

Limbs Twigs Lists: Ethical Paths...

There is great suffering in this world. There are tens of thousands of human beings putting themselves at enormous personal risk in their flight from war, disaster and strife; there are political processes that make *House of Cards* look like a sweet love story; there are countries being ripped apart by savage violence, being deeply threatened by climatic changes, being ruined by the drive to extract raw materials. And there are countless individual stories of difficulty and illness, of loss and struggle, of fighting, controlling and succumbing to a global pandemic.

A question for us is “What can we do?” In asking ourselves this question, we are applying our awareness to what is in and around us. An essential part of awareness is considering our personal behaviour and how we live our lives. This can be called a matter of ethics and morality.

One definition of the word ‘ethics’ is “moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity...the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles.” There are different schools of ethics, such as that which developed from Aristotle’s (384–22 BCE) teachings. He believed that concepts and that knowledge were ultimately based on perception.

Another school is utilitarianism: “the guiding principle of conduct should be the greatest happiness or benefit of the greatest number.” There is also the characterisation of ethics as either ‘conventional’ (which reflects societal/cultural attitudes) or ‘natural’ (views of conduct not conditioned by society or culture).

The linguistic root of ‘ethics’ is the ancient Greek word *ethikos*, which can be translated as habit, custom, moral or character. Morality comes from the Latin *moralis* (meaning ‘custom’) and has come to mean which actions are right and which actions are wrong.

How we behave is incredibly important for our own lives, the people whom we contact and our society. The philosophies and the

practices of yoga and Buddhism place great emphasis on personal behaviour. *Limbs Twigs Lists* is a personal perspective on these emphases — so subjective and potentially eccentric and idiosyncratic (“if you describe someone’s actions or characteristics as idiosyncratic, you mean that they are rather unusual” (*Collins Dictionary*)).

I have drawn from Bernard Bouanchaud (*The Essence of Yoga*); Donna Farhi (*Yoga: Mind Body and Spirit*); Georg Feuerstein (*The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*); Richard Freeman (*The Procrustean Bed* and other teachings); Judith Hanson Lasater (*Living Your Yoga* and other teachings); Gregor Maehle (*Ashtanga Yoga Practice and Philosophy*); and Matthew Remski (*Threads of Yoga*).

I have had ongoing discussions with my partner, Maitripushpa Bois, who is a practitioner and scholar of Buddhism. There is also my own experience and my own perspective.

I am not a scholar, my pronunciation of Sanskrit is poor and I prefer Winnie the Pooh to the *Bhagavad Gita*. I am merely someone who is trying to do my best with what skills I have. This is my dance in the disco of philosophy, my attempt to make some sense and express how these wisdom traditions can guide us in the 21st century.

THE EIGHT LIMBS

Many yoga practitioners are familiar with the famous eight limbs of Patanjali — what has at times been called the heart of ‘classical yoga’. These are drawn from the *Yoga Sutras* (compiled possibly about 200 CE) and, after centuries of obscurity, it has become the standard philosophical text for yoga students.

The **eight limbs** are:

- *yama* guidelines for living a life of personal fulfilment (more outer emphasis)
- *niyama* more personal precepts (more inner emphasis)

- *asana* physical postures
- *pranayama* managing and exercising breath
- *pratyahara* withdrawal of energy away from the senses
- *dharana* concentration
- *dhyana* meditation
- *samadhi* merging of subject and object

These are all helpful ways for us to be. Yet of this list of eight, what is best known in the West is *asana*. The physical postures that are performed throughout society, from professional footballers to YouTube channels, from up-market health clubs to local authority leisure centres.

Sharath Jois, senior Asthanga practitioner, offered this in a talk.

You can hurt your body by trying to prove things, and by performing. Know your limitations... Don't get so attached to the *asana* thing... Become wiser in your thoughts... I used to be able to catch the backs of my knees. Now I can't. So what? *Asana* practice is just physical at first, until you develop wisdom. The yoga is what happens inside you — that should be alive all the time.

