**NYTT Philosophy 101 Assignment**

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In this short essay, I will summarize my understanding of aphorisms 11.34 and 11.35 based on Edwin F. Bryant’s translation and commentary (2009) of Patanjali’s yoga sutras, and explain how they can be used: 1) in my life and in my practice, 2) with people I find difficult, 3) in teaching my students.

Aphorism II.34 is about the nature of negative thoughts, their cause and effect, and a solution to counter them. The first part of this aphorism states that at the gross level of consciousness, negative thoughts are violence. It then lists and describes the factors affecting how negative thoughts occur: there are three layers of agency; three triggers; and three levels of intensity.

The three layers of agency describe how negative thoughts are either directly performed by us, indirectly performed by someone else on our behalf, or authorized by us through explicit consent or through a lack of counteraction. The three triggers for negative thoughts are greed, anger or delusion. The three levels of intensity mean that negative thoughts can vary from slight, moderate to extreme. Bryant’s commentary explains that the possible combinations of the aforementioned factors (3x3x3) create 27 or 81 subtle categories (depending on how it is calculated). Regardless of these subtle categories or distinctions, violence still remains their core identifier at the gross level.

The second part of this aphorism 11.34, states that the violence contained in negative thoughts leads to suffering and ignorance. This statement, plus the assumption that suffering and ignorance are to be avoided, provides the reasoning for why it is important to counter negative thoughts. The solution given in this aphorism is that if we remain conscious of what negative thoughts do, we would consciously reduce the amount of negative thoughts we have, resulting in a reduction of suffering. This then becomes an aim of yoga: to cultivate the remembrance of cause and effect (negative thoughts cause pain) so that we can consciously work on reducing this cause of pain.

Aphorism II.35 states that the company of one or more people who have a solid practice in non-violence, has the effect of reducing or eliminating violence in those around them. This provides two solutions to countering negative thoughts: seek out the company of people who are non-violent to reduce or eliminate your own violence; and build a solid practice in non-violence yourself so that you can positively affect others.

This aphorism also addresses the ethical problem that comes up in aphorism 11.34: defining and dealing with one’s expanded sphere of personal agency and our corresponding responsibility. This problem occurs due to the 3rd level of agency: we can indirectly cause suffering and ignorance by letting other people perform negative thoughts. Realistically speaking, we cannot control other people: we can stop people from physically doing harm by tying them up or incarcerating them, we can try to convince people to change, but we cannot fully control what happens in their minds. What then, becomes of the idea of having agency (which implies responsibility) over negative thoughts that other people have? Aphorism 11.35 answers this question by implying that if you do not share the company of those who can reduce violence in you, and you do not have a practice in non-violence yourself, you cannot lead by example nor reduce violence in others. This lack of action on our part still holds us responsible, especially once we know the effects of negative thoughts, and a solutions we can implement to diminish them. Our knowledge of this cause and effect makes us responsible for our actions and inactions in this regard.

How these two aphorisms can be used:

 1) In my life and in my practice:

These aphorisms remind me that violence doesn’t have to be physical: negative thoughts count and result in suffering. Thoughts can lead to action; therefore the seed of a violent action starts with a violent thought. In my life and practice, I should spend time with non-violent people and avoid violent people while I cultivate a practice of non-violence within myself. My practice should include self-reflection and exercises to sharpen my sensitivity towards the negativity I have or authorize within and around me. Acknowledging subtle forms of violence and remembering their effects should help me to anticipate causes and implement yogic tools (breath, meditation, mantra, posture, focus, etc.) that reduce my “violent habits”. I think that this practice is not about apathy (or the negation of emotion) at all, but about cultivating an alternative to “anger, greed and delusion” which might be appreciation, empathy or compassion, and reality checking to gain a healthy perspective. It doesn’t mean I have to be positive all the time: a neutral mind, developed through a regular yoga practice, also reduces negativity.

2) With people I find difficult:

When confronted with people or situations I find difficult, I will try to keep a neutral receptive mind and have compassion. If I keep my own thoughts in check through self-reflection and working through my own reactions, I’d make sure I don’t make things even more difficult to deal with, and I may not be as affected by people’s actions. If my presence non-violent, this itself may reduce antagonism. My lack of “violent” reactions (negative thoughts or words) may also rub off on those around me. The aim is not to change other people, but to change my reaction towards them. If I’m peaceful, I’m more likely to inspire peace around me. That is the limit of agency that I have. People will then make their own choices.

3) In teaching my students:

These aphorisms provide guidance for teaching my students in the following ways: 1) spreading awareness that negative thoughts lead to ignorance and suffering is a big first step towards positive change; 2) guiding students in pinpointing areas they can work on in their practice (triggers for anger, greed or delusion) can help them work through and reduce their negative thoughts; 3) having a solid non-violence practice and being a peaceful presence in their lives as a teacher can have a huge impact in reducing their own stress and anxieties; 4) providing them with the tools (breathing, meditation, postures, mantra, etc.) to work through their reactions and thoughts can help them gain a sense of control and self-regulation which is very empowering to them and those around them.

Ultimately, there is a ripple effect or snowball effect that can occur from my own practice and from teaching. It’s therefore imperative that I hone my awareness and maintain a solid practice myself while providing the tools people need feel empowered and build their own practice.

**Reference:**

Bryant, E. F., (2009). The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. North Point Press, New York.