

Essay Question:

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 sutra's. Explain how they can be used in your life, with people you find difficult, in your practice and in teaching your students.

II, 34

Negative thoughts and emotions are violent, in that they cause injury to yourself and others, regardless of whether they are performed by you, done by others, or you permit them to be done.

They arise from greed, anger, or delusion regardless of whether they arise from mild, moderate, or excessive emotional intensity.

They result in endless misery and ignorance.

Therefore, when you consistently cultivate the opposite thoughts and emotions, the unwholesome tendencies are gradually destroyed.

II, 35

By abiding in nonviolence,
one's presence,
creates an atmosphere in which hostility ceases.

Sutras II, 29-55 outlines five of the eight limbs of yoga: yamas (things to avoid), niyamas (things to observe – personal discipline), asanas (the physical postures), pranayama (the breathing exercises), pratyahara (the retirement of the senses). The remaining three considered to be more about supernatural powers and gifts are described at the beginning of **Sutras III, 1- 4** dharma (steadiness of the mind), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption in spirit).

II, 34-35 becomes guidance on aspiring to non-violence, the most important of the yamas – Ahimsa. These yamas are often referred to as the Great Vows (**II, 31**: *"The great universal vows, which must be extended unconditionally to nurture everyone, regardless of status, place, time or circumstance."*) This becomes important to us westerners practicing our concept of "yoga", which focuses so much on the asanas (the physical postures) with extraordinarily little education about the other seven limbs nor the philosophical context the yamas and niyamas provide.

As I read these lines, in the context of avoiding all suffering (especially suffering to come), it seems that negative thoughts could be considered violent, in the sense that they could lead to suffering. Suffering for ourselves, the initiators of these negative thoughts, suffering for those around us, who may become victims of these thoughts, whether we consider these people to be "difficult" (ie. "deserving" of these negative thoughts), withing our own yoga practice where we may cause injury to ourselves as we relentlessly push ourselves through pain and

suffering, and perhaps inadvertently inspire such suffering by modelling this violence to our students. II, 34 encourages us to become aware of these thoughts and to *"consistently cultivate the opposite thoughts and emotions"*, to destroy these unwholesome tendencies. II, 35 then reinforces this notion, by confirming that when we truly model non-violence, our mere presence will create an atmosphere in which hostility ceases.

If we begin with the impact of negative thoughts on ourselves, we can observe how such thoughts may impact our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Too often we have the very best of intentions and thoughts to everyone around us but reserve the most severe judgements and criticisms for ourselves. Interestingly when we first learn how to walk as babies, innately we celebrated each milestone, able to be so fully proud of ourselves for every little achievement. (Adults around us would reinforce this too, as they applauded our first steps and so on...). We would clap in glee after having stood for three whole seconds, instead of berating ourselves for having fallen yet again. The joy in celebrating success encourages continued experimentation, joyful exploration and encourages further growth and development of abilities. Yet somehow as adults, we believe that negative reinforcement, grinding down through pain and suffering is the way to grow, and improve at work, in school, in sports, dance, or yoga.

It is interesting that verse II, 34 even describes the intensity of the emotion, mild, moderate, or excessive. It really does not take much to either encourage or discourage experimentation and growth. Cultivating this sense of wonder and curiosity, without expectations or judgements would be a first step towards non-violence to ourselves, which would then make it much more natural to extend to others. Someone satisfied with their own body, content with the progress they are making will have a much more appealing, non-violent effect on their surroundings than a severe, taught, forceful presence. I would venture to say that this does not only apply to physical exploits, but to pretty much everything we do in life. So, this to me, is practicing gentle kindness, curiosity, and acceptance toward myself.

Before continuing to how this may impact others in my life, specifically people considered "difficult", I would pause to consider the notion set forth in verse II, 34: *"regardless of whether they are performed by you, done by others, or you permit them to be done."* These verses call us to action, for ourselves. Too often we protect those around us, with little thought about doing it for ourselves. We allow others to commit violence by allowing their negative thoughts and emotions in. This is a reminder that negative thoughts and emotions are not to be condoned, whether we initiate them or someone else does, even as a spectator, doing nothing "permits" them to occur. We are being called upon to cultivate the opposite of the negative thought or emotion, doing it consistently until it is destroyed. Respecting clear boundaries, we set for ourselves, physically, emotionally, and mentally that do not permit violence to permeate seems like a very empowering code of conduct indeed.

Practicing this idea of non-violent thought towards others becomes the next corner stone of our foundation for life. When we practice this notion for ourselves, offering it to others becomes a

natural extension. The expression: " with *people you find difficult*" is an interesting one. I have often wondered about why I consider some people "difficult". Most often, they reflect something unresolved within me that needs to be addressed. A negative thought of my own being amplified and irritating. Once again cultivating this ability to transform such thoughts into empathy, compassion and altruism would allow for that atmosphere where hostility ceases to come into being. The ability to notice the negative thought or emotion, already signifies that I can modify it. If I can access that moment to pause and reflect and formulate a non-violent response instead of simply reacting to the hurtful message being broadcast would again alleviate present and future suffering.

In terms of my own yoga practice, this notion becomes remarkably interesting and valuable. Like many others when I first came to yoga it was to become "flexible", "strong", "fit". It was a new form of "exercise" for me. Something you worked hard at, suffered through to get better, stronger, and faster. Just like when I would train to run marathons. How opposite to this notion, is the idea of non-violence? There is no need to be hard on myself, no need to push through pain, in fact it is the total opposite I am being encouraged to cultivate. "No pain, no gain" is firmly ingrained in our culture. Release, fluidity, and gentle opening are foreign languages. That joyful discovery of what is possible in this moment, and accepting that without criticism or judgement cultivates a strong, powerful sense of rootedness and complicity with my body and the environment I find myself in. This constant search for balance between seeking "perfection" in the details of the pose, but within the global context of what my body is doing today. Joyful effort. Just like when I learned how to walk.

This notion, I like to think, will be translated into yoga (or any other) classes I will teach. I can offer gentle, non-judgmental guidance. Invitations to listen to the mind, body and emotions and follow their lead. When my own presence models this joyful exploration of this moment, inviting play, curiosity, and wonder; the participants would (hopefully) get a sense that the goal is not to suffer and achieve a "perfect" outcome, but instead to play with the elements of breath, alignment and balance and welcome what we find. Encouraging people of all ages, abilities, and circumstance to reconnect with their bodies and move with joy sounds like the opposite of violence and hostility. As this positive connection gets reinforced without violent emotions or thoughts, we are encouraged to repeat and pursue this exploration, thereby fostering this playful, nonviolent atmosphere.

Bibliography:

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