**Essay presented to Matthew Remski**

**By Catherine Venne**

**NAADA Yoga Teachers Training, 200-Hour Foundation[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Introduction

This essay is presented as the final requirement of the *Philosophy of Yoga* course included in the Naada Yoga Teachers Training, 200-hour Foundation. Its objectives are to summarize in my own words two lines of the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and to explain how they can be used in my life, with people I find difficult, in my global yoga practice and in the perspective of beginning to teach yoga to students.

This essay is structured as follows:

* The two lines of Patanjali as translated by Edwin F. Bryant and my simple description of it based on Bryant’s translation.
* A personal reflection related to the recent Sivananda scandal in the yoga world and the connections I make between this event and Patanjali’s lines.
* My appropriation of the two lines of Patanjali based on my professional roles and identity.
* My critical and inspired look at this content in the perspective of my hoped-for position as a yoga teacher.

All through the text, I will take the opportunity to draw from sources that guide my professional activities and personal yoga practice and include quotes from:

* Carl Rogers and humanistic psychology;
* Jon Kabat-Zinn with his description of how mindfulness can help us with our relationships with ourselves and others;
* Michael Stone with his views on how a consistent yoga practice can help us gain inner freedom; and
* Amy Weintraub as she claims that stepping on a yoga mat is a way to find wholeness and reduce the feeling of separation between oneself and the universe!

Patanjali – Chapter 2 Practice, Lines 34 and 35

Patanjali wrote *Yoga Sutras* around the second century. The yoga world he describes is known as Raja Yoga, “a system for working with higher states of consciousness (…) whose basis is contemplation” and is used “to develop spiritual awareness.” His work compiles a “moral philosophy of life and living.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Line II.34

“Negative thoughts are violence. They may be personally performed, performed on one’s behalf by another, or authorized by oneself; they may be triggered by greed, anger, or delusion; and they may be slight, moderate, or extreme in intensity. One should cultivate counteracting thoughts, namely, that the end results, or negative thoughts, are ongoing suffering and ignorance.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Line II.35

“In the presence of one who is established in nonviolence, enmity is abandoned.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The translation of the line 34 of Patanjali talks about negative thoughts. Bryant’s interpretation includes examples not only of thoughts but also of acts (killing an animal).

Here, Patanjali tells us, based on Bryant’s interpretation, that the violence that we commit through negative acts or thoughts, that we influence others to commit or when we are accomplices with others or do not denounce them (meaning that we authorize this violence) needs to be compensated by opposite acts or thoughts in order for suffering and ignorance not to reign.

Originally, these thoughts of violence are inevitable. They can be inspired by greed, anger or delusion. They can be of various levels of intensity.

The Karmic Law of action and reaction[[5]](#footnote-5) makes sure that the one who commits the violent act or thought will eventually suffer in the same way he affects others.

Because of the multiple consequences of negative thoughts (suffering, ignorance, being inflicted with the suffering one has imposed others), no one should let the mind contemplate them.

As he progresses, the yogi will be able to counter these thoughts and get rid of them.

The second line – line 35 – pursues the same ideas concerning violence and nonviolence. It says that all beings become pacifists in the contact of someone who lives in a nonviolent state. A yogi who has renounced all negative thoughts (which equals violence) and who is rooted in meditation will have a soothing effect on those around him so that everyone will renounce all warlike momentum.

I believe that we can make a connection between Patanjali’s message in these two lines and the fundamental tenet of Jainism, nonviolence and non-injury “towards all living beings to move the soul towards divine consciousness and liberation.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Sivananda scandal, negative thoughts and acts

Until recently (and maybe still today), I have felt very much attached – although I know very little about it – to the Sivananda tradition, the 1st yoga path that brought me to a mat.

The Sivananda scandal – sexual abuse allegations that have happened since December 2019[[7]](#footnote-7) have been a big surprise and disappointment to me. In the recent past, I had the chance to stay at both the Val-Morin and the Bahamas ashrams of the organization. Even if the events of sexual abuse are said to be isolated, they were committed by very influential and powerful figures of the organization, some of whom defined its mission and spiritual orientations.

Shocked by these allegations, I decided not to go to the Christmas party of the Montreal centre. Since then, I have been troubled by many thoughts such as: how can the mission of this organization be pure and inspire so many people all around the globe, when it was defined and built over the years by such gurus who lied and embodied a disparity between their teachings and their daily acts!

I know that we have seen these kinds of revelations in the past decades in many religions and spiritual practices. But I had the naivety to think that my admiration for the spiritual, physical and life path yoga represents was shared and truly lived by others.

