



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Spiritual Upliftment #3

Transcendent Morality

By Swami Nirmalananda & Vidyadevi Stillman

Yoga can eliminate all mental and emotional disturbances. Are you interested? Simply practice the yamas: refrain from causing harm, lying, stealing, sexual obsession and greed. Such animalistic actions disturb your mind. Even watching nature shows creates inner turmoil due to the violence built into them. Practicing the yamas gradually eliminates all inner turmoil. By living this way, you hold yourself to a high standard, well beyond society's definition of morality.

The yamas are transcendent morality, morality for the purpose of transcendence. Swami Nirmalananda defines transcendence: "You leave one inner state or quality behind, so you can live in another. You go beyond the 'small-s-self' to find your deeper essence within: your 'capital-S-Self,' svaroopā."

In living by this higher standard, you may be tempted to wiggle out of it from time to time. You already know how to side step as well as rationalize why you should not be so virtuous. The ancient sage Patanjali offers you the opportunity to upgrade to a whole new level by taking the Great Vow, mahavrata (maha=the great, vrata=vow).

Jaati-de"sa-kaala-samayaana-vacchinaa.h sarvabhauma mahaa-vratam —
Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.31

The Great Vow is the practice of the yamas universally, unaffected by class, location, time or usual custom.¹

Class: Patanjali knows that people often treat others badly, especially when dealing with someone in the service industry. Watch yourself and see, how do you treat the person behind the counter at the convenience store, the garbage collector or mail delivery personnel? Compare that to how you treat your family, your dear neighbors or co-workers. What about telephone solicitors?

If you take the Great Vow, you practice the yamas no matter who you are dealing with or where they come from. Their educational level, mental or physical capacity, social position, financial status and what they do for a living won't change your standards for your own behavior.

Location: Do you treat people in your hometown differently than when you are someplace new? The image of the ugly American has been freshened worldwide by recent national events and politics. You might even catch yourself in the act, trying to get in front of others when you're standing in line or maneuvering your car to get ahead of others or to block them. With the Great Vow you continue to be yogic with everyone everywhere, regardless of your location or theirs.

Time: The time of day can throw you off. Maybe you are grumpy until you get your morning coffee or chai, or you might be tired and cranky in the evening. Ladies, you may be reactive at a certain time of month, taking it out on others. Even the time of year can change your behavior, due to the cold and dark of winter or the summer's sweltering heat. Or maybe you are racing against time, late again; you have so much to do, you are cutting people off and cursing. Your practice of the yamas has flown out the window!

Circumstance: Maybe the situation or occasion throws you off. When something is hard or challenging, or when you don't want to do something that you must do, your yogic practices might slip away. Whether it's a family reunion, a fender bender or a meeting at work, life is not always easy and convenient. Your practice of the yamas may become a low priority when circumstances are challenging.

This sutra challenges you to practice all the yamas, all the time, with everyone, everywhere and in all circumstances. While extraordinary situations sometimes arise, the Great Vow means you don't lose yourself in the process. If it causes you hardship to live according to this high standard, you might remind yourself that, in the process, you are completing some old karmas.

¹ Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda

As important as the yamas are, they are not easy! Your thoughts, words and actions can just spring up & out. You may regret them or wish you hadn't done those things, but it's better to simply not do them. Just don't. In addition, practicing the yamas brings up subterranean mental and emotional stuff, or maybe you realize it has been at the surface all along. You're moving through the day and something happens — you react. But you just lost ahimsa. Now what do you do? Instead of beating up on yourself, Patanjali recommends you “cultivate the opposite.”

It's helpful to know that Patanjali taught monks who were living in the forest or mountains. Everyone had renounced the world, yet they still found the yamas hard to do. Just as he told them, he tells you what to do: when your mind is churning out of control, cultivate the opposite.

Vitarka-baadhane-pratipak.sa-bhaavanam— Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.33

When your mind is disturbed by improper thoughts, remedy it by cultivating the opposite.¹

First you have to figure out what the opposite is. That means you identify what you're feeling. Whether it's anger, loneliness, grief, lust, blame or any other feeling, you catch it in the act. You see it, which means you're not lost in it any more. Now determine what the opposite feeling would be so you can cultivate it.

What is the opposite? Different people name different opposites even when they're experiencing the same feeling. Some say the opposite of grief is joy, while others pick acceptance, gratitude, etc. The opposite for blame could be compassion or appreciation. The opposite for anger may be love, patience, peacefulness, etc. Your opposite is whatever you say it is; it may be different for you at different times and in different situations.

To cultivate the opposite that you've chosen, simply muster up the feeling inside. The whole range of feelings are already all there, in a potential form, like unplayed piano keys. You play those keys. Actively call up the feeling you've chosen. You're not lying to yourself; this is the opposite of lying to yourself. You have admitted where you are at and now you are doing something about it. You cultivate a genuine inner feeling, the one you've chosen to feel. You do have to do some work to bring it up.

Swami Nirmalananda describes, “Maybe someone you love does something that makes you feel hate toward them. While hate is a genuine feeling, your love for them is also genuine. Choose which one to bring into the foreground of your awareness. It's actually rather easy, and gets easier with practice.”

Cultivating the opposite calms and quiets your mind in only a moment. This quieting of your mind is yoga's goal. It is the purpose of the yamas. Additionally, it improves your relationships with everyone. Patanjali is describing your ability to choose what your mind is doing. You already have this ability. His goal for you is that you use it to change the quality of your thoughts, later developing the ability to quiet your mind at will, which opens up your inner experience of your own Divinity, svaroopaa.

Vidyadevi says, “I use mantra to support me in practicing the Great Vow. First, I notice my thoughts or actions are not in accordance with the Great Vow. This is happening because I have lost my svaroopaa, my Self. I identify my feelings, feel them and repeat mantra to find my Self again. From this inner vantage point, I see everyone and everything as Divine. For me, this is contemplating the opposite. My problem was that I wasn't seeing them or the situation as Divine.”

Yoga gives you the tools for transcendence, to move you towards your own Divine Self. Yet it is up to you to use the tools. For an inner upgrade, take the Great Vow. When you need a lifeline to get you through the process, cultivate the opposite. Are you ready for a whole new level? This is called, “Doing more yoga.”

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON “SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT,” OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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