

Pratipakṣa Bhāvanam: Contemplating the Opposite

What do you do when anger bubbles up inside of you, threatening to explode, when fear or jealousy eats away at you, when sadness consumes your being? The *Yoga Sūtras* say to contemplate the opposite.

vitarkā-bādhane pratipakṣa-bhāvanam ||2.33||

When there is obstruction by negative impulses,

one should contemplate the opposite.¹

vitarkā hiṃsādayaḥ kṛtakāritānumoditā lobhakrodhamohapūrvakā mṛdumadhyādhimātrā

duḥkhājñānānantaphalā iti pratipakṣabhāvanam ||2.34||

The negative impulses – violence, etc. – are either performed (by oneself), or caused or permitted (to be done by others) and are preceded by greed, anger, and delusion in a mild, intermediate or intense manner. Because these produce the infinite fruits of suffering and ignorance, one should contemplate the opposite.

For Patañjali, the first two limbs of aṣṭāṅga yoga – the ethical practices of *yama* and *niyama* (restraints and observances)² – arise from the practice of *pratipakṣa bhāvanam*. Thus if one is thinking violent thoughts, one should meditate on non-violence, giving birth to the first *yama* – *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). If one is being untruthful, one should contemplate truth, producing *satya* (truthfulness), and so forth. But is this really possible? Can we simply meditate on the opposite, ignore our true emotions and hope they'll go away? This may work temporarily

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

² *ahiṃsāsatyāsteyābrahmacaryāparigrahyamāḥ* ||YS 2.30||

The restraints are non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual fidelity and non-grasping. *śaucasantoṣatapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ* ||YS 2.32||

The observances are purity, contentment, discipline, self-study and surrender to the Divine.

but eventually these emotions will come back to haunt us, until we are willing to explore them, to look them straight in the face, and ultimately to heal the wounds which lie behind them.

Sometimes we are consumed by our own suffering; sometimes we feel guilty for drowning in our own sorrows when there is so much suffering in the world. But how can we hope to help others if we can't help ourselves? And how can we help ourselves if we don't acknowledge our own suffering (*duḥkhaḥ*), as well as our joy (*sukhaḥ*)?

The classical definition of Yoga, as tersely stated in *Yoga Sūtra I.2* is

***yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ* ||1.2||**

Yoga is the *nirodha* of the fluctuating states (*vṛttis*) of the mind (*citta*). The word *nirodha* has usually been translated as control, suppression or dissolution. However, Ian Whicher, a scholar-practitioner and professor at the University of Manitoba, has challenged this commonly-accepted interpretation, “suggesting that any attempt to interpret Patañjali’s Yoga as a practice that seeks to annihilate or suppress the mind and its modifications for the purpose of gaining spiritual liberation distorts the intended meaning of Yoga as defined by Patañjali.”³ He instead proposes that *nirodha* “refers to the cessation of the worldly, empirical effects of the *vṛttis* on the yogin’s consciousness, not the complete cessation of *vṛttis* themselves.”⁴ In other words, it is not the *vṛttis* themselves that are problematic, but our identification with and attachment to them. I strongly agree with his interpretation here; too often, we, as yoga practitioners, think that we can just make our *vṛttis* disappear into thin air, that if we can just gain enough control, the turbulence of our minds and the trauma of our past will simply vanish. Instead, perhaps we can learn to acknowledge (rather than abolish) our *citta-vṛttis* as we practice,

³ Ian Whicher, “Yoga and Freedom: A Reconsideration of Patañjali’s Classical Yoga,” *Philosophy East and West* 48.2 (Apr., 1998): 273.

⁴ Ibid.

and ironically, just by allowing them to exist – by not fearing them – they will no longer monopolize our minds.

