

## **The Way of Ahimsa: Practising non-violence in your life and on the yoga mat**

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Today, wherever you are – standing on the street, watching television or reading a magazine – you are sure to see something related to yoga. As a nation, we are heading towards the mat, flooding yoga schools, halls and yoga retreats, and looking for something beyond the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Every person comes to yoga in search of something. Sometimes it is physical pain that will compel someone to go to a yoga school or maybe it is a low-level dissatisfaction with life, a yearning for more space or quietness. Whatever the reason, if you start a yoga practice you are sure to gain benefits beyond your initial expectations.

In society today we often measure our self-worth by how much we earn, where we live or what we are going to do with our life. We are conditioned to achieve and forge ahead at all costs and are left with very little time to really get to know ourselves and question what we really value or want in our life.

Working long hours and experiencing workplace stress can take their toll, and in the few hours you get off you might squeeze in a yoga class. However, if you are burdened with the message of “Work hard and keep going at all costs”, what are you bringing to your yoga practice?

Watching newcomers huff and puff their way through yoga, I often recall my first few months on the mat. I’d push myself hard, with breath shallow and muscles almost screaming, intent on making my body relax! The frustration and confusion would overwhelm me. I was there because a friend assured me yoga was good for anxiety and relaxation, but all I was doing was getting myself worked up into a lather of frustration and anxiety.

How did the calm, serene woman teaching the class expect us to execute the postures, breathe and find the quietness within? What quietness? My body and mind were on overload. After the class I questioned her about the gap between how it should be and how it was. It was then that I was introduced to the notion of non-violence, or ahimsa.

### **Ahimsa and interconnectivity**

Ahimsa is a Sanskrit term meaning non-violence, or non-harming. Within the eight limbs of Ashtanga yoga, ahimsa is the first of the yamas and is concerned with right conduct. Of all the yamas (that is, all the guidelines helping us relate to the external world) ahimsa is at the very core.

Within the Hindu belief system, divinity is all-pervasive. Everything, from stars to rocks to humans, is a manifestation of the divine. The entire world is holy ground. Everything is sacred and interconnected. The same divine spirit that runs through you runs through the entire universe.

While we may hold different beliefs from the Hindu system, the interconnectivity of all life is increasingly apparent. For example, a person at work might yell at you, so you go home to your family that night feeling upset and, in turn, may take your anger out on the ones you love. The rubbish we don’t recycle ends up polluting the earth. People carelessly harm each other, the earth and themselves because they are not

living their lives with compassion and awareness. We often live in a state that is opposite to ahimsa, which is known in *The Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali as himsa, inflicting violence and harm on ourselves, others and the earth.

### **Physical non-violence**

When people first consider ahimsa they often think of not killing or of having to be a vegetarian. However, you don't have to eat meat, abuse an animal or yell at someone in traffic to harm yourself and others. Harm can be inflicted in subtle ways every day.

In a yoga class you are asked not to push yourself, not to harm yourself, not to go beyond the edge. Yet when you enter the yoga room, you don't leave your social conditioning and beliefs at the door. People often tell themselves, "If I don't work hard, I won't achieve. If it's not hurting, I mustn't be doing it right. No pain, no gain."

Have you found yourself on the mat pushing yourself through a rigorous practice with no awareness of how your body is responding? You may be striving to make your body fit that asana (posture), but if you are physically exhausted and depleted by the stresses of modern life, the act of pushing yourself through a punishing yoga practice can be an act of violence upon yourself. If you are truly aware of your physical and mental state, you will pull back and practise in a more nurturing and appropriate manner. This is ahimsa in action.

BKS Iyengar, in *The Tree of Yoga*, says, "If you extend the right side [of your body] more, and if the left side does not stretch so much, should you not observe the duality between the right and the left and make use of the left side intelligently to be on par with the right? This is known as balancing violence and non-violence and at this moment both the violence and non-violence disappear. What is required is integration between the right and the left sides of the body, and this balance of the two sides is true non-violence".

When you first start out, searching for this balance in your yoga practice is difficult as you are asked to place your body in unfamiliar shapes; you are sensing and feeling your way into the shapes of the asanas. They may feel foreign and maybe all you notice is the tightness of your muscles or the stiffness of your joints. We are all consumed by the stretch. Yet, over time the body opens, the muscles lengthen and the mind quiets. Then you are able to go in search of the delicacy of the asanas, seeking out balance.