At the same time this scandal took place, last December, I went to see a play by Marilyn Perreault, a Quebec playwright and actress, performed by college students. The play was about young adults going to party during which things degenerate so much that over the night several of them commit sexual abuse on one of the most popular and admired girls of the group.

Although the play’s plot seems to evoke the classical message to help raise the audience’s awareness about the influence of a group that can be devastating on all of its members and people around it, another layer of meaning focussed on the victim’s identity, after the fact. “I am one of those,” she whispered at the public… “One of those who sends the message that I can be abused, that I like to be abused.”

After the play, there was a discussion with the audience, the author, the actors and the director – a college teacher. During these discussions, I rarely speak. But this time I did and was thanked for it a few days later by the director and some of the students. It seems that I had made a pertinent and necessary parallel for some of the spectators of the play between its two messages and the Sivananda story. How can a female director’s assistant (Julie Salter – the one who denounced the abuses she was the victim of) and other female members related to the organization accept being abused for years if this is not related to some identity, they get to define themselves by?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his conclusion of *Full Catastrophe Living*, *The Ways of Awareness* chapter, talks about how easy it can be to be at home. “At any moment, we are very close to home, much closer than you think. If we can simply realize the fullness of this moment, of this breath, we can find stillness and peace right here. We can be at home right now, in our body as it is, in this moment as it is.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Reading this and making connections with the messages of the play and the Sivananda scandal, I feel revolted. If this being at home right here and now is the essence and the strongest message of mindfulness and one of the global yoga practice, how can a guru that promotes the yoga way of living in public be dispossessed of the discipline of his mind and body by manipulating that person and maybe others over years through physical and psychological abuse? Isn’t the body, mind and soul sacred territories and the Divine manifestation for yogis? This is what my meditation practice confirms to me every day![[9]](#footnote-9)

Thinking that the swamis that committed these acts of violence will themselves be abused later is no consolation. I would prefer to think that the suffering and ignorance can be erased from the surface of the planet thanks to our diligent practice of meditation. Through his lines, Patanjali lets me think that if I cultivate nonviolence myself, I can at least contribute to alleviating the world’s pain and ignorance. And, as Michael Stone states it: “When we begin to examine and undo our own harmful intentions and act with moderation, we cultivate an atmosphere in which others can do the same.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Interpretation of the 2 lines based on my professional identity – Positive thoughts and acts in the HR world

As an Human Resources consultant specialized in Competency Development and Career Management, a Professional Specialist in adult learning (in French we say *andragogue*), small Team Manager, and a Lecturer at the *Université du Québec à Montréal* in the Education Department, I am very much inspired by Carl Rogers’ work with which we can establish links with the lines of Patanjali. Rogers testifies of his humanistic approach in his books *On Becoming a Person:*

“If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur”[[11]](#footnote-11)

and *Freedom to Learn:*

“It would be most unlikely that one could hold the three attitudes I have described (realness, acceptance and empathic), or could commit himself to being a facilitator of learning, unless he has come to have a profound trust in the human organism and its potentialities.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Here are various situations of negative thoughts and acts I witness every week through my professional activities. Each time I witness one of these situations, I think of the suffering of the person who commits these acts or thoughts, because, to me, if violence creates suffering, it is generated by a suffering which I do not always have the key to interpret.

1. My biggest client who, even in the midst of a constructive discussion, includes hurtful or accusing words in her speech;
2. An employee who loses his job and when I launch his career transition program talks negatively about his former employer and colleagues;
3. A candidate in career transition whose support I have been entrusted with because he was dissatisfied with the support of one of my colleagues and submitted a negative evaluation of said colleague’s services.

As Patanjali says, nonviolence attracts nonviolence. To pacify my work place, here are some of my answers to the situations listed above.

1. I have often tried humour over the years with that experienced woman who has gained hierarchical power and is now responsible for the mandates assigned to me.

Unfortunately, the messages of empathy I try to send her don’t seem to coax her much! I seize all the opportunities of my contact with her to practise my active, intentional and reflexive listening. I also strive to cultivate positive thoughts concerning her as well as to always give her positive feedback on the mandates she offers me.

As Amy Weintraub says in *Yoga for Depression*, I try to build on the 2 pillars of yoga: awareness and equanimity.

My main difficulty is not to get entangled in her negativity and her aggressiveness, not to try to defend myself even when I feel unfairly accused of devoting too much time, energy or passion to my work, to doing too much research, to taking too much care of the candidates I support!

