



The Fruit of the Practice

Ethical Foundations of Yoga

Om City Soap Box – Volume 2 – March, 2007

Namaste . . . and Greetings of the Season . . .

Here in New England it's a balmy 41 degrees outside and there is a radiance to the clear blue sky outside my window. As I gaze out over my bleak computer screen there is this incredible intricate pattern of tree branches dancing against the backdrop of the luminous sky. The sterile tree branches are still barren from winter's frost but the luminous brightness of the morning sky holds so much promise for cathartic release as we look towards Spring's inevitable thaw.

Emerging as a newsletter editor is a completely new job description for me. I spent the first week of March literally scratching my head, pondering, brainstorming for a theme or focus for this second edition of the Om City Soapbox. Thanks to all who offered positive feedback and encouragement on Volume 1. Your kind words have helped to inspire me to continue pondering and brainstorming. For the past 10 days or so - - I've set aside some time each day to allow my mind to ride the streams of my consciousness down many tributaries and even a few back roads. And miraculously . . . none of these various streams has led me to a single focal point or strong subject or theme for Volume 2.

Quite the contrary. What I found was that if I followed one stream long enough it would inevitably take me down various related tributaries and eventually one of these tributaries would lead me to an entirely new stream and on and on and on . . . Such is the nature of the mind. And what I am finding through this process of becoming a writer, is that this process of writing a monthly newsletter is very much like my yoga practice: Giving yourself space to observe the flow of the thoughts, allowing the thoughts to move through you and watching as they transition into totally new thoughts.

As it turns out - - my mind is very much like that web of barren tree branches, dancing their intricate crisscross pattern outside my window. The thoughts are like tree branches, emerging from a strong base or foundation which is the trunk of the tree which is deeply rooted down into the moist and fertile earth. From my window, I can see these branches against the backdrop of a brilliant, shining sky, branches growing thinner as they grow taller as if reaching out into the sky or perhaps merging into the endless infinite space which is the cosmos. Therefore I now see my job as the writer / editor as a process of allowing those branches to grow freely, meandering organically in all directions without any clear pattern or purpose – But who knows – when these trees are left to their own devices, they may just surprise us and produce a peach or who knows even a coconut.

Like it's cousin the tree, the mind needs rooting, grounding and nourishment in order to be prolific. The yoga practice provides the grounding, the rooting, the nourishment and the fertile soil for the mind to propagate. And like the clear, blue never ending sky, our minds have the capacity for infinite growth, infinite creativity.

Life is creation. That is my thought, my theme for today. All of my meanderings, my crisscrossing patchwork of thoughts have seemed to lead me endlessly back to this one place -- life as creation and with yoga as the important link to this creative potential that may be lying

dormant within us at this very moment – the prana shakti, the creative intelligence of the universe.

The process of being alive is to continually create. Is it not true that at this very moment thousands of cells are dying in your body and that thousands more are being created anew? As I sit here in front of my bleak looking computer screen is it not true that the cells of my body are multiplying with lightening speed? What is this miracle that we call life? Is not life an incredible process of growth and change? Are we not growing and multiplying infinitely right here right now?

To me, this is the essence and beauty of life – this capacity for growth, for change. Yoga enhances this capacity by helping us to avoid that which hinders this capacity.

Over the years, my yoga practice has taken many twists and turns. But like a meandering river, it continues to lead me home. And just like those tree branches that continue to produce peaches or plums or acorns or walnuts, the fruit of the yoga practice is too delicious for words.

In order for a tree to produce walnuts or peaches or even acorns, it needs to be deeply rooted to the earth. And it is the same with the yoga practice. Yoga as we know it is rooted in a 4000 year old history of vedic thought that has come to us by the grace of God as students and disciples passed on their knowledge to other students and disciples and on and on until it got to us. It is my belief, that in order to reap the fruit of the practice (which is self – knowledge) you must start with a firm foundation which is based on this deep and long history of yoga itself.

The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali

The great sage Patanjali is credited with having codified the yoga practice in the form of a written primer of sorts in the year 200 BC (more or less.) His Yoga Sutra stands out because previous to his work there was little else in the form of writings on yoga. Mostly yoga was passed on from teacher to student in the oral tradition.

According to the Yoga Sutra: There are eight limbs on the path to Yoga:

Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi.

Today I would like to focus on the foundation of the practice which is the first two limbs. In order to reap the deep fruit of the asana practice, you should be strongly grounded in these first two limbs.

Yamas

The yamas provide an ethical groundwork for our relationships with others beings.