Eventually during your practice you will be able to identify areas of dullness. This allows you to look at what you are not doing, or perhaps overdoing, on one side of the body. This dullness creates a focus and a point of observation that enables you to take your attention back to the foundations of the asana and establish balance.

### **Mental non-violence**

According to Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati, in *the Textbook of Yoga Psychology*, "Vocal injury is more serious than physical, and mental injury is the most serious. By physical injury one can destroy only physical forms. By vocal injury one can destroy both physical and mental forms. By mental injury one can destroy even the form of the spirit."

Your thoughts are very powerful. Have you found yourself comparing yourself to the person next to you in a yoga class, measuring yourself as better or worse than them? Have you felt restricted by the tightness or size of your body during a class, only to

spend the next 10 minutes obsessing over what is wrong with your body? If so, this is the view of yourself you unconsciously project out onto the world.

Next time you're struggling with an asana, stop for a moment. What are the thoughts running through your head? Are they judgmental? Are they violent? What of the opinions you hold about the person next to you? Are you perhaps merely projecting your feelings onto them?

I was recently in a class where the teacher asked us to stop in the middle of an asana and challenged us to observe how we were applying ourselves in the asana: were we mentally whinging, pushing or judging ourselves? He went on to explain that when practising yoga with a busy mind we tighten the body, restricting movement and energy, and exhaust ourselves. consequently, we get to the end of our practice and all we want to do is rest.

Yoga is about unity and transformation. It requires a consistent practice. It is a journey: one that has no end. If you practise with harshness, why would you want to return to the mat?

It is impossible to be compassionate if you compare yourself with and judge others. You cannot love if you want to control everything and have everything in its perfect place. If you are rigid in your beliefs, you restrict your life by limiting others and yourself and suppressing your true nature.

Recently, Ashtanga yoga teacher Fiona Parker told me about one of her students, a competitive runner attracted to the physical demands of Ashtanga yoga because she could measure how far she had come. However, she soon reached a point where she was no longer progressing and couldn't understand why. Fiona explained to her that physical exertion alone couldn't make a practice happen.

There are aspects to a yoga practice that cannot be measure in terms of asana progress. Yoga is above willpower and brute strength. To progress further, you need to work on a more subtle and compassionate e level so that your yoga practice evolves and grows just as you do. It is an internal and reflective process. Observing what you do and how you do it enables you to access one of the greatest gifts of yoga: self-transformation.

### **Verbal non-violence**

Recently I was called to my son's school. My son, the teacher explained, did not understand the consequences of his behaviour. Earlier that day some boys in the playground were teasing him, so he turned around and hit them. I thought, "Imagine the difference in the world if all children were taught about ahimsa from an early age".

this is such a common occurrence in life: reacting to violence with violence. Instead of expressing how we really feel, we can become vengeful or angry and impulsively react, if not with physical violence, then with words: the off-handed comment, the snide remark. But when was the last time you asked yourself, "Did I hurt that person?" Words spoken in anger can be more painful than the infliction of physical pain.

Yet not speaking words of truth and suppressing your self will still come through energetically in conversation. You may think you are not harming the other person, yet they feel your energy. Everyone knows "that look", the look that brings up a well of emotion. In this case, both you and the other person are experiencing violence. the violence in our actions can clearly be this subtle.

When you react to a situation in a knee-jerk manner, you do so impulsively, perhaps without really understanding what has happened because your response is clouded by judgment and anger. Similarly, in your yoga practice, if you are pushing ahead without understanding and listening to what your body is telling you, you can remain fixed in your head, reacting to your judgments rather than responding to your needs.

To me, nobody put it better than that great advocate of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi: "there should be truth in thought, truth in speech, and truth in action. To the man who has realised this truth in perfection, nothing else remains to be known because all knowledge is necessarily included in it." ([www.mahatma.org.in](http://www.mahatma.org.in))

Eight limbs of Ashtanga yoga from *The yoga sutras* of Patanjali

1. Yamas: universal vows, ethical restraints.  
ahimsa (non-violence)  
satya (truth)  
asteya (non-stealing)  
brahmacharya (chastity, moderation)  
aparigraha (non-greed)
2. Niyamas: moral observances  
saucha (cleanliness, purity)  
santosha (contentment)  
tapas (austerities)  
svadhyaya (scripture study)  
ishvara-pranidhana (surrender to god)
3. Asanas: postures
4. Pranayama: breathing
5. Pratyahara: withdrawal of the senses
6. Dharana: concentration
7. Dhyana: meditation
8. Samadhi: bliss, super-consciousness and absorption into ecstatic contemplation.