



ahimsa

– the art of peace

Why do we feel rage, frustration and other negative emotions? And how can we learn not to give vent to these fear-based emotions? Jane Wiesner explains how yoga's teaching of non-violence liberates us to act with insight, not react in anger.

You're at a roundabout. You look carefully to the right. Satisfied that it's safe to move, you turn left. All of a sudden a car is on top of yours. Where did it come from? It must have thundered through from the opposite side. Now, it rides your bumper – the driver bips the horn and screams abuse. Although there are two other lanes available (you're in the far left) the driver stays on your tail, perhaps to prove a point. But what is the point? What drives a human being to such a point of rage?

If we look to the classic, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, we find an answer. This wise, ancient text suggests that the collective rage echoing throughout society today is a reflection of our discontent or dissatisfaction with ourselves. In other words, rage is a mirror of our discontent.

Unfortunately, rage is common nowadays, especially on the roads. Whether we feel rage or have it directed towards us, it is something we all experience at one time or another. Anger management has become a buzz phrase. But what fuels our anger?

According to yogic philosophy, we lash out because of anxiety, frustration, impatience – fear-based emotions. In *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*, Georg Feuerstein suggests that fear (*bhaya*) is “a universal constant of human experience”. Fear is something we deal with regularly. Whether conscious or unconscious, fear is at the core of all negative emotions. In many instances fear is what stops us experiencing joy. In essence, the goal of yoga is the cessation of fear.

The rage in our everyday world is a reflection of the world's belief system and how it is changing as a result of our fear. The frustration we see demonstrated on the road is only one example of fear at its worst. Another example is the rage expressed through racial violence. Every day, on television and in other media, we see evidence of the intolerance generated by the inability to understand each other's differences.

Fortunately, Patanjali's yogic wisdom not only diagnoses the problem of rage, it also offers a solution in the concept of *ahimsa* – the practice of non-violence towards others and towards ourselves.

Non-violence starts with the self

In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Sri Swami Satchindananda describes yoga as “a science of the mind”. The physical aspects of yoga are designed to facilitate our psychological (some would say ‘spiritual’) development – to free us from the burden of fear. Patanjali connects fear to anger and violence, suggesting that we need to turn to ahimsa to quell the effects of angry feelings.

The word ahimsa, which means ‘non-harming’, is “the practice of abstaining from harming others physically, mentally, and vocally at all times”. This practice of non-harming applies on two levels: our thoughts about others and our thoughts about ourselves. The violence of thinking angrily about others is obvious, but we need to recognise that self-abnegation (or self-rejection) is also a form of violence, in this case towards the self.

According to the wisdom of ahimsa, anger requires indulgence in destructive thoughts – in its worst form it results in an inability to exercise control over our feelings and choices.

How can we break the pattern of destructive thoughts and learn to exercise control and understanding? According to Patanjali, ahimsa is the first of the five moral observances of *yama* (or restraint), and part of the five personal restraints of *niyama*. Where *yama* reflects respect for the other, *niyama* reflects a respect for the self. Unfortunately, self-care has been distorted over the years and caring for the self has become confused with narcissism (self-love). We are told we must not be selfish, we must not 'love' ourselves, but caring for the self is the most important thing we can do. Without the ability to care for the self we cannot truly care for others; valuing human life starts with our own. Where arrogance (self-glorifying) is a mask for feelings of insecurity, caring about the self is a reflection of honouring life. There is no room for anger when we are filled with such a positive emotion.

Fear, the brain and the mind

Emotion has taught mankind to reason.

—VAUVENARGUES

Thousands of years ago we were primitive, *reactional* beings who took what we wanted in a fight for our survival. Over time we evolved; we became civilised and we developed a higher brain. This cerebral cortex is something we might refer to in yogic terms as *buddhi*. (Buddhi, the higher mind, is the feminine form of Buddha, the awakened one.)

In 1967 Dr Paul MacLean developed the model of the triune brain, in which he suggested that there are three layers to the human brain: the brainstem or reptilian brain which is responsible for breathing, excretion, blood flow, body temperature and other autonomic functions; the limbic system, which circles the top of the brainstem and is the seat of emotions; and the cerebral cortex, in the forebrain, which is the seat of reason.

Yoga teaches us to achieