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**S.K.S.D. MAHILA KALASALA UG&PG(A)**

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## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE AND MORAL JUDGEMENT AN EXPLORATION INTO MORAL ASPECTS OF ASHTANGA YOGA

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**ABSTRACT :** This article endeavours to understand the spiritual discipline enunciated in Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga and its influence on our Moral Judgment, which forms the basis of all moral activity. Our moral actions largely depend on how we look at a particular moral context and place ourselves in it. In other words, all moral actions are the direct outcome of moral judgments we make in cognizance of a specific moral situation. Our moral character is nothing but our disposition to take up activities or restrain from them, due to our moral judgments.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra lays emphasis on the moral and spiritual discipline in its 'Sadhana Pada' as the necessary condition for attaining Kaivalya (Spiritual Oneness) or Moksa (Emancipation). In the Ashtanga Yoga, Yama and Niyama are the basic preparatory conditions to progress in spirituality, which culminates in Samadhi.

The immediate advantage of practicing Yoga is that it results in creating an unperturbed mind, which has the ability to look at every context without any prejudice. Such purity of disposition aids attaining right perspective towards a moral context and making a moral judgment with right discrimination. Such unprejudiced judgment leads to right moral action.

This paper tries to explicate how Yama and Niyama help us towards better moral disposition, better moral judgment and finally, realization of human values.

**Keywords:** Ahtanga Yoga (Eight-fold Yoga); Sadhaka (Practitioner); Yama (Moral Principles ); Niyama (Personal Discipline); Asana (Postures); Pratyahara (Withdrawal from Sensations); Samadhi (Oneness); Kaivalya (Emancipation)

Yoga aims at conjoining (*yuj*) our empirical self with ultimate Reality by attaining realization of its nature in isolation (*kevala*). Achieving this ultimate state of isolation (*kaivalya*) is regarded as the *summum bonum* of the psycho-physical practice of Yoga. Yoga as a spiritual practice has many branches followed by different sects with their own traditional modes of practice. Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutra' is one the most compact and comprehensive text extant with its systematic rendering. The Eight-fold Yoga (**Ashtanga Yoga**) enunciated by Patanjali paves a methodical way for a *sadhaka* (practitioner) to progressively achieve moral and spiritual growth leading to ultimate emancipation (*kaivalya* or *moksha*). In the process of attaining this ultimate liberation, the main impediment is the perturbing nature of our mind (*citta*). Hence Yoga aspires to achieve cessation of all modifications of mind (*citta vritti nirodha*).<sup>1</sup>

Indian philosophical systems, except Carvaka, recognize Moksha as the ultimate goal of human life and consider moral uprightness as the necessary condition for it. On the same lines, Yoga insists that moral worthiness and personal discipline are the basic requisites for spiritual progress. Hence, Patanjali incorporates moral prohibitions (Yamas) and moral imperatives (Niyamas) as the first two stages of Ashtanga Yoga.

### The Yamas (Principles of Moral Prohibition)

The word "yama" is originally found in Rigveda in the sense of 'Reins' or "Restraints". Patanjali enumerates Ahimsa (Non-violence), Satya (non-falsehood), Brahmacharya (non-indulgence), Asteya (Non-stealing), Aparigraha (Non-accumulation) as the five prohibitions (Yama).<sup>2</sup> Adherence to these Yamas is the first step in the Ashtanga Yoga. The same principles are also found in Jainism as Mahavratas (Major Vows). Though they appear to be negative in purport, they are nevertheless leaving a positive moral disposition. Now let us examine the moral significance of these principles.

#### Ahimsa

Ahimsa is not merely non-infliction of injury to any living being but is, more positively, understanding the inner worth of all living beings and having harmony with them. It leads to the specific understanding of every other form of life as extension of one's own inner nature. This virtue of construing others on par with oneself leaves the *yoga sadhaka* compassionate and prepares her to understand the comprehensive oneness of Reality in essence.

#### Satya

Satya is adhering to Truth and, in common parlance, not speaking falsehood. Having its roots in the ancient precept of **Rita** (the Cosmic and Moral Order), speaking truth is considered as the straight path of righteousness (**Riju**). Of all the moral virtues, Satya is regarded as the most fundamental and difficult to practice. Adherence to Satya is being in conformity with Reality (Sat). This makes a *sadhaka* strive ahead in his moral uprightness and spiritual fortitude.

#### Brahmacharya

Brahmacharya is practicing the life of celibacy, abstinence from promiscuity and marital fidelity. Brahmacharya is very significant as sensual indulgence is considered the major impediment in spiritual progress of a *yogin*. Brahmacharya as continence towards pleasures makes a *sadhaka* prefer spiritual bliss to physical pleasures. This restraint has a telling affect on the moral ascendancy of a *yogi*. Without this control over seeking pleasures, a *sadhaka* can never progress in his spiritual path.