I feel the necessity to take a look at my possible faults, but I often come to the conclusion that I have very little to do with her negativity and that it is her way of relating to others.

1. To support employees that lose their jobs, I facilitate many on-site trainings and webinars. I launch these workshops with a round table where everyone can tell me a little about themselves.

I work hard to create a sense of community by letting everyone express their struggles so that they can feel they are not alone.

I do the necessary reading and research (even if I am not paid for it) to maintain job market awareness and always bring new resources and information to the table. This way, candidates can gain hope that a better job awaits them.

1. I begin by listening to the candidate and try to position the support I can offer as complementary to the one they have received before. I talk positively of the colleague that disappointed the candidate so that no comparison is made and we start over on a positive basis. This gives me the opportunity to validate Patanjali’s thought: in the presence of nonviolence, enmity is abandoned.

I share my belief that a career transition program is a treasure and that it is the candidate’s opportunity to develop resilience and goals to build the rest of his career.

Although I am making all this effort, I find difficult to cope with the surges of aggressiveness that I have witnessed from my boss, some of my colleagues, candidates or students. I understand that there are constraints but, in public, I believe that everyone is responsible for themselves and should remain positive or at least neutral to prevent the spread of violence. There is always a better way to settle differences in private than to make a public scandal or to spew aggressiveness on others.

My acts and thoughts as described above have three objectives: to not perpetrate violence, to put an end to its cycle and to preserve myself so that I can continue my professional activities, keep my faith in what I am doing and maintain my vibrant passion. In a way, this corresponds to a yoga perspective as described by Michael Stone:

“Yoga is the practice of finding within ourselves freedom from the sense of being caught in impermanent and limited situations. In some respects, we can’t escape those conditions, but we can be less invested in them. Freedom is living in such a way that we are not hemmed in or entangled in the situations we encounter. We learn to preserve an inner psychological stillness of nonreactivity and ethical action, which is equivalent to freedom.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

I like very much this part of Bryant’s interpretation when he explains: “… even natural enemies such as cat and mouse … give up their enmity in the presence of the yogi who has fully renounced all thoughts of violence, due to being influenced by the yogi’s state of mind.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

During my career, I have observed colleagues and managers play the political game in organizations and fight in various and ugly ways for a promotion. However, I have never developed the taste for such a game, hoping that my efforts, my rigour, my realizations would speak for themselves. And, in a way, I feel they have. I have also observed that some people around me seem to be fighting with everything in their lives, all the time: traffic, sicknesses, IT tools, colleagues, clients, members of their family, etc. I think that their warlike attitude attracts conflicts.

Whenever I ruminate rather than overcoming my challenges and observations, it leads nowhere and it undermines me. More than anything, that takes me away from my life mission: helping the people I meet progress and be well! It takes me away from my feeling of being professionally in my zone, whereas overall, I want to share, communicate, seek and engage with others. And when I get there, it’s always very fruitful.

In conclusion to this section, I would like to quote Amy Weintraub again: “Yoga itself is the complex science of awakening to who we are, who we can be. Yogis believed that we can create our own lives, our own happiness. (…) By activating our innate mental, physical and spiritual healing capacities, Yoga practice strengthens our feeling of joy, peace and connectedness.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Hoped-for position as a yoga teacher – my life in yoga[[16]](#footnote-16)

An opportunity to contribute to the well-being and self-confidence of others

I am trying to live every day with a yogic mind. This mainly means making, as the days go by, more links between my thoughts, my activities, my diet, my meditation and yoga practice, with the philosophy and history of yoga.

Four years ago, I began a formal, and continuous practice of daily meditation based on the MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) approach, developed and popularized in the West by Jon Kabat-Zinn. In *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn says, as a conclusion to this 600 plus page’ book, two things that are of great interest to me:

* Practise every day, whether feeling like it or not, as if your life depends on it, because it does!
* The ideal is to practise every day, to get all the increasing benefits of mindfulness. But, if for some reason you stop practising and come back later to meditation and body scan, as soon as you begin again, you will feel the benefits coming back.

Since the beginning of my meditation practice, I have experienced fewer negative thoughts, a reinforced humour and more peaceful human relationships at work. It seems as if my growing self-awareness and of what I have to offer has brought me to opportunities to consciously live my professional challenges.