There are different reasons for the success of the *Yoga Sutras*. Indeed, whole books have been written about why this text has become a dominant model in yoga philosophy, such as David Gordon White's *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A biography*. There are other formulations of yoga philosophy which have different limbs which emphasise different qualities. Such as the *Aparoksanubhuti* (*The direct experience of reality*), which was written about 800CE reputedly by Sankaracarya.

In verse 100 of this text, we read of: “fifteen steps by the help of which one should practice profound meditation at all times.” In these steps (or limbs) there are the *yamas* and the *niyamas* and in addition to the ones in the *Yoga Sutras*, there is renunciation (*tyagah*), absolute silence (*maunam*), space (*desha*), time (*kala*), restraint of the root (*mulabandha*), balance and equipoise of body (*deha-samyam*) and steady gaze (*drishti*).

And there is the *Yoga-Tattva-Upanishad* (written between 700 CE and 1300 CE). It states that scant diet (*laghu ahara*) is the single most important discipline. In the *Tri-Shikhi-Brahmana-Upanishad* (written about the 17th century), there is sympathy (*daya*), rectitude (*arjava*), patience (*kshama*) and others. The point is that there are different ways and different ideas and different situations; at the heart of all of this are attempts to guide us towards living a better life.

YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

Returning to Patanjali and that explanation of *yamas* and *niyamas*. It is often stated that the most central of the eight limbs are these first two, that chasing *samadhi* without having a basic grounding in *yamas* and *niyamas* is nonsensical.

For Patanjali, there were five points (could we call them twigs?) in each of these limbs. *Yama* can be interpreted as attitude towards others or wise characteristics or relationship to other. *Niyama* is often understood as personal principles for positive action or good relationship to oneself or codes for living soulfully.

It has to be stressed that these are neither goals nor statements that are carved into stone. These are much more guidance to living better and brighter lives, vehicles that can help us get towards the essence of who we actually are: compassionate, generous and honest. Obviously, there are many layers and much may obscure between that essence and us now. And these are the journeys; this is a practice, we are on our paths and the guidances are signposts and reminders.

The first *yama* is ***ahimsa***. A common translation of this term is ‘non-violence’, ‘non-harming’ or ‘compassion for all living things’. These meanings do not mean that you must be a vegetarian, for example. Personally, I have not knowingly eaten meat since 1982; yet I know that there are people in this world who must eat meat because of where they live, such as the Inuits and the Mongolians. You can definitely still eat meat and practice *ahimsa* by the *way* you are consuming the meat: with consideration, with respect, with veneration.

Abimsa is the most important of these ethical guidelines. So this is the question that we have to keep asking ourselves: are we living with *abimsa*? How does this influence our relationships with other? Personally, I like the use of 'kindness' as one way for understanding this *yama*.

Then the second is *satya*: truthfulness and honesty. Please note that truth has to be tempered with *abimsa*. Are our words coming with kindness as well as being true? If we can embed *abimsa* and *satya* in our lives, then everything else can flow from this foundation. The foundation of our lives and the way we are living will be guided by and grounded in compassion and truth.

The third is *asteya*. One unusual interpretation of *asteya* is 'fair trade'. It is often described as 'not stealing' but this is not a rigid instruction that one must never steal. In some circumstances, it can be necessary to take what is not ours. Such as when Hurricane Katarina hit New Orleans in 2005 and people were starving and shut-up shops had food. In such extreme circumstances, we still need to maintain our grounding in *abimsa* and *satya* (like leaving a note in that shop to explain what we had to do and promising to compensate when circumstances have changed).

The fourth *yama* frequently causes confusion amongst Western practitioners: *brahmacharya*. According to Georg Feuerstein, this "essentially stands for the ideal of chastity." It is about being sexually responsible and practicing moderation as a way of encouraging vitality.

Judith Hanson Lasater relates a definition from Dr Usharbudh Arya, a Sanskrit professor and a yoga practitioner. "When you are having sex, have sex; when you're not, don't... Remain in the present and focus on what is happening right now without obsession." Another way of understanding this *yama* is safe intimacy, which is a particular favourite of mine.

