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Yoga Sutras, Yamas and Niyamas, and Yogic Overview of the Mind

This article describes an everyday experience:-

Initially I highlighted the sections, that if I had remembered the yamas and niyamas, I may have been able to reduce the resulting conflict and anxiety. Later, I pointed out when I began to remember the yamas and niyamas, and also the effect this remembering had on my mind. The color coding is as follows:

Ahimsa, **Satya**, **Asteya**, **Brahmacarya**, **Aparigraha**, **Sauca**, **Samtosa**, **Tapas**, **Svadyaya**, and **Ishvara pranidhana**.

See Afterword for the detailed explanations.

When I stepped off the plane from Bali three days ago, I felt a wonderful sense of kindness and empathy towards all other beings, and a strong sense of connectedness with everything. Not even the cold weather or impatient drivers leaving the airport could burst the serene bubble 10 days on a yoga retreat had wrapped me in. It seemed that all the anxieties and worries which pervaded my usual everyday experiences were bouncing off, leaving me unaffected. I couldn't help but smile. . It's incredible the clarity that comes, when ahamkara operates more from buddhi. Unfortunately, by the fourth morning, my serene bubble had sprung leak.

I intended to awake early for some asana practise. Instead I woke at 8.30 am. Frustrated, I snapped at my bewildered partner, and without listening to his reply, I leapt out of bed and straight into the shower. The peace and tranquillity evaporated with the steam. I berated myself, and my partner, for me having slept in and subsequently not doing any asana practise. Clarity was lost as I embraced manas. I began to identify more strongly with the movements of my mind (1:4, Iyengar, 1993) and ultimately forgot the rest of my yoga practise as well.

As my partner prepared breakfast I continued to stew - embracing manas completely. I grabbed the newspaper to distract myself, and soon became caught up in the dramas of the world. My partner placed my breakfast in front of me, and before I knew it the meal was gone.

Later I sat at the desk intending to write this essay. Instead I fussed around with papers, organised myself, or if I'm perfectly honest, I procrastinated. I even picked up my account book and tried to organise my finances. Looking at the book I remembered I had just spent all my money on a holiday. The all too familiar worry and anxiety began to set in. I cannot stand being in debt. I felt my stomach flip flop, and the furrow I'd spent the two weeks away trying to remove, resurfaced in my brow. I don't know why I've always disliked being in debt. Maybe it's the fear that I might not have enough money to live? I needed a distraction... I wanted to study, I needed to study, I had an assignment to write. I wanted to sleep. I was becoming very tired all of a sudden. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to be back in Bali, back on the retreat. I needed... I wanted... Flustered and overwhelmed I decided I needed chocolate - that always helps. But was 10am too early for chocolate? I was no longer sure what I needed or wanted. How had my mind become so overwhelmed so

quickly? The more I thought, the more immersed I became in manas. I needed to just settle. I needed clarity.

The klesas were in full swing as my mind jumped around like a wild monkey (kshipta). Avidya muddied my perception of "my true self", of what really mattered. I became caught up with asmita, believing I needed to be in control, that my plans needed to come to fruition. I was completely attached (raga) to these plans, to my asana practise, and sought to escape (dvesa) my frustration by eating chocolate, reading the newspaper, and ultimately avoid writing this essay by procrastinating. Even my attachment to life could be demonstrated by my attachment to the things of life; ie to money, to plans. The klesas operate at many levels within each of us, and they create an imbalance between our mind and body and disconnect us from the divine, or from our higher selves, or however we might see this (Iyenga, 1993). For me, beginning to understand how the klesas disturb the balance in my life is incredibly powerful. Whilst I admit it's rather challenging to maintain this mindfulness all the time, it creates the freedom to begin to stop, or at the very least change, the many repetitive cycles I experience in my thoughts and actions.

It's at this point (and hopefully, as my practise progresses, it will occur much quicker!) that I can let go of the idea that pursuing the klesas further will lead me back to buddhi. I've found the yamas and niyamas have been integral to discerning this path. The more I adhere to the guidance provided by the yamas and niyamas, the greater the clarity I experience. Lets go back now to the story.

I was literally turning in circles, both physically and mentally, trying to work out what I wanted or needed to do.

So I put aside the pen, and decided to let go of any attempt to study right now, or eat chocolate for that matter. Instead, I headed to my mat. After 3 rounds of surya namaskar A, my mind began to settle. The first round was a little stiff. I pushed my way through it, almost trying to punish myself for my own procrastination. The second round became much softer, as I tried to balance sthira and sukha, and ultimately let go of ahimsa. In the third round I introduced a virabhadrasana sequence, as it always helps to ground me. I find an amazing sense of balance, between mind and body, and between power and gentleness in virabhadrasana 1. In virabhadrasana 2, I experience a sense of surrender, and a reconnection with something greater than myself.