To me, the physical practice of yoga comes as an extra layer, on top of this foundation of searching for calm, insight, inspiration and awareness that comes from my meditation practice. Physical yoga is slowly becoming a daily need for me, but jogging is even a greater need, specifically through these days of confinement because of the COVID-19 pandemic. More and more, I recognize in my body the signs for the need of the calming and energizing benefits that some asanas and pranayama exercise bring to me. *Surya Namaskara* (Sun Salutation), for example, brings a nice feeling of global stretch and I can feel the energy flowing within me while doing it, especially combined with *Virabhadrasana* (Warrior) I and II and *Viparita Virabhadrasana* (dancing Warrior or reverse Warrior). *Ustrasana* (Camel), as a slight back bent engaging the abs and heart opening is the most energizing posture I have experienced!

When I think of yoga for its physical part, the asanas, I am not sure that I have what it takes to become a yoga teacher… But, when I consider yoga as a way of living, a global practice that includes meditation, breathing and relaxation, diet (eating habits and choices, knowledge and balance), spiritual path and growth[[17]](#footnote-17) – including the curiosity to search in history, philosophy and psychology, to explore deeply in myself – then, I hear a strong calling and I am convinced that I already have a lot to share, explore and learn with practitioners, students and spiritual seekers around me.

In this, I embody Patanjali’s ideas on nonviolence and the necessity of cultivating positive thoughts. The absolutely positive angle of this exploration is a very important aspect of my thirst for learning and sharing. I want to say “Yes, congratulations!” to my yoga students most of the time, if not always. As I am motivated to guide them in the exploration of the effects of the postures in their body and of the meditation on their mind and emotion, having begun the exploration myself and wishing to deepen it, I wish that every stretch, every breath, every minute of silence or chanting to be positive and to have the potential to support the connection they want to establish with their sense of well-being.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the influence of the two lines of Patanjali in my professional life and my dream to contribute as a yoga teacher. I have also taken the opportunity to put Patanjali’s thoughts in connection with authors, theorists and practitioners from the worlds of yoga, participative medicine and psychology, the works which guide me on a daily basis.

I wish to contribute to people’s well-being that can be fostered by self-confidence and deep self-reflection. Jon Kabat-Zinn inspires me when he writes about his Stress Reduction Clinic:

“Many people come to the clinic with much more pain than only that caused their physical problems and by the stress in their lives. Many find it difficult to feel much, if any, love and compassion for themselves. Many feel unworthy of love and unable to express warmth toward members of their own family, even when they want to. Many feel disconnected from their bodies and have a hard time feeling anything, or knowing what they are feeling. (…) Many got the message from their parents or from school, or from church (…) that they were bad, stupid, ugly, unworthy, or selfish. Those messages were internalized, becoming part of their self-image and of their view of the world, and were carried into adulthood deep in their own psyches.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Here, I wish to draw a final connection between the Sivananda scandal, this idea of identity and the nonviolence path Patanjali suggests the yogi to take. There is a necessary effort to counter violence as Patanjali defines it especially if this violence has helped shape someone's identity over time. But mindfulness practises such as yoga and meditation give me hope that all of us can heal from violence, become aware of our true nature and make it radiate in a peaceful way in order to move away from suffering and ignorance.

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1. Please take note that I did this course as a free student in November-December 2018. I registered for the 200-Hour Foundation in August 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Philosophy course notes, Naada Yoga. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Patanjali, translation and commentary by Edwin F. Bryant. *The Yoga Sutras*. P. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Patanjali, translation and commentary by Edwin F. Bryant. *The Yoga Sutras*. P. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.les-ailes-du-karma.com/les-lois-karmiques/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Philosophy course notes, Naada Yoga and Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://gen.medium.com/how-a-metoo-facebook-post-toppled-a-yoga-icon-c25577185e40> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living*. P. 594. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “So, true yoga comes from an awareness that one’s deepest and highest self is identical with the spirit of God, and as we act to honor ourselves, we respect other and the fields in which these actions occur: our bodies, our relationships and our community.”

   Philosophy course notes, Naada Yoga. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stone, Michael. *The Inner Tradition of Yoga*. P. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rogers, Carl. *On Becoming a Person*. P. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rogers, Carl. *Freedom to Learn*. P. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Stone, Michael. *The Inner Tradition of Yoga*. P. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Patanjali, translation and commentary by Edwin F. Bryant. *The Yoga Sutras*. P. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Weintraub, Amy. *Yoga for Depression*. PP. XIII and XVI. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Centuries ago, yoga was not a physical practice, but rather a way of approaching life.” Philosophy course notes, Naada Yoga. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Yoga teaches that health is a harmonious integration of body, mind, spirit – and community.” Philosophy course notes, Naada Yoga. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living*. P. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)