The fifth is *aparigraha*: 'non-grasping' or 'self-possession' or, in the words of Donna Farhi, "recognizing that which is essential to us is already at hand."

PERSONAL PRINCIPLES FOR POSITIVE ACTION

The first *niyama* is *saucha*. This is widely understood to mean cleanliness or purity. A difficulty is that *saucha* can encourage the increasing disconnection from body that can be common: obsessional behaviours, fixations on physical form, eating disorders. As an example of how this *niyama* is encouraging disconnect and disembodiment, Matthew Remski quotes Sri Swami Satchidananda: "by purification arises disgust for one's own body and for contact with other bodies".

For me, an essence of practice is becoming more connected with this physical form while of course realising its inevitably changing nature (grey hairs coming, hairlines receding, bodies deteriorating over time). Remski radically rejects the traditional understandings of *saucha* and interprets it as "honouring body".

Then there is *santosha*: 'contentment'. Nearly all the interpretations of *santosha* have this meaning — 'contentment'. Yogi Mammohanand provides an interesting spin on this interpretation in his book *Sivananda Buried Yoga*.

Contentment is a virtue when it is applied to material greed. The *niyama* of contentment does not actually apply to the spiritual desires of the aspirant. To ascend in the realms of spirituality, contentment is only a hindrance. A yogi should always remind himself *neti-neti* (not this, not this).

This position is informative but we have to be careful that it does not fuel the ceaseless striving, the common failing that, due to our low self-esteem, we actually fail to perceive what *has* been shifted. Too many of us have spent too much emotional energy caught in that common everyday belief of 'not being good enough'. *Santosha* can be a way of balancing this, a tool to soften the striving, a means of appreciating what is rather than forever being driven onwards to what might be.

The third *niyama* is *tapas*: a 'disciplined life' or 'burning enthusiasm' or 'endurance' or 'heat'. We require this energy to balance that second *niyama*. As much as contentment is essential,

we can remember the words attributed to Zen master Dogen: “practice like your hair is on fire.” There has to be drive and vigour to help us break the patterns of conditioned existence, the sleepiness of this life: and wake up. As Gregor Maehle writes, “in yoga, *tapas* refers to the ability to sustain our practice in the face of hardship.”

Then there are the last two: *svadhyaya* and *ishvara-pranidhana*. ‘Self-study’ or ‘learning’ is the widely accepted translation of *svadhyaya*; we have to put our shoulders to our wheels. *Ishvara-pranidhana* is more controversial; a traditional view is ‘worship of the Lord’. For myself, I prefer an interpretation like ‘celebration of the spiritual’ (from Donna Farhi) or especially Matthew Remski’s ‘commitment’.

RIGID APPLYING

We need to remember that this text is a product of its time. Although these limbs and twigs are certainly helpful ways for us to be, there can be a danger of rigidly applying ideas and practices that were being formulated 2000 years ago to contemporary society with all of its connections and disconnections. This is an age when vast distances are covered in hours, this is the age of internet when individuals at the click of a button can communicate across the world and can access vast stores of information.

There are clearly great benefits and deep insights in the *Yoga Sutras* and other texts from this time. At the same time as acknowledging this truth, we would be wise to remember that circumstances are changing and have changed dramatically since the time of their development.

Predating the *Yoga Sutras* and undoubtedly part of the cross-fertilisation and continuing development of these ideas are the teachings of the Buddha, who died about 400 BCE. There is a significant sharing between these different currents, as much as there is a sharing between Western philosophical schools, as much as Buddhist teachings took many ideas from the Vedic tradition from which the *Upanishads* sprung.

The first public teaching of the Buddha was on the **four noble truths**. It is called ‘the first

turning of the wheel of dharma’ and was given at Deer Park, near Varanasi in northern India. The first two lines are: “Brothers, there are four truths: the existence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. I call these the Four Noble Truths” (from *Old Path White Clouds* by Thich Nhat Hanh).

