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Foundations of Yoga, Part 2: Ahimsa (Harmlessness)

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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. Ahimsa is the second principle of Yama. Ahimsa is interpreted in many ways-which is to be expected since Sanskrit is a language that abounds in many possible meanings for a single word. But fundamentally ahimsa is not causing any harm whatsoever to any being whatsoever, including subhuman species.

Ahimsa: non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness

In his commentary on the Yoga Sutras, Vyasa begins his exposition of ahimsa: "Ahimsa means in no way and at no time to do injury to any living being." Shankara expands on this, saying that ahimsa is "in no capacity and in no fashion to give injury to any being." This would include injury by word or thought as well as the obvious injury perpetrated by deed, for Shankara further says: "Ahimsa is to be practiced in every capacity-body, speech, and mind." We find this principle being set forth by Jesus in his claim that anger directed toward someone is a form of murder, and by the Beloved Disciple's statement that hatred is also murder.

Even a simple understanding of the law of karma, the law of sowing and reaping, enables us to realize the terrible consequences of murder for the murderer. As Vyasa explains: "The killer deprives the victim of spirit, hurts him with a blow of a weapon, and then tears him away from life. Because he has deprived another of spirit, the supports of his own life, animate or inanimate, become weakened. Because he has caused pain, he experiences pain himself.... Because he has torn another from life, he goes to live in a life in which every moment he wishes to die, because the retribution as pain has to work itself right out, while he is panting for death."

Ahimsa is interpreted in many ways-which is to be expected since Sanskrit is a language that abounds in many possible meanings for a single word. But fundamentally ahimsa is not causing any harm whatsoever to any being whatsoever, including subhuman species. To accomplish this ideal it is self-evident that violence, injury, or killing are unthinkable for the yogi. And as Vyasa immediately points out, all the other abstinences and

observances-yama and niyama-are really rooted in ahimsa, for they involve preventing harm both to ourselves and to others through either negative action or the neglect of positive action.

"The other niyamas and yamas are rooted in this, and they are practiced only to bring this to its culmination, only for perfecting this [i.e., ahimsa]. They are taught only as means to bring this out in its purity. For so it is said: 'Whatever many vows the man of Brahman [God] would undertake, only in so far as he thereby refrains from doing harm impelled by delusion, does he bring out ahimsa in its purity.'" And Shankara explains that Vyasa is referring to delusion that is "rooted in violence and causing violence."

Ahimsa includes strict abstinence from any form of injury in act, speech, or thought. Violence, too, verbal and physical, must be eschewed. And this includes any kind of angry or malicious damage or misuse of physical objects.

Ahimsa is a state of mind from which non-injury will naturally proceed. "Ahimsa really denotes an attitude and mode of behavior towards all living creatures based on the recognition of the underlying unity of life," the modern commentator Taimni declares. Shankara remarks that when ahimsa and the others are observed "the cause of one's doing harm becomes inoperative." The ego itself becomes "harmless" by being put into a state of non-function. And meditation dissolves it utterly. However, until that interior state is established, we must work backwards from outward to inner, and abstain from all acts of injury.

In actuality, we cannot live a moment in this world without injuring innumerable beings. Our simple act of breathing kills many tiny organisms, and so does every step we take. To maintain its health the body perpetually wars against harmful germs, bacteria, and viruses. So in the ultimate sense the state of ahimsa can only be perfectly observed mentally. Still, we are obligated to do as little injury as possible in our external life. In his autobiography Paramhansa Yogananda relates that his guru, Swami Yukteswar Giri, said that ahimsa is absence of the desire to injure.

Although it has many ramifications, the aspiring yogi must realize that the observance of ahimsa must include strict abstinence from the eating of animal flesh in any form or degree.

Though the subject is oddly missing from every commentary on the Yoga Sutras I have read, the practice of non-injury in relation to the yogi himself is vital. That is, the yogi must do nothing in thought, word, or deed that harms his body, mind, or spirit. This necessitates a great many abstentions, particularly abstaining from meat (which includes fish and eggs), alcohol, nicotine, and any mind- or mood-altering substances, including caffeine. On the other side, it necessitates the taking up of whatever benefits the body, mind, and spirit, for their omission is also a form of self-injury, as is the non-observance of any of the yama or niyamas. It is no simple thing to be a yogi.

Perfection in ahimsa

"On being firmly established in non-violence [ahimsa] there is abandonment of hostility in his presence." The eminently desirable nature of this siddhi is evident. Wherever a yogi perfected in ahimsa may be, there no hostility can arise; and if it is already present somewhere, upon the yogi's entry it will cease. The one perfected in ahimsa is a living fulfillment of the Prayer of Saint Francis, and is truly an instrument of divine peace. This was true of Buddha in Whose presence hired assassins and even a mad elephant became at peace and incapable of doing harm. The same was seen in the life of the great yogi Paramhansa Yogananda. "This happens with all living beings," says Vyasa. Many times it has been observed that in the presence of perfected sages wild animals become tame, even friendly, not only toward human beings but even toward their usual enemies or prey. "In the presence of that one who follows ahimsa, even natural enemies like snake and mongoose give up their antagonism," says Shankara. Violent human beings, too, have become peaceful and gentle after contact with holy people in whom ahimsa was completely realized.

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>