Another interpretation of *pratipakṣa bhāvanam*, suggested by B.K.S. Iyengar, encourages this approach. He explains that we should simultaneously contemplate our real emotion, along with its opposite, in an attempt to find a balance between the two. In this way it can be a tool to help us make peace with our emotions. We cannot begin solely with non-violence because we live in a violent world and violence exists within our nature. Perhaps if we learned how to recognize and deal with our anger, rather than repressing it, we would not be living in a world so full of rage. According to Iyengar, one must contemplate both anger and non-violence, in order to understand this duality. “If a person is violent, he is violent. If he is angry, he is angry. The state is not different from the fact; but instead of trying to cultivate the opposite condition, he should go deep into the cause of his anger or violence. One should also study the opposite forces with calmness and patience. Then one develops equipoise.”⁵ In this way, we don’t just tip the scale to the other side, but gently try to find a middle ground. Speaking as one prone to extremes myself, I can attest that contemplating only one “opposite”, even if it is the positive pole, can only lead to further imbalance and confusion. Balance is only found (and I think it is a lifelong endeavor) by trying to find a middle path between the two.

The first *yama*, as already mentioned, is *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). This is the opposite of violence, the cause of all other negative impulses, and the first to be addressed. According to Patañjali, when someone is established in non-violence, all hostility is abandoned in his/her

⁵ B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), 146.

presence.⁶ Thus, from contemplating our own anger and the violence in the world as well as the means to peaceful resolution, by becoming more compassionate towards ourselves and others, perhaps we can achieve an ever-expanding sphere of peace. Little moments can add up and have a ripple effect; if you smile at someone on the street, if you say thank you to the bus driver, perhaps you can spread a little bit of happiness and kindness. The practice of *āsana* can give us an opportunity to experience our own violent thoughts, to have a safe place in which to understand and work through them, by learning to practice *ahiṃsā* towards ourselves. *Ahiṃsā* also traditionally implies vegetarianism (except if this diet is harmful for your individual health), in an attempt to minimize our violent imprint on the world.

Next is *satya*, or truthfulness, which is truth of speech and mind. Truth often emerges from untruth; the real from the un-real. Not only should our actions be honest, but our thoughts as well. Honesty should be non-violent, which means that certain truths do not need to be spoken. This, however, does not mean that the truth is always pleasant. Sometimes the truth can be painful, but as my teacher Śrī K. Pattabhi Jois so succinctly says, “Pain is real,” and part of yoga practice is learning to deal with this pain with strength and grace. According to Patañjali, from the practice of truth, one receives the fruits or benefits of actions, even if one does not actually physically perform them.⁷ Traditionally this refers to sacrifices to the gods and their resultant rewards; however, we can think of it as meaning that our thoughts and intentions are just as important as our actions.

Asteya is non-stealing, which is not taking or coveting the property of others. In the absence of this, it is said that divine jewels approach from all directions.⁸ Although I like the

⁶ *ahiṃsāpratiṣṭhāyāṃ tatsannidhau vairatyāgaḥ* ||YS 2.35||

⁷ *satyapraṭiṣṭhāyāṃ kriyāphalāśrayatvam* ||YS 2.36||

⁸ *asteyapraṭiṣṭhāyāṃ sarvaratnopasthānam* ||YS 2.37||

image of flying gemstones, this can also mean that if one is not envious of others, one receives all that one needs and more. In *āsana* practice, as in life, there is often the temptation to look at others, to be envious of someone else's flexibility or strength, or a host of other qualities, rather than appreciating what we already have ourselves. If we can learn to contemplate the opposite here - to explore our jealousy but simultaneously be happy for others and to have faith that we are exactly where we personally need to be - all that we desire for ourselves, and more, will naturally arrive.

Brahmacārya is usually translated as chastity or abstinence; however, literally it means acts for Brahma, the god of Creation. Some students, as they start practicing yoga, think they must take it to this extreme of celibacy; however, this is just another form of absolutism and is not what is advocated by most contemporary yoga teachers. Although the preponderance of choice in all areas of our lives leaves many of us floundering from one relationship to another, years of thoughtless sexual activity can precipitate its opposite - *brahmacārya* - which, for the modern householder yogi, can mean being committed to one partner. This implies consciousness in our sexuality, which entails non-violence, truthfulness, and the absence of envy. The traditional fruits of this practice are an increase in strength and vigor in the body, senses and mind.⁹