1. Ahimsa –Nonviolence or non-harming.

Let your thoughts, words and deeds create no harm to others. To embrace this practice wholly implies vegetarianism. The true yogi does not kill animals to satisfy sensual cravings. The true yogi does not purposefully hurt or harm other beings. Do you engage in gossip on a regular basis? Is your tongue often sharper than it needs to be?

2. Satya – Truthfulness

This often involves breaking through a thick veil of denial that we carry inside. We often will lie to ourselves to protect ourselves from being hurt. These lies that we tell ourselves will inevitably backfire. They come with a high karmic price tag. In order to be truthful to others we must first know ourselves. In order to gain this self knowledge we must begin to own the lies and dissolve the denial. Once we are able to accept our own internal truth, we can then present ourselves accurately to the rest of the world. The first stage towards practicing Satya is to begin to notice the lies you are constantly telling yourself. Make an intention to replace those lies with truth. This road towards truthfulness is the road towards spiritual growth.

3. Asteya – Non-stealing

Begin to notice the small subtle ways you might be stealing from others. Taking credit for something you did not achieve or forgetting to pay back a small debt. How many times have I seen people in Whole Foods Market nibbling foods from the bulk food bins? Really who do they think they are kidding? Stealing is stealing. The ultimate act of non-truthfulness. What about the person who is constantly borrowing things and forgetting to return them? Do you know anyone who is chronically late for every single meeting or appointment? The chronically late person is generally 5 – 10 minutes late for everything.

Although unaware, they are stealing time from the people who got to the meeting on time. The ultimate act of selfishness – waltzing into a meeting or appointment - - five to ten minutes late. Acting as if your time is more valuable than everyone else's.

4. Brahmacharya – Practicing moderation of sensual desires

In it's deepest sense we are talking about celibacy. However to interpret this for those of us not living the monastic life we can take a looser interpretation. Begin to practice moderation in all things. Refrain from overeating. Refrain from all addictive behavior whether it is sex, pornography or television. *Anything* done in excess will cause a karmic scar. The life of the true yogi is a life lived in balance. How many of us are addicted to our cell phones, addicted to our computers? Begin to practice Satya (Truthfulness) when dealing with your addictions. Overcoming the fear and breaking through the denial. Letting go of the unhealthy attachments to people, places and things.

5. Aparigraha – Non possessiveness or absence of greed

Simply stated – share what you have. Don't take more than your share of anything.

I consider overeating an act of greed. Most Americans are guilty of this. Overeating is the most basic act of greed that there is, since feeding ourselves is such a basic act of survival. If you are being greedy in the kitchen, chances are that this greed is manifesting in various other ways. Americans have become the most greedy, gluttonous people on the planet. This goes back to the second Yama (which is clearly my favorite!) Stop lying to yourself about why you are overeating. Everyone is using food as the drug of choice. We are overeating in an attempt to compensate for unmet needs elsewhere in our lives. People are terrified to look in the mirror and see the truth. Crass materialism and over consumption are all symptoms of the same disease called greed.

Niyamas: Observances or Practices:

1. Saucha – Purity

Purify your body by avoiding overeating, avoiding ingestion of toxic foods or drugs of any kind. Practice yoga and pranayama daily and other forms of moderate exercise. Purify your mind by monitoring the input. Avoid television and other media sources such as the Internet or junk mail that contain low grade content. Low grade content can be defined as content that lacks intellectual stimulation and is uninspiring. Purify the thoughts by learning to observe them to sit with them and begin to avoid allowing your mind to drift into toxic territory. Begin to steer the mind towards enlightening thoughts.

The best tool to purify the mind is something so simple it's almost humorous. Find a mantra that has meaning for you. It could be an intention you have created for yourself or a prayer or quote from a song or poem. You could choose a traditional Hindu mantra such as Om Namah Shivaya. The mantra itself is immaterial. Use the mantra to ground your mind -- let it be like the roots of those trees you see outside. Without something to hold onto, without grounding the mind, you will be a total victim of your thoughts. The mantra is repeated 24 / 7 whenever possible – while you are washing your dishes, sitting on the lavatory or driving your car. I learned this technique from a book I stumbled upon on my brother's web site (www.yogalifestyle.com). The book is called the Mantram Handbook by Eaknath Easwaren and what a gem of a book!

Over the course of the past 2 years, I have totally transformed my mental outlook by using this technique.

Here is a sample Mantra that you can start using today:

Following the Breath, my mind is at ease.

That's right, just start repeating this incessantly as much as you can during the course of the next day or two and start to notice a shift in your mental awareness.

