

YOGA OF THE MOUTH

By: Devarshi Steven Hartman

Swami Kripalu and Mahatma Gandhi both spoke often about how a real yogis character can be measured by their mouth. Yes, you heard me, their mouth! Yoga of the mouth. By what goes IN IT, and what comes OUT OF IT. Gandhi said that those who are not in control of what goes in their mouth, and what goes out of their mouth, have no self-control in other areas of their life as well. Your mouth is a measure of your self-discipline and conscious, aware will. Your mouth is a mirror for your yoga practice, much more than your mat.

Swami Kripalu called the tongue, the body's "mischievous elf," the tail that wags the dog. He also said, "Before speaking, consider whether your words are an improvement upon silence." Bapuji, Swami Kripalu, practiced 14 years in silence, writing only from a slate board when necessary. Certainly if we were to take his words to heart, we would rarely speak at all.

So what does this mean for us common modern-day yogis? To me, it all begins with practicing Patanjali's first two limbs: the Yamas and the Niyamas. The, often over looked, practices of character building. Without awareness and continual observance and improvement on one's character, whatever great feats you may obtain in your physical practice, remain meaningless.

In yoga, the beginning is always the end, and the ending is always the beginning. When I first moved into the ashram, we began with many hours of pranayama – conscious and deliberate breathing, in and out. It was the beginning of practicing conscious awareness. Now, forty years later, it's all about breathing, deliberately, consciously, in and out, all the time, everywhere, with this breath, and then this one, and then this one, and then again.

The yamas and niyamas are the beginning two stages of Patanjali's eight-limbed path to yoga consciousness – enlightenment. They are the end as well. One does not begin on the real path of yoga unless they are intent on true self-improvement, with the sincere desire to be the best that a human being can be. That's yoga. To be on the path of becoming the best example of what a human being can be, in every moment. Any human, regardless of their religion or race, taking on this monumental and holy endeavor, is practicing yoga, call it whatever you wish. And if you take this task of self-betterment to heart, you will, no doubt, be practicing the yamas and niyamas.

The ancient practices of the ten yamas and niyamas did not originate with Patanjali's Sutras, which was written somewhere around 100 BCE to 300 CE. The yamas and niyamas are embedded in the Upanishads in the final chapters of the 6,000 to 8,000 year old Vedic scriptures. Some have mislabeled them "yoga's ten commandments"; but the yamas and niyamas are not rules, or commandments, to be followed, with dire consequences of hell, should one disobey them. There is a big difference. They are the oldest methodological science for happiness and contentment on the planet. They are the practices necessary for peace within and without. They are the beginning of the yogic path and the true measure of the fruit of one's practice. That's all. The price of not practicing them is a continuation of one's suffering.

If you are familiar with the yamas and niyamas, you may notice that every darshan/talk that Gandhi delivered, revolved around the practice, meaning, integration and interpretation of the yamas and niyamas in real life circumstances. Bapuji, Swami Kripalu, in his final darshan to those living in Kripalu Ashram before he left for India prior to his mahasamadhi/death, gave his last discourse on the yamas and niyamas. Each word of Bapuji's final message was chosen with great care and precision. He could have spoken on anything. He chose the yamas and niyamas. The beginning of the path, and the end as well.

Many “yogis” today are not familiar with the character building practices of the yamas and niyamas – Yamas: the five essential practices of qualities worth cultivating and nourishing, and Niyamas: the five essential practices of qualities requiring restraint and discernment. If you are not familiar with the yamas and niyamas; Google them! The ancient yogis of long ago could not say that!

The first yama is ahimsa – non-violence. Again, it is the beginning and the end as well – Noticing a theme? Non-violence is the absence of violence. Himsa is violence. Ahimsa is the absence of violence. And what remains when violence is removed? What shines forth when the shadow of violence to the self, others, and the world around us, is no longer? Yes, you guessed it; Love. So in truth, the first practice of yoga, and the end as well, is love. The path of love. Go figure. Thank you, Bapuji, who defined himself as a “Pilgrim on the Path of Love”.