The fifth and final *yama* is *aparigraha*, literally translated as not grasping around us. Grasping is attachment: attachment to people, objects, thoughts, etc. We all do it constantly, both consciously and unconsciously, and it is one of the biggest obstacles to spiritual practice. So often we want to hold onto the past, or onto the present, in a desperate attempt to hide from our fear of the future, or conversely, we hold onto an idea of the future in order to escape the past

⁹ *brahmacaryapraṭiṣṭhāyāṃ vīryalābhaḥ* ||YS 2.38||

or present. If we can contemplate the reason for our grasping, it will help us to be present exactly where we are. Traditionally the fruit of non-grasping is the knowledge of other births,¹⁰ but, first of all (and perhaps enough for most of us), it is true knowledge of this existence.

The *niyamas* are observances - positive actions as opposed to the negations of negative impulses, as in the case of the *yamas* - but they can still be thought of as arising from their opposites. The first *niyama* is *śauca* or purity, which is two-fold. External purity, according to Bhoja (an 11th century king and prolific writer), consists of cleansing the body with earth, water, and other purificatory substances. Internal purification comes from cleansing the impurities of the mind through friendship, and other virtuous actions.¹¹ This refers back to *sūtra* 1.33, which says that from the cultivation of friendship with happy people, compassion towards those who are suffering, joy towards the virtuous, and indifference towards the non-virtuous, the mind is purified.¹² So, a yogi can only come to know him/herself, learn to make peace with his/her *vṛttis* and eventually change negative patterns, through interacting with others. This is one of the reasons why it is essential to have a teacher. Although the ultimate goal of yoga may be discovering ourselves, we can only do this with the help of someone else. From the external practice, one begins to transcend the identification with one's own body and to see past the external forms of other people.¹³ Since purity comes from cleansing, it means it necessarily arises from its opposite, as the lotus grows in the mud. According to Patañjali, from the internal practice of *śauca* comes purity of *sattva* (the *guṇa*, or quality, of light and equanimity),

¹⁰ *aparigrahasthairye janmakathantāsambodhaḥ* ||YS 2.39||

¹¹ *śaucam dvividham - bāhyamābhyantaraṅca | bāhyam mṛjjaḍibhiḥ kāyādiprakṣālanam | ābhyantaram maitryādibhiścittamalānām prakṣālanam* | Bhoja's comm. on YS 2.32

¹² *maitrikaruṇāmuditopekṣāṅām sukhaduḥkhaḥapūṇyāpūṇyaviṣayāṅām bhāvanāścittaprasādanam* ||YS 1.33||

¹³ *śaucātsvāṅgajugupsā parairasamsargaḥ* ||YS 2.40||

cheerfulness of mind, one-pointed concentration and victory over the senses, which leads to the capacity to see the Self.¹⁴

The second *niyama* is contentment, which leads to the attainment of unsurpassed happiness.¹⁵ This is an internal satisfaction, one that is independent of the external environment, a feeling of peace within ourselves. This is not the happiness one feels upon receiving a present or from external achievement but the happiness one manifests inside. Contentment does not mean that we are happy to be complacent and stay wherever we are; contentment means that we can find joy and peace in the journey, in our every action and inaction. Sometimes in order to discover this we must sit in our discontent; we cannot just wake up one morning and decide we are going to be perfectly happy for the rest of our lives, but if we can acknowledge and fearlessly face the root of our unhappiness, while simultaneously contemplating the happiness we seek, we will hopefully discover a place of contentment with what we actually do have.

Next is *tapas*, from the verb *tap*, to burn or to heat. It is a flaming devotion, an intense self-discipline, which the practice of yoga can represent. This discipline destroys the afflictions of the mind and makes the body and senses strong.¹⁶ Often we don't discover this self-discipline until after years of indulgence. But for the modern householder yogi, *tapas* does not mean excessive deprivation either; it means finding an appropriate level of discipline, the middle path. It means learning to draw boundaries that are appropriate to our lives, which is actually much more difficult than either extreme. We need our bodies to function well in order to support our daily activities, our jobs, our families. If our yoga practice depletes our energies or causes

¹⁴ *sattvaśuddhisāmanasyaikāgryendriyajayātmadarśanayogyatvāni ca* ||YS 2. 41||

¹⁵ *santoṣādanuttamaḥ sukhālābhaḥ* ||YS 2.42||

¹⁶ *kāyendriyasiddhiraśuddhikṣayāttapasah* ||YS 2.43||

injuries then we're doing something wrong; we must re-examine the intention behind our discipline. This can be done in conjunction with the next *niyama*, *svādhyāya*.