A recent re-interpretation of this comes from Stephen Batchelor: ‘the four tasks’ (see 2015. *After Buddhism*. Yale University Press. Like those eight limbs, instead of beliefs and believing, this is more a path and a way of becoming freer. The four tasks are simplified into the acronym of ELSA: embrace life; letting go and letting be; stopping (which might also be called *nirvana* or *shunyata* or the deathless or *purusha* or enlightenment or the unconditioned); and act: this means we need to take action to become free.

This action which leads to the end of suffering, to becoming free, is expressed through the eightfold path: wisdom through right view and right intention; and ethics through right speech, right action and right livelihood; and finally meditative or mental development through right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

PRECEPTS, PARAMITAS AND MORE

The Buddhist tradition has their own set of ethical guidelines: the precepts. For those who are not ordained, there are **five precepts**. The first is to avoid taking the life of beings (*pannatipata*). This precept applies to all living beings, not just humans. All beings have a right to their lives and that right should be respected. Obviously this is very similar to *ahimsa*; and like *ahimsa*, it is the most important ethical guidance.

The second precept is to avoid taking the not given (*adinnadana*). This goes further than mere stealing. One should avoid taking anything unless one can be sure that it is intended for you. So it can include taking someone’s time or taking advantage of someone’s generosity.

Then there is the precept to avoid sensual misconduct (*kamesu micchacara*). This is about acting ethically in terms of intimate

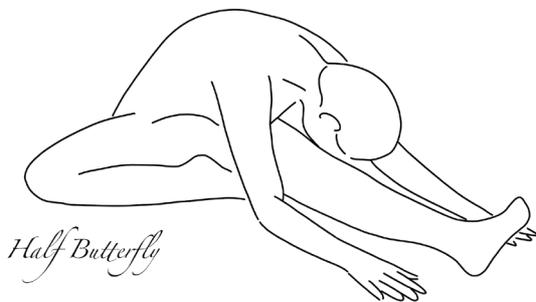
relationships. Thus the element of consensus is important and also not using sexual energy in a coercive or manipulating manner. This precept is often misinterpreted as relating only to sexual conduct but it covers any overindulgence in any sensual pleasure such as gluttony as well as that misconduct of a sexual nature.

Next there is refraining from false speech (*musavada*). As well as avoiding lying and deceiving, this precept covers slander as well as speech which is not beneficial to the welfare of others.

The final precept speaks of abstaining from substances that cause intoxication and heedlessness (*suramereya majja pamadattana*). This precept is in a special category as it does not infer any intrinsic evil in, for example alcohol, but indulgence in such a substance could be the cause of breaking the other four precepts.

Buddhism also offers us the **six paramitas**, which might be described as ‘qualities that we can develop that can purify our intention and mental states’.

- generosity (*dana*)
- ethics (*sila*)
- patience (*kshanti*)
- energy (*virya*)
- meditation (*dhyana*)
- wisdom (*prajna*)



An example of the first *paramita* is from the Buddha’s teachings recorded in one of the earlier Buddhist collections, the *Itivuttaka* (26).

If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift.

MANY LISTS

Buddhism is famous for its many lists (lists being helpful ways of remembering things). Two of my favourites are the **four right efforts** (*samyakpradhana*) and the **four reliances** (*catuhpratisarana*).

The **efforts** are:

- *Guarding* not to let an unwholesome or unskilful thought arise which has not yet arisen;
- *Abandon* not to let an unwholesome or unskilful thought continue which has already arisen
- *Develop* to encourage a wholesome or skilful thought to arise which has not yet arisen
- *Sustain* to encourage a wholesome or skilful thought to continue which has already arisen

One of the points that I love about this group is its pragmatism, how it goes from the more abstract position of ‘guarding’ to the practicality of ‘abandon’ (knowing that inevitably unwholesome or unskilful thoughts will be in the mind).

I can make an effort to dampen the fuelling of mental flames by seeing less of the constant advertising that surrounds us, by consciously not reading the piles of prejudice in papers such as the *Daily Mail*. I can observe the sight of flowers around my home, I can smell the sweet scent of jasmine when it is in blossom, I can be alert to the taste of food as it enters my mouth (rather than eating while checking emails and making plans for the summer).

