

Philosophy 101

Read lines II 34 and II 35 from chapter 2 of the Yoga Sutras. 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.

Summary:

These sutras explain that negative actions, thoughts, or speech that are created by our ego, lead to suffering, and cause violence, greed, anger, and delusion. In order for the yogi to meditate and experience inner peace, this negativity should be avoided. The sutras go on to say that if avoided, ultimately, those around, and those who come into contact with the yogi, will naturally lose any feeling of hostility as well. When the yogi cultivates a practice, mind, and attitude of *ahimsa* (non-violence, compassion and kindness), they will influence those around them with such positivity.

An illustration of this, could be two baristas in a coffee shop, Billy and Rae, having a tense relationship. Billy thinks negative thoughts about Rae, he doesn't let go, and the frustration builds. Billy's thoughts turn to speech as he begins to speak badly about Rae to the other baristas working at the shop. The other co-workers listen, and whether or not they actually agree with Billy, they've just heard one side to the story, so they go with it. Their listening gives Billy a platform to speak more often, and more freely about Rae. The fact that people are listening is enabling Billy, creating more and more resentment for Rae, creating more and more negativity, and anger around the relationship. These thought patterns become habit for Billy, and his thoughts and speech turn into actions, and even his physical body language becomes more and more hostile towards Rae. Billy is unable to have any perspective over the situation, as his anger builds, and his judgment becomes clouded in negativity and ego. The atmosphere in the coffee shop becomes hostile and pleasant not only for all the baristas, but in turn for all the customers too; who are being served their morning coffee by grumpy, negative, angry folk.

Had Billy had a personal practice of yoga, meditation, or even read these sutras, maybe he would have been aware of the attitude of *ahimsa*. Had he checked himself on the negative thoughts, noticed them, and let them go, it's possible he would have found compassion and kindness for Rae instead of hostility, and anger. Instead of following his thoughts, and turning them into speech, and anger, the sutras say it would have served him better to let them go before they had a chance to spiral and create a hostile environment. There would have been no spiraling of negativity, filtering into the rest of the shop; and the customers would have been served their coffee in a much more pleasant, and peaceful environment.

In my life, in relation to those I find difficult:

Negative thoughts can have a downward spiraling effect, it can be hard to get out of it. It can become so pervasive that it can be an obstacle in certain areas of my life, even debilitating, feeling stuck in relations that I find difficult, perhaps unknowingly creating habits, and patterns that are hard to break.

Stewing in the past, old conversations, actions, filtering into the enjoyment of the present.

As these thoughts turn to speech, these words are given weight, and meaning, words acting like an enabler to the thoughts; and can in turn justify the negativity, normalizing them. Hence the downward spiral, the feeling of being stuck, as I stew on the negativity.

The negativity bounces right back at me. Negative thought and speech make me feel frustrated with myself, or the situation – can sometime lead to anxiety, anger, stress; likely taking it out on loved ones, or those in close proximity. Doesn't make me feel better about myself. I don't pay attention to loved ones around me when fixated on the negative anger or thoughts. My attention and energy are used up in places that don't serve me, and I forget what is right in front of me: the enjoyment of the present.

Me stewing in negative thoughts or speech, doesn't make the behavior of the other person, or the situation change either. It only makes me more sensitive, and reactive. So there is nothing productive about it.

A negative reaction towards someone may eventually cause angered confrontation coming from this place of negativity and hostility, with an ego to protect – and create tension, whereas if there is a positive, or neutral reaction, then there's nothing to reciprocate – nothing to react to. If I am able to let go of the hostility, I have more space to welcome clarity and a clear mind with much more perspective.

Wishing those I find difficult well, practicing *ahimsa* and letting go of anger or negativity, frees the ego, brings clarity to the good in my own life, makes me feel grateful, and more positive – and be nicer to those around me, and makes me more present. The positivity reflects back at me, making feel at ease, and present, and at peace.

In my practice:

In my meditation and asana practice, notice without judgment when these negative thoughts come up. Trying not to chase them – let them be. Increasing the awareness of these thoughts arising, can at least stop them before they become actions or speech, or spiral into the life around me. Eventually, I would hope that these thoughts become more infrequent, and less invasive.

The more I practice, the calmer and stiller my mind, and the more easily my breath flows within the body – free from racing of negative thoughts and ego, creating space and clarity. As I focus on my breath, I become more aware of my physical alignment bringing about a stable, grounded foundation within my body and mind.

Sometimes, I have found myself becoming frustrated or angry with those around me in the yoga studio who may have placed their mat too close, or if someone is walking around with a heavy footing – having negative thoughts which impacts my practice. My breath restricts, my stability and balance are off in both my body and mind. When I let go of these thoughts, able to free my ego, from thinking I should be the only one in the room, I am able to feel fully present within my breath and my body, and naturally everyone else fades out of focus. I feel free of anger and frustration – peaceful and still while the breath flows more easily.

I've even felt negativity towards myself in poses that I find challenging, anger or frustration will not make me feel physically or mentally, stable, balanced, or strengthened – it can even go as far as to restrict the breath, and the body becomes tense and stiff. Softness, stillness can instead provide stability and strength and fluid breathing through the energetic lines of the body. There are poses I am fearful of doing – fear of falling (ego?) or hurting myself – but if I retain that fear, the fear will perpetuate, and I'll never do the pose. If I found a way to let go of that fear, and negative thoughts surrounding the pose, I would perhaps open up space, and perhaps slowly slowly find trust that my body can hold the pose. Another illustration of how negative thoughts created by our ego, obstruct our inner peace.

In teaching:

These sutras relating to negative thoughts of harming, and violence, can echo into our practice, as we can invite ourselves, and our students to practice kindness and compassion – this also means towards oneself. In teaching yoga, I would hope to encourage the students to practice with kindness and compassion towards themselves. To let go of expectations of the ego, to let go of looking around the room (or on instagram) to see how others look in a pose and bring the attention within. Approach their practice with a softness, and kindness to themselves, free of any expectation, without comparing to others. Invite introspection to one's own alignment, and freedom of breath. Frustration that they don't look like someone else in the pose, for example, will restrict the breath, and the muscles, and detach the student from the present moment and take them out of their body. If they are encouraged to let go of any negativity, they will have the space to take their gaze inwards and hear what their own body needs, cultivating a freeing and peaceful practice, where they are able to soften further and likely feel the benefits of the poses even more.

I would encourage students to arrive in the present moment on their mat. Leaving their day or their week at the door. A way to do this would be frequent reminders of the present moment, and a way to do that – would be frequent reminders of the awareness of their breath. Hopefully they can be encouraged to spend the time they are on their mat, letting go of negative thoughts from their day; arriving into their breath, into their body, and into their mind with presence, softness, and clarity.

I would perhaps introduce grounding poses like one leg balances. I find these poses the best for bringing oneself into the present; as in order to get into the pose there is no one else you *can* be. The attention naturally comes inwards; while everything else fades out of focus and it becomes easier to arrive in the present.

I would give reminders to students to soften their gaze; inviting introspection without eyes bouncing around the room checking what others are doing.

I may also end a class with the loving kindness metta meditation - it can be very sobering to hear the words out loud, “think about someone with whom you have difficulties in your life and wish them peace and happiness...”. This really brings this sutra to life.