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Foundations of Yoga, Part 3: Satya (Truthfulness, Honesty)

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In the eightfold path of Yoga as laid out by the sage Patanjali, the foundations are "Yama and Niyama", the "do's and don't's" of spiritual life, without which the structure of Yogic success will not stand. And one of the most important of these is satya, truthfulness, honesty.

Satya: truthfulness, honesty

(A continuation of an explanation of the aspects of Patanjali's Yama and Niyama)

"Satya is said to be speech and thought in conformity with what has been seen or inferred or heard on authority. The speech spoken to convey one's own experience to others should be not deceitful, nor inaccurate, nor uninformative. It is that uttered for helping all beings. But that uttered to the harm of beings, even if it is what is called truth, when the ultimate aim is merely to injure beings, would not be truth [satya]. It would be a wrong." So says Vyasa.

Shankara says that truthfulness means saying what we have truly come to know is the truth—mostly through our own experience or through contact with sources whose reliability we have experienced for ourselves. Who but the most intuitive could be sure that they do not speak any inaccurate thing? Yet such is demanded of the yogi, and for that he must strive.

"Untruthfulness in any form puts us out of harmony with the fundamental law of Truth and creates a kind of mental and emotional strain which prevents us from harmonizing and tranquillizing our mind. Truthfulness has to be practiced by the sadhaka because it is absolutely necessary for the unfoldment of intuition. There is nothing which clouds the intuition and practically stops its functioning as much as untruthfulness in all its forms," says Taimni regarding the most personal and practical aspect of satya.

Bending the truth, either in leaving out part of the truth or in "stacking the deck" to create a false impression, cannot be engaged in by the yogi. The Bible speaks of turning truth

into a lie. (Romans 1:25) This is done by either not telling all the truth or by presenting it in such a way that the hearer will come to a wrong conclusion-or adopt a wrong conclusion-about what we are presenting. Regarding numbers it is said that "figures do not lie-but liars figure." The same is true here. Equally heinous is the intentional mixing of lies and truth. Some liars tell a lot of truth-but not all the truth. This is particularly true in the manipulative endeavors of advertising, politics, and religion.

There are many non-verbal forms of lying as well, and some people's entire life is a lie. Therefore we must make sure that our actions reflect the truth. How many people claim to believe in God and spiritual principles, but do not live accordingly? How many people continually swear and express loyalty and yet are betrayers? ["This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me." (Matthew 15:8) "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46)] Therefore Saint John wrote: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth." (I John 3:18) We must not only speak the truth, we must *live* it.

Honesty in all our speaking and dealings with others is an essential part of truthfulness. This includes paying our debts, including taxes. It is inexpressibly crucial that the yogi make his livelihood only by honest and truthful means. Selling useless or silly things, convincing people that they need them (or even selling them without convincing them), is a serious breach of truthfulness.

Trying to compromise the truth, even a little, making the excuse that "everybody does it" is not legitimate. For "everybody" is bound to the wheel of birth and death because they do it and that is not what we wish for ourselves. We can lie to ourselves, to others, and even to God; but we cannot lie to the cosmos. The law of cause and effect, or karma, will react upon us to our own pain.

It is interesting that Vyasa considers that truthful speech is informative. By that he means that truthful speech is worthwhile, relevant, and practical. To babble mindlessly and grind out verbal trivia is also a form of untruth, even if true in the sense of not being objectively false. Nor is foolish speech to anyone's gain. Sometimes also people lie by "snowing" us with a barrage of words intended to deflect us from our inquiries. And nearly all of us who went to college remember the old game of padding out whatever we wrote, giving lots of form but little content in hope of fooling our teachers into thinking that we knew the subject and were saying something worthwhile. This is one of today's most lucrative businesses, especially in the advertising world.

Speaking truth to the hurt of others is not really truth, since satya is an extension of ahimsa. For example, a person may be ugly, but to say: "You are ugly" is not a virtue. "What is based on injuring others, even though free from the three defects of speech (i.e., not deceitful, nor inaccurate, nor uninformative), does not amount to truth" (Shankara). Our intention must never be to hurt in any way, but we must be aware that there are some

people who hate the truth in any form and will accuse us of hurting them by our honesty. Such persons especially like to label any truth (or person) they dislike as "harsh," "rigid," "divisive," "negative" "hateful," and so on and on and on. We would have to become dishonest or liars to placate them. So "hurting" or offending them is a consequence of truthfulness that we will have to live with. The bottom line is that truth "is that uttered for helping all beings." For non-injury is not a passive quality, but the positive character of restoration and healing.

Silence can also be a form of untruth, particularly in dealing with the aforementioned truth-haters. For truth is only harmful when "the ultimate aim is merely to injure beings." But if some people put themselves in the way of truth, then they must take responsibility for their reactions to it.

Will Cuppy defined diplomacy as "the fine art of lying." Sadly, it often is. So we must be sure that we do not deceive under the guise of diplomacy or tactfulness.

Self-deception, a favorite with nearly all of us to some degree, must be ruthlessly eliminated if we would be genuinely truthful.

"Therefore let one take care that his speech is for the welfare of all." (Shankara)

Perfection in satya

"On being firmly established in truthfulness [satya], the result of action rests upon him alone." Luckily, we have quite a few authoritative commentaries to elucidate this obscure language. All are unanimous in saying the meaning is that when the yogi is firmly established in truth in all its aspects, then whatever he says or wills comes about without any action being needed to produce it. As Vyasa explains: "When he says: 'Be righteous,' that man becomes righteous; told by him: 'Do you attain heaven,' that one attains heaven. His word is infallible." "When truth is firm in him, events confirm his words," avers Shankara. This was demonstrated in the life of Paramhansa Yogananda. In the first chapter of his autobiography he tells how, as a child, he received anything he desired—though as a devotee he attributed this to the loving providence of God as Mother. Furthermore, anything he said would come to pass, as when he said his sister's boil would increase in size, and he would get one also on his arm. My friend, Sri Abani Lahiri, a relative of Lahiri Mahasaya, a Master written about in Yogananda's autobiography, told me that his grandfather had the same power even as a child. Once he became angry with another little boy and said: "You should die!" Immediately that boy became deathly ill and was declared by the doctors to have only a few hours of life remaining. When his parents were told: "That Brahmin boy told him to die," they called for him and asked him to tell their son to live. He did so, and the boy was immediately well. Jesus, too, had this power as a child and had to learn how to control it, as recorded in the "apocryphal" gospels. By the power of his word Sri Ramakrishna caused hibiscus blossoms of two different colors to grow on the same plant. At the end of His earthly life, anyone who heard Sri Ramakrishna speak of spiritual awakening became spiritually awakened. Sri Ma Sarada Devi often told her disciples: "This is your last birth." And so it would be. For

"the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Truly, those who are perfected in satya speak with "the mouth of the Lord."

About the Author: Swami Nirmalananda Giri is the abbot of Atma Jyoti Ashram, a traditional Hindu monastery in the small desert town of Borrego Springs in southern California. He is widely travelled, and has spent much time in various parts of India. He has written extensively on spiritual matters, especially on meditation and on the inner side of the world's religions. His many writings may be found on the Ashram's website at <http://www.atmajyoti.org>

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