I should end this sweet commentary right here, and for most readers I would say STOP! Read no further! Stay with the inspirational message above. If you wish to re-post this message, only include the above! Don't scare off the newbies by what's coming next....But...I love the grist for the mill – or as it is called in the niyamas – Tapas. So, here we go, Brave One, read on...back to the practice of “Mouth Yoga” and what goes in it.

Consider the practice of treating yourself lovingly by what you put into your mouth. Imagine a loving, aware Gatekeeper always standing guard at your lips, who practices ahimsa. Be kind and loving to yourself by what you allow to enter your mouth. And ask yourself if what is entering your mouth was treated with kindness and love as well. We are what we eat. If you are not vegetarian, consider beginning the practice of not eating meat. It is debatable whether eating meat is good for you, it is definitely not good for the animals, and it is not good for the planet and our ability to sustain ourselves as a species.

Eating meat may well be the demise of our earthly existence altogether. The “cow industry” alone is the leading cause of deforestation, global warming – because the methane from cow emissions destroys the ozone layer more than gas emissions from our cars, and water shortages – because each cow consumes around 20 gallons of water each day. I could go on, but will spare you. Google it! But questions like this arise when you truly start to practice ahimsa. How can I practice being an example of the best that a human being can be, knowing what we know today? How can I practice making a difference in the world and our evolution as whole? How can I be a non-violent activist in the revolution towards freedom inside and out?

I believe the day will come when people speak about how humans use to have these places called “supermarkets” where slabs of bloody dead animals laid open and dripping for people to buy and consume. I believe there will be a day when it is against the law and unethical to eat meat because of the effect on society, the planet and the rights of animals. They/we will look back with awe and disgust, much like we look on the practices of slavery today. We are far from a vegan world today, and I don't believe it will be in my lifetime (thank god I believe I have many) but I choose to be a part of this active revolution by practicing vegetarianism.

I am not a fundamentalist...about anything... except being a fundamentalist against fundamentalism in all forms. I don't know what is “right” and am well aware that no one does. I abhor people who “know” they are “right” and act righteously. All I know is that we can make what we know to be the best choice we are aware of. That's the best we can do. We can educate, with patience and understanding, ourselves and others to our ideals, beliefs and practices, respecting others beliefs, sharing our findings and experiments with a soft grip, and with the intention of more contentment and wholeness for all. If we practice this, surely the world will improve daily.

Gandhi experimented and practiced all the time with his food and diet. Bapuji experimented much with his diet. I spent nine years as a strict macrobiotic. It didn't work optimally for me. I gave it all up and ate conveniently, as I use to call it. I preferred being vegetarian, but it just wasn't “convenient”. I ate everything. I have been

“mostly vegetarian” for the last many years with occasional fish on special occasions and not freaking out about mishaps with chicken stock. But now, I have to face the music for myself. It’s time. No more meat at all. The oceans are being depleted to extinction as we speak and I do not need to eat fish to flourish.

So, today, on my birthday, I once again commit to the yogic practice of vegetarianism. And in the coming year I will experiment with eliminating all animal products and practicing veganism. I only mention it to encourage others as I have been encouraged by many. If many more join the conscious eating revolution, veganism will one day be “convenient” to eat for all and I believe we, and the planet, will be better off for it. Face it. If not now, when? Why not now? Except for the fact that change is hard – and this is where the “practice part” of yoga comes in.

A story. A man was inspired by his Guru to begin the practice of yoga. The man spoke to his Guru of his concerns and said, “If I practice yoga, will I have to give up eating meat, drinking alcohol, and having sex with many women?” His Guru said. “No, you do not have to give up any of those things...Just begin the practice of yoga earnestly and the day will come when you no longer desire any of these things.”

And so it is with me, after many years of earnest yoga practice, the practices are always new, always more subtle. There is always another frontier of betterment and experimentation. This is my Happy Birthday gift to me. I hope in some small way these words may be an inspiration to you for your practice of betterment, to be the best you, that you can be. Jai Bhagwan. We will deal with the practice of what goes “out of the mouth” another day. Oh Lordie, help us!