Svādhyāya is self-study, which is usually taken to mean the study of scriptures or the chanting of OM or mantras to a particular deity. The result is union with this god/goddess and the qualities he/she represents.¹⁷ One of my Sanskrit teachers defined *svādhyāya* as the repetition of our lessons. I think it can also represent the study of history, both our own personal story, perhaps in the form of therapy, as well as the history of the world we live in. *Svādhyāya* is self-reflection, individual and global, the willingness to look at ourselves and our patterns of behavior, even if such reflection is not always pleasant. In this way we can learn from our mistakes - from our non-reflections - rather than repeating them over and over again. This of course involves *satya*, being truthful with ourselves.

The last discipline is *īśvara pranidhāna*, or surrender to the Divine. This is self-less action - the offering of all effort without attachment to the fruits, as Kṛṣṇa explains in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This is difficult for many of us born in the West. We are brought up to be independent, ego-driven, to fight our own battles, and the thought of surrendering our actions, of complete faith and devotion, is hard for us to understand. In India, faith is everywhere, implicit and explicit; every home and every shop has a little altar, whose deities are revered before the day begins. We are not required to believe in God (that is personal and not a necessary component for the practice of yoga), but we can believe in life, in love, in nature, and in our capacity for transformation. So how do we surrender? Once again, by *pratipakṣa bhāvanam*, by exploring both our resistance and the possibility of surrender. From this altruistic action of

¹⁷ *svādhyāyādiṣṭadevatāsamprayogaḥ ||YS 2.44||*

offering up our efforts, there is the attainment of perfection in *Samādhi*.¹⁸ In other words, by doing actions for others, without any expectations, we end up becoming happy and peaceful ourselves.

For each of these *yamas* and *niyamas* it is possible to contemplate both the positive and negative aspects of the discipline. *Āsana* practice, as Iyengar suggests, can be a tool to explore these dualities – inhalation and exhalation, expansion and contraction, up and down, love and hate, joy and suffering, anger and non-violence, etc. – rather than a means of suppressing the negative. It can become a true means to enlightened living, a means to living peacefully and honestly.

However, although *āsana* practice often brings strong emotions to the surface, it does not necessarily give us the psychological ability to deal with these feelings. We cannot find steadiness and happiness in posture through physical practice alone and if we do it is generally superficial. *Āsana* may be where we must start, because we are more familiar with our bodies than our minds; however, as we practice we begin to know ourselves better, and as yoga is truly a science of the mind, we must develop the other limbs of yoga.

As Śrī K. Pattābhi Jois explains in *Yoga Māla*, “yoga signifies the means to the realization of one’s true nature”¹⁹ and thus the path for each of us will be different. If we deny or try to suppress a piece of who we are then we are not practicing yoga, we are not fulfilling our *dharma* (duty). Many Westerners misunderstand yoga – we think it is about withdrawal from the world, about abstinence, when in fact it should be a means to living more fully in the world,

¹⁸ *samādhisiddhirīśvarapraṇidhānāt ||YS 2.45||*

¹⁹ Śrī K. Pattābhi Jois, *Yoga Māla* (New York: Patanjali Yoga Shala, 2000), 17.

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in all of our various individual capacities. The practice of *yama* and *niyama* is what situates a yoga practitioner in the world. We must acknowledge the violence in the world as well as in our own hearts, and trust that our inner work can address and help to heal this violence, in order to truly begin the practice of yoga. Contemplating the opposite, *pratipakṣa bhāvaṇam*, is an ancient - yet modernly applicable - technique to help us on this path.

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