



August 2011 Contemplation Theme

The Great Vow

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No exceptions. Always holding yourself to a high standard. Not merely morality, but a yogic lifestyle – the yamas are your beginning point. Yamas are the things you refrain from doing, even things that other people do without concern. Yoga holds you to a higher standard in five ways: non-harming, non-lying, non-stealing, non-licentiousness, and non-greed.

These five yamas are not for the purpose of making you an admirable person, though you will be; they are for the purpose of quieting your mind. This is because causing harm to others stirs up your mind, even if you harmed them accidentally. Similarly, even little white lies keep your mind churning, as do stealing, sexuality and greediness — in any amount and to any degree.

Thus Patanjali offers yogis a great opportunity: *mahavṛta*, the great (*maha*) vow (*vṛta*).

Jaati-desha-kaala-samayaanavacchinnaah saarvabhaumaa mahaa-vratam. — Yoga Sutras 2.31

The great vow is not limited by birth, place, time or circumstance.

This *sutra* (aphorism) is pivotally placed between sutras listing the yamas and niyamas, it's as though Patanjali is reaching 2,000 years to say, "I know you'll try to wiggle out of it, without even realizing what you're doing." This *sutra* is a delusion-buster.

It applies specifically to the yamas rather than the niyamas, because the yamas are harder. They are harder because they come at the beginning of yoga's practices, when your habitual tendencies are still full of self-defeating patterns. It is truly hard to overcome your old ways. Yet if you don't, where are you?

The yamas are also harder because everyone models the wiggle-room that they allow themselves. They say, "Don't lie, except in this situation or except to this person or except when you really want something specific to happen."

When you've worked your way through the yamas for the first time, everything becomes easier. Yoga becomes easier, life becomes easier, and the way you live inside your own skin becomes easier.

One of the things that makes it all easier is that you are no longer comparing yourself to everyone else. The changes you get from the yamas make you look at the higher standard — you now compare yourself to *svaroopa*, your own divine essence. That comparison is ever uplifting. You turn your mind to the vastness and bliss of your own Being, compare yourself to that undeniable inner Reality, and your mind soars even higher.

In addition, you get a lot of practical benefit. When you refrain from doing, saying and thinking things that agitate your mind, then your body and breath are more open. Your heart needs less guarding. Your tailbone stays soft and long. It takes less yoga to open up your spine because you didn't close it down with your mind. You can use the great vow to keep your body open.

This *sutra* details the ways in which you'll lose track of the yamas, a list as accurate today as when it was written. While you must adapt your behavior in different locations, at different times, in different circumstances, and with different people, you must maintain an underlying personal standard. It's called integrity. The great vow calls you to an unwavering yogic integrity, even when it's hard.

Birth — the *sutra* means that you practice the yamas no matter who you are dealing with, regardless of where they were born, whether or not they are related to you, if they have more or less education than you, if they speak a different language or have a different economic or social status, etc. Begin to watch yourself and you may see that you speak to people who work at fast-food places differently than those who work at fine restaurants. You may actually be nicer to strangers than to your own family members. I have even heard people share the ways they treat telephone solicitors, none of which can I call yogic.

Place — When you go somewhere that you've never been, does that change the way you handle yourself? Remember, yamas are about how you handle yourself in the world. When the place is unfamiliar, whether it is in your own neighborhood or a great distance away, you might lose track of the yamas without even realizing it. Perhaps it's the other way around – and you handle yourself differently with those at home than when you're dealing with strangers. Maybe it's the highway that stirs up your mind, and you treat the neighboring drivers badly. With the great vow, you continue to be yogic, regardless of where you are located.

Time — The time of day may affect you. I know yogis who don't talk to anyone before their morning cup of coffee or chai. Maybe you're good at mornings but begin to lose it at night. Perhaps you are adversely affected by the time of year, with the shorter days of winter offering less natural light and slowing you down, or you may be one who loves the chill in the air and the crunch of winter's ice and snow. Of course, monthly rhythms affect many women as well as those who love them. Can you continue to be non-violent and non-greedy while you go through the ever-changing nature of time?

Circumstance — Your desires and expectations are not always met. Worse, they are not always meet-able. How do you handle yourself when things go wrong? How do you handle yourself when things go right? The situation and your expectation can affect your practice of the yamas. Sometimes the situation that you are dealing with is not about right or wrong, but is a complete surprise or even a great shock! Your practice of the yamas can fall to a very low priority when circumstances are challenging you.

This is why the yamas must go beyond being a practice. This is why Patanjali offers you the opportunity to take the great vow, so you get beyond doing a “practice” and arrive at mastery. Then the yamas are your lifestyle; they are just the way you are, as an individual. You can say, “This is just the way I am.” It's not something you have to remember to practice.

This word “practice” is very important in yoga. It means that you are consistent, that you apply yourself and repeat as needed, and it also means that you learn something and get better at it over time. Practice leads to mastery.

A pianist practices musical scales, then various pieces of music, and then becomes able to sit down and play out of pure joy. Yet the most important effect of all that practice is hidden from others' view. You can see the pianist's ability to share music with others. You can even see the work it took the pianist to get to that level of mastery, but you cannot see the effect that the piano has had on the pianist. Their practice on the piano changes the way they hear music, changes the way they sit and how they use their hands, changes the way they use their brain cells, changes the way they think and how they see the world, and changes the way they interact with the world. Yoga practice does the same. It changes everything.

Whether you begin with poses, yoga's breathing practices, meditative practices, sutra study or yoga's mantras and music, yoga changes you. It changes the way you feel inside your own body, mind and heart. It changes the way you see others and even what you want from the world. It changes the way you think and especially changes the quantity of your thoughts – your mind becomes quieter. You don't have to practice the yamas to get this result. You don't have to take the great vow, unless you want to. You don't have to look in your mirror and see the warts, or even work on them consciously. Yoga will dissolve them for you anyway. Do more yoga. The pace at which they dissolve is determined by how much yoga you do.

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