After another 2 rounds, I noticed my thoughts become progressively more subtle. I slowly began to observe the thoughts as they moved through, rather than simply identifying with them. I tried to embrace Patanjali's idea of using the mind to understand, control and still the processes of the mind (1:41). I began to feel a sense of clarity again. I could accept where I was at now, I could see what I needed to do (firstly apologise to my partner...), and so I set about doing it. My sense of I had begun to move back towards buddhi.

Life is incredibly complicated, and the mind easily clouded. Sri Krishna said, (that) "for the person who has conquered their mind, it is their greatest friend; but for the person who fails to do so, their mind will be their greatest enemy" (cited by Swami Rama, 1999). The challenge of course comes in attempting to use the mind to control the mind, through discernment and detachment. For me this is an ongoing challenge. I move quickly and rapidly into manas, only occasionally catching glimpses of buddhi, and the clarity with which buddhi brings. It has been the yamas and niyamas that provided the framework I needed, to try to balance that which is expected from me in the world, and that which is required on the yogic path.

Afterword

YAMAS

Ahimsa

My self talk, my initial asana practise, and when I snapped at my partner all constitute violence. Whilst they are not physically aggressive, they still inflict pain. This in turn creates guilt and further disturbances in my mind. Further to that, my partner retaliates by snapping at me. Patanjali was very wise when he said that once ahimsa is established, others abandon hostility in our presence (2.35; Iyengar, 1993).

Satya

Satya requires that there is strict avoidance of all exaggerations, pretense, equivocation, and of withholding information (class notes). For me, apologising to my partner involves satya. I must let go of my pride to honour my higher truth. This provides the opportunity for growth and change. Without this truth, disharmony grows. And what happens at the level of my mind is generally mirrored in my environment.

Asteya

Unfortunately this yama didn't seem to fit into this essay. Essentially its teaching is not taking anything that doesn't properly belong to us, both tangible and intangible. It is the intangible things I find more difficult. ie. I start work late to go to a yoga class. Ultimately, I am stealing time I am being paid to do other things with (but I really like the class...).

Brahmacarya

Traditionally, brahmacarya sees the celibate individual transform their vital energy into spiritual energy (Iyengar, 1993). I'm not sure I'm prepared for celibacy (nor do I think my partner would support a decision like that!), so I prefer to think of it in terms of lessening my attachment to the enjoyment of the senses. Which, to be quite honest is challenging in itself.

My craving for chocolate (a very fickle relationship), like my desire to be back in Bali, represents an escape from the confused state of mind I had found myself in. By turning to my asana practise, I was able to create space for some much needed clarity. This helped me detach from my cravings, so I could see them for what they were.

Aparigraha

Aparigraha means non-possessiveness. It can be about living without surplus possessions, about having an experience but not holding onto it, but also about not holding onto one's thoughts (Iyengar, 1993).

I wanted to go back to the yoga retreat, to hold onto that experience. I wanted to have enough money, for what I'm not sure. These thoughts disturbed my mind. They created worry and anxiety, and they prevented me from feeling contentment (samtosa).

NIYAMAS

Sauca

Sauca is about purity and cleanliness of body and mind (Iyengar, 1993). Worrying, procrastination, eating without awareness, even reading the newspaper can create stress, and cloud the mind with emotions. Asana, Pranayama and Meditation practises cleanse the body and the mind, and begin to restore clarity.

Samtosa

We need contentment to establish a calm, clear mind. And it is a calm mind that reflects our true nature. When I wanted to still be in Bali, I became discontent. I was suddenly caught between two places, one imagined, one "real". I couldn't embrace or accept what I needed to do. I didn't want to write my assignment. My mind became clouded by "I want... I need..." These desires created suffering. Asana practise and meditation stills the mind, and cultivates contentment in the moment.

Tapas

Tapas encompasses will, austerity, self-discipline, and moving outside ones comfort zone. It was self discipline that enabled me to let go of procrastination, and try to shift/burn off the frustration through asana practise. This ultimately allowed me to bring the body and mind back under the control of my higher self, and not only start, but finish this assignment.

Svadyaya

This entire assignment has been an example of svadyaya. It has involved self study and reflection, combined with the study of the scriptures. The

theoretical study has and will continue to inform and support my personal experiential study, as I continue on this path of, and to yoga.

Ishvara pranidhana

Ishvara pranidhana is particularly challenging for me, yet freeing. I like to be in control, and more often than not, believe I can 'think' my way through any dilemma to solve it. Unfortunately, this creates worry, anxiety and an attachment to my plans. Ishvara pranidhana focuses instead on 'being', it provides a pathway from the 'ego' to our divine nature - to grace, peace, love, and clarity.

Through asana practise I reconnect with the universe, remembering that I cannot control everything, and that I need to have faith. (Of course this is sometimes easier said than done).

References

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