#### Asteya

Asteya is non-appropriation of others' possessions illegitimately. This principle enunciates that one should not seek property or belongings of others and desire to own them. This also forbids exploitation of others for the interests of oneself. On the positive side, it guides us to be content with whatever we own legitimately. The immediate consequence of this principle is absence of clash of interests with others and illegitimate craving for others' possessions.

#### Aparigraha

The principle of Aparigraha forbids us from accumulation of worldly things. Our tendency to acquire and hoard things in the name of future security is addressed by this principle. Excessive accrual of things leads to indulgence and bondage. This means that acquisition of things more than we need is bound to make us cling to worldly things. In

turn, the *sadhaka* will not be able focus on her spiritual growth. On the other side, this principle seeks us to limit our needs, sacrifice excessive things for the benefit of others.

These Yamas or prohibitions develop a positive moral disposition in us and pave way for spiritual initiation. These Yamas are complemented by positive ordinances of personal discipline, the Niyamas. Yamas and Niyamas together constitute the basic list of "Don't"s and "Do"s, the necessary conditions for sailing into the spiritual depths.<sup>3</sup>

### **Niyamas (Moral Imperatives)**

Niyamas are positive imperatives with regard to observances to make oneself fit for *yoga sadhana*. These positive strictures are aimed at creating a psycho-physical ambience for the *sadhaka* to push his spiritual limits ahead. The Niyamas cultivate a spiritual culture in the *yogi*. Patanjali, in the Sadhana Pada of Yogasutras, enunciates *Soucha* (Cleanliness), *Santhosa* (Contentment), *Tapas* (ascetic penance), *Svadyaya* (Self-study) and *Iswarapranidana* (Contemplation on God) as Niyamas.<sup>4</sup>

### **Soucha (Cleanliness)**

Soucha is the principle concerning comprehensive purity of Mind, Speech and Body. The bodily cleanliness is attained through daily observation of sacred bath, intake of good food and physical exercise. The purity of speech is attained by speaking Truth (*Satya*), Smooth (*Mridu*) and Compassionate (*Priya*) words. Even silence is also considered as control over speech. The purity of mind is achieved by shedding desire, anger, greed, pride, passion and jealousy, which are considered as impurities of mind. The complete purity of mind, speech and body serves as precondition for spiritual excellence.

### **Santhosa (Contentment)**

Self-contentment is the virtue of being happy with whatever little we have, no longer seeking external things and, more importantly, cultivating the inner source of happiness. As long as a *Sadhaka* depends on the external contingencies for her happiness, she is bound to lose sight of her internal spiritual richness. *Santhosa*, once realized, leads to the most congenial treatment of things, people and events. This contentment is primary requisite to attain the ultimate bliss of *kevala*.

### **Tapas (Austerity)**

*Tapas* is persistent meditation with acute perseverance. It is the mode of achieving discipline of mind with sustained efforts of contemplation. It is the preparatory stage for the ultimate *Samadhi*, where the contemplator and contemplated subject are absorbed in oneness. *Tapas* is also viewed as a penance, in which *sadhaka* undergoes severe self-imposed punishment to achieve higher ends. However, it is not self-mortification but systematically adopting mind and body to take up longer spells of *Samadhi*.

### **Svadyaya (Self-study)**

Though this term *Svadyaya* has a technical sense of studying one's one *sakha* of the Veda handed over in generations, it also is used to mean self-study of what is learnt from guru. In fact, *yoga* too is passed on from generation to generation in teacher-disciple mode of transmission. *Sadhaka* has to recollect (*manana*) the teachings and ascertain the meaning of those teachings by deeper reflection (*nidhidhyasana*). Thus *Svadyaya* is essential to understand the teachings of preceptor with contemplative mind. Continuous reflection by *sadhaka* leads to better insights into the nuances of the discipline.

### **Iswarapranidana (Contemplation on God)**

*Iswarapranidana* is contemplation on the nature and splendour of God or Ultimate Reality.<sup>5</sup> This contemplation prepares the *yogi* for the accession to supreme bliss

as the nature of her own self and the ultimate reality. *Iswaropranidana* is not mere devotion to any personal God but is contemplative exercise on the nature of God as the absolute being.

Thus, Yamas and Niyamas together constitute the moral-spiritual preparation for yoga as the first two components of Ashtanga Yoga. The beauty of Indian yogic tradition is that it treats moral excellence as necessary condition for spiritual achievement of liberation.

### **Spiritual Discipline and Moral Judgment**

As we have noticed, spirituality encompasses moral excellence. In turn, spiritual discipline enhances the clarity and precision of moral judgment. One who observes Yama and Niyama is bound to control oneself and overrides the narrow self-interests with his excellent moral disposition. As we are aware, our moral judgments often go wrong due to intervention of various mundane preconditions. A yogi, with his spiritual discipline, overcomes the propensities of empirical interests to arrive at commendable moral insights into life and the world.

The moral judgment of a person, who conquered her worldly indulgence and developed a spiritual disposition, will invariably be free from the flaws of normal inflections of self-interest. Hence, Yoga as a spiritual practice has great influence on our moral vision and conduct towards the world.

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