The **four reliances** are relying on:

- the message, not the messenger,
- the content, not the form,
- explicit teaching, not implicit and
- wisdom, not knowledge.

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche presents the reliances this way.

Rely on the message of the teacher, not on his personality; rely on the meaning, not just on the words; rely on the real meaning, not on the provisional one; rely on your wisdom mind, not on your ordinary, judgmental mind.

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Many of these approaches and ideas are found in Western psychology and practices of psychotherapy. An example is from anger management: event plus response equals outcome. Influencing that outcome can be done through the practice expressed by the acronym AWARE: **a**cknowledge a situation; **w**ait and be alert to what is happening; **a**dapt, so there is a willingness to step out of previous patterns of behaviour; **r**espond; **e**mpathise. This is a successful tool for dealing with anger. Considering how common anger is (whether expressed externally or internally), this technique could be very helpful for many of us.

The Holocaust survivor and influential psychotherapist, Victor Frankl, wrote: “between the stimulus and the response there is a space and in that space lies our power and our freedom.” Part of practice is perception of space and then deepening the scope and the span of that space. This has been called the practice of pause. A substantial amount of research show that long-term meditators have a much greater ability than non-meditators to consciously experience and expand this space.

And in this space — with the assistance of such principles and practices as the *yamas*, *niyamas*, *paramitas* and more — we can be gently cultivating precious drops of friendliness, compassion, contentment, honesty, learning. Just as a bucket of water is gradually filled by drops or a boulder worn down by drips, what might seem impossible

can be probable over time and with patience and with commitment. Those drops and these drips are certainly helpful ways for us to be.

In our awareness of these guides for how we might live a better life, it is essential that we remember the interconnection and interdependence of all. In Buddhism, this is reflected in the image of Indra’s Net. According to Sir Charles Eliot (author of *Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch*):

In the Heaven of Indra, there is said to be a network of pearls, so arranged that if you look at one you see all the others reflected in it. In the same way each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object and in fact is everything else.

That all is connected. That all phenomena and that all people depend upon each other.

In many parts of the world, there can be a common view about the inalienable right to happiness for the individual person. In some other cultures, there is an acceptance and conscious acknowledging that life is suffering if our expectations are unrealistic (for example, that all is permanent). It is almost counter-intuitive but I believe that the second position (if we simplify life down to such two great generalisations) can actually make us happier. Because when things go ‘wrong’ — as they inevitably do for all of us: sickness, a loved one leaving us, the death of a parent, losing work — it is not our own personal fault. It is not that we have ‘failed’ (which feeling can arise if we subscribe to position one about the individual inalienable right to happiness). It is the undeniable nature of life.

GREAT SUFFERING AND MANY OPPORTUNITIES

As I wrote at the start, there is great suffering in this world. Mark Boyle (the author of *The Moneyless Manifesto*) said:

What we are doing to the world we do unto ourselves....We live in a culture where inexplicably punching someone on the street would provoke outrage, and rightly so; yet where the extirpation of a couple of hundred of species every single week due to human activity alone barely raises an eyebrow. It’s time to resist, revolt and rewild.

In my opinion, even though there are 2000 years between the advice from yoga and Buddhism and ourselves today, we can use these guidelines as a means of deepening and nourishing that question of “What can we do?”

Someone said to me: “Narcissism is the new normality”. This is a major obstacle in the world of yoga and individualistic practicing. One of my *Yoga Sutras* favourites is 1.33: “calmness arises from friendship, delight, empathy and equality towards others” (tr Matthew Remski). Within such guidance, naturally we need support. Within all these suggestions and encouragements, it is good to be patient and know that it can take a lot of time to shift stuff: these patterns of behaviour that we each have in our own individual way are deeply embedded.

We keep learning and staying open; we keep realising that we are human and thus we make mistakes. And maybe over time what we can see evolving are minds that are softer and more flexible, hearts that are more grounded and more gentle. Perhaps we really grasp how helpful these ways can be for us. That 1.33 sutra has often been described as the ethical basis of the *Yoga Sutras*. It bears a strong similarity to the *brahma viharas* (the divine abodes) of Buddhism. These are *metta* (loving

kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (empathy) and *upekka* (equanimity).

Richard Freeman said that we should desire the happiness of all sentient beings — if only for purely selfish reasons. Why? Because as long as any being is suffering, we cannot truly still our own mental fluctuations (*vrttis*). So our activity in the world is grounded in personal awareness and our personal awareness indisputably understands Indra’s Net and the truth of Richard Freeman’s words.

2.16 in the *Yoga Sutras* states: “future suffering is to avoided” (according to Bouanchaud); Remski reminds us that “the future is unwritten”. The radical historian Perry Anderson wrote: “As Popper had shown, human creativity is such that we cannot know in advance what we will know in the future, so the very basis of our evolution is in principle unpredictable.”

Machle’s interpretation of 2.16 is “the only way to avoid future suffering is to awaken now”. Becoming free requires constant alertness and continually paying attention while simultaneously balancing these energies with kindness, being gentle and acceptance: with love.

Norman Blair

5 September 2015, amended December 2020

FIVE MORE PERSPECTIVES...

Ruth Westoby www.enigmatic.yoga

Practice on its own is not enough: yes it helps ease the existential crisis of being in the world, of relating to others — but it risks a rigidity of viewpoint, a superiority of technique. Without reflecting on how we got here, on yoga’s past, purpose, and future, on cultural shifts and political agendas, the unwitting naivety of practice alone can harden into fundamentalisms. Fundamentalisms such as my yoga really is better than your yoga, or, my flexibility grants me access to wisdom and morality superior to my fellow practitioners.

Reflecting, or *tarka*, is a yogic practice. *Tarka* means to reflect, to think, to doubt, to inquire, to reason. Many textual sources from the premodern Indian tradition list six limbs of yoga, such as the *Maitri Upaniṣad*. Skipping two of the eight limbs of yoga that concern ethics, *yama* and *niyama*, and *āsana* or posture, familiar to many students of yoga from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, six-limbed paths of yoga often include *tarka*. This is not necessarily an end in itself but a means to yoga. I see a tight fit between this ancient imperative to reflect and more contemporary ideas of critical theory that argue there is no neutral view, no view from nowhere.

Shifting viewpoints expose hidden prejudices. Borrowing different spectacles, different coloured lenses, is yoga theory as method. We see things differently and start to stop identifying with certain ways of seeing as intrinsically tied to our identity. We enable the possibility of spiralling towards more nuanced understandings. Reflecting on different preconceptions and ideologies, for that's what opinions are, doesn't entail a collapse into relativity, where every articulation of every view is equally valid. But it insists on the value of diversity and allows philosophy to become therapy. It seems to me that historically yoga is technique, rather than ideology, and in its historical manifestations has exhibited a playfulness towards metaphysics.

If I were going to be bold I'd go further. Because actually, I don't just think reflecting on history and philosophy is *a* yogic practice, as if it were somehow optional. I think it is a moral imperative to peel back the layers of this thing that we love. One of my Sanskrit teachers always says that Sanskrit is better as a team sport. I think she means that we think better when we think together. At the heart of yoga is *līlā* or play. In dialogue with one another we can play with ideas, dress-up in different spectacles, learn together.

from Yogacampus newsletter January 2021 <https://www.yogacampus.com>

Robert Birnberg <https://www.whyyogaworks.com>

The classical texts describe the essential qualities of a good Yoga teacher. *Sthitadhi/mauni*: mentally and emotionally stable, quiet. Someone reflective and responsible. The teacher shouldn't leak or complain to the students about their own problems (often the mark of a teacher-less teacher). A good teacher has the ability to listen with complete attention, empathize, and give appropriate, non-reactive advice while remaining detached from the results. *Jnani/sampradaya sevaka*: authoritative, yet knows their limits, has a teacher of their own. A teacher should be quite knowledgeable, yet truthful about what they don't know. They should demonstrate a deep understanding of the *Yoga Sutras*, and a comfortable command of Yoga's various tools, applications, adaptations, modifications and their effects. While no one is expected to know everything, a teacher connected to a teacher connected to a teacher has access to the entire lineage's body of knowledge and experience, and is constantly having their knowledge and skills reshaped, refined and tested for accuracy.

