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**Read Lines II.34 and II.35 from chapter two of the Yoga Sutra’s of Patanjali. Summarize, in your own words, the meaning of these Sutras. Explain how they can be used in your life, with people you find difficult, in your practice and in teaching your students.**

2.34 Negative thoughts are violence, etc. They may be [personally] performed, performed on one’s behalf by another, or authorized by oneself; they may be triggered by greed, or delusion; and they may be slight, moderate, or extreme in intensity. One should cultivate counteracting thoughts, namely, that the end results [of negative thoughts] are ongoing suffering and ignorance.

2.35 In the presence of one who is established in nonviolence, enmity is abandoned.

*Excerpt from “The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary” by Edwin F. Bryant*

To me, the essence of these two sutras is the idea that negative thinking patterns are both destructive and optional. Regardless of the reason why we find ourselves engaging in negative self-talk, we always have the power to make different choices and to cultivate a different mental attitude in any moment of our lives. Doing so will not only be a step towards being kinder to ourselves and to others, but modeling this behavior in front of other people can go a long way towards creating a kinder and more courageous world.

Thus, self-compassion is a foundational component to personal freedom. Another way to say this is “check yourself before you wreck yourself”, or, in the (immortal) words of Ru Paul Charles: “if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love anybody else? Can I get an amen up in here?”

The cultivation of self-compassion has been a huge theme in my life for many years now. It is a skill that I have been working to build slowly – partially through self-reflection, partially through therapy, and partially through my personal yoga and meditation practices. As a recovering perfectionist, I suspect this will always be a daily practice for me, but I am (finally) ok with that.

While it may be strange to think of negative thoughts as a form of violence, it is important to remember how powerful our thoughts really are. The things we think about ourselves and about others on a daily basis become our belief systems, our actions, and our behaviors. If we don’t at least try to encourage our habitual thinking patterns to become primarily wholesome and non-violent, it is easy to become trapped in patters of fear, ignorance, self-judgment, self-hatred, and low self-esteem.

From this mental vantage point, it becomes very difficult to be fully present in our lives and with others, to relax, to stop hustling for love and approval, to feel safe, to feel as though we “belong,” to let go of compulsive self-improvement activies, etc. Indeed, what violence can ever be more extreme than that of self-rejection? While switching the script to more wholesome thinking patters is an imperfect and iterative process, in my experience (and Patanjali’s!) it is worth a try

In the context of a yoga class, there are many ways to help students explore and build the skills of self-compassion and non-violent thinking. This could include working to break down the typical student-teacher hierarchy dynamic and encouraging students instead to participate fully in their own experience taking the variations and modifications that feel best for their body that day. This could look like discussing these two sutras explicitly and sequencing a class around them. This could also look like being mindful of the language you are using as a teacher to cue postures and variations so one is not preferable or “better” than the other. This could include encouraging students to go slower, to note how they are talking to themselves in the postures, and in the transitions between them. This could even be applied to partner yoga exercises by asking the students to practice leading their partner through a pose and then checking that against how they talk to themselves in won their heads about that posture.

The possibilities to incorporate the themes of non-violence and self-compassion into a yoga class in different concentrations and/or contexts is endless! Though, I do think exercises to cultivate self-awareness and to normalize the class as a psychologically “safe” learning environment are foundational to any long periods of self-directed somatic exploration, as this type of inquiry could be extremely different than the way some students think about what a yoga class “should” look like, whatever that means.