A little trick I devised to make this easier is to combine a technique called Japa where you actually count the mantra as you recite it. Counting is a powerful tool to steady an otherwise distracted mind.

I also like to punctuate the mantra with some Hindu words - - so it goes like this:

Following the Breath, my mind is at ease. Om Shanti one.

Following the Breath, my mind is at ease. Om Shanti two.

Following the Breath, my mind is at ease. Om Shanti three.

Make it like a game. Try this while you are washing dishes and see if you can make it to 10 without losing count. As you get better you can set little goals like say 20 or thirty. See if you can focus the mind to repeat the mantra 30 times without losing count.

I bet you can't!

Now here are two other tips that will intensify this practice for you. As you repeat the mantra, stay totally aware of your breath. You may even engage Ujayi or 3 Part Breath as much as possible which will have a deep calming effect on your nervous system.

2. Santosha – Contentment

Simply stated - - “Don’t worry, be happy.”

Yogis are content, no matter what . . . We are not the ones complaining about every little bump in the road. You can leave that to the kvetches and the whiners. Yogis have an inner smile, regardless of external circumstances. This does not mean we don’t react to circumstances. The true yogi reacts appropriately to all circumstances. But as we surrender our will to God or some Higher Power (which is the 5th Niyama) we begin to practice total acceptance of the present moment, even when life hands us lemons. To quote the Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. Contentment is basically a process of “letting go” of the need to always be in control.

Our mood is not dependent on the weather, the stock market or the state of our love life.

3. Tapas – Self Discipline

This is difficult to define. According to Swami Rama in his book Lectures on Yoga – Tapas are practices that lead to perfection of body, mind and senses. His definition might be a bit out dated by our modern standards. These days it’s very non-PC to talk of perfection. My teacher Shiva Rea has a beautiful definition for Tapas: Unwavering devotion to your evolutionary journey through self discipline and self study. The key word here is “unwavering.” So many of us embark on a journey towards self improvement and then we quit after a week or a month or even 6 months. This is not tapas. Tapas is something you can stick with for the long haul.

Here is how I look at it. If you want to grow, you’re gonna need to sweat a little bit. To me – anything requiring self discipline is tapas – for example right now for me writing this newsletter is Tapas. It’s difficult, it’s challenging, unpleasant at times - - but through the process I am growing, moving towards attaining my goals. Basically Tapas is the opposite of laziness and sloth. You get the idea? To me, if you have a good yoga teacher, you are practicing tapas. I follow in the footsteps of every great teacher I have ever met. In my beginner classes, my students are sweating – in my vinyasa classes, my students are sweating. Maybe not literally sweating - - but often yes – literally sweating – feeling their edge. Going to your edge is tapas. Staying in your slothful comfort zone is not tapas.

4. Swadhyaya - Study leading to knowledge of the self.

Traditionally this has meant studying the great scriptures of yoga - - the Gita the Sutras etc. I will list these in a later newsletter. However it is generally accepted that in yoga, experience is the greatest teacher. My personal belief is that *anything* done consciously is swadhyaya. If we are awake as we walk through life it becomes swadhyaya. Knowledge of the self can come from every single encounter that we have during our day, if we are awake. If we are sleepwalking through life (as I did for many years) well that’s a different story entirely. So if that describes you -- you better go read the Gita right now and get yourself on track!

5. Ishwara pranidhana – Surrender to the Ultimate Reality

This is the practice of transcending the ego as you surrender totally to a Higher Power. I believe this to be the most important of the Yamas and Niyamas. Surrender is a fundamental principle of yoga. Without surrender, you are just going through the motions. With deep surrender you are able to drink of the sweet nectar of self knowledge which is the fruit of the practice.

Once surrendered, all of the other yamas and niyamas will fall into place effortlessly.

Conclusion:

The true yogi is constantly using the yamas and niyamas as a barometer with which to measure spiritual practice. If you find you are failing in some area - - the answer is to deepen your faith, deepen your surrender to something outside yourself.

As yogis we are not seeking perfection or perfect adherence to these spiritual guidelines. The Yamas and Niyamas can be seen as a road map or compass to guide you through the ups and downs of your life. If you are practicing yoga without knowledge of the ethical framework – then you are like a man in the woods without a trail map or compass to guide him. You will end up walking in circles and spinning your wheels a lot. You will never make your way out of the woods.

Conversely as you begin to incorporate these principles into your life, you will gain a deeper awareness of your shortcomings. As long as you can maintain an attitude of total self acceptance and self love, this awareness will serve you well. This awareness may well be the first step towards total transformation of your consciousness.

Namaste.



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