from *Yogi Times* January 2012

<https://www.yogitimes.com/article/yoga-psychology-indian-vedas-sutras-patanjali-insights-reducing-discomfort-joy-philosophy>

Kenneth Liberman

First must be the resolve to overcome egoism ... anything that results in inflating the ego cannot be considered a yoga practice.... It is the considered opinion of two millennia of yoga practice that egocentrism leads to ruin so techniques for reducing the obsessiveness with which a student pursues his or her self-image and interests need to be preserved ... simplicity should be taught and practiced for it is the very heart of traditional yoga ... what is the measure of what is authentic in yoga: a full frontal attack on egoism, the mindful reduction of nervous tension, simplicity, the growth of ethical sensibility and a practical and daily responsibility for one's own contentment ... the cultivation of one's vital energies must be harnessed to the task of evolving which can amount to leaving the world more tamed than one found it.

from 'The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatha Yoga' in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* edited by Jean Bryne and Mark Singleton (Routledge, 2008) p111

Gregor Maehle <https://8limbs.com>

In yoga austerity (*tapas*) means simplicity. Behind the term simplicity lies my acceptance of the truth that to be happy I need nothing but to know who I truly am. By living a simple life without extremes and without constantly yielding to my desires, my mind is concentrated and focused. On the other hand if I follow the call of this world to ‘spoil yourself’, ‘treat yourself’, ‘pamper yourself’, I communicate to my mind that I am not in charge of my life. Rather I cement the belief that a constant stream of external stimulation and sensory satisfaction has to occur for me to keep my mental equilibrium — which means I am not in charge of my life but am a slave to my needs and desires.

To wake up to the truth that I need nothing at all to be internally happy, that in fact constantly following external stimuli separates me from myself is *tapas*. Austerity will make us strong, whereas gluttony and decadence weaken. The more we believe we need certain things, the more we will be dependent on them. Simplicity makes the body strong and healthy and the mind calm and focused. It is the foundation of self-knowledge since it means giving up the lie that anything but self-knowledge can make us permanently happy.

from *Ashtanga Yoga: Practice and Philosophy* by Gregor Maehle p184 (New World Library, 2006)

Matthew Remski <http://matthewremski.com/wordpress/>

A family member tells you over dinner that there is a catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and that it has been caused by global human consumption patterns that drive an ever-more reckless extraction industry which has been both grossly mismanaged and cynically leveraged to foster economic and environmental imbalance to line the pockets of oligarchs. Having heard quite enough, you would rise from the table with your dinner half-eaten, put your fork in your back pocket, and walk out the front door. You would walk to the nearest highway and begin hitching to New Orleans. Between rides you may shriek at passing cars to stop driving, or to at least stop driving with one passenger only.

The paradox of hitchhiking and yelling at cars wouldn’t bother you in the least: after all, you need to go as fast as you can, and it is also true that your means of transportation is destructive. The fact that many contradictory things are true does not cause internal doubt but rather further enflames your desire for justice. You would eat and drink whatever you could find and whatever you needed. You would go directly to the beaches and begin cleaning the sea birds. If the oil company executives came to the beach for a photo-op you would murder them all with your fork. You may be shot dead on the spot. If you avoid being shot, your rage would be immediately and completely satisfied, and without a shred of guilt or misgiving, you would return to bathing the birds.

This is actually the yogic story of Rudra, wrathful aspect of Shiva, with his trident (your fork) protecting the world’s defenceless creatures with blood-curdling war-shrieks. The modern yogi, typically very uncomfortable with this role, must learn creative ways to avoid aiding and abetting the abhorrent behaviour he witnesses in the world as he sits behind a veil of self-protective ‘peace’, munching his organic vegan power bars.

from Matthew Remski and Scott Petrie. 2010. *Yoga 2.0 — mala 1: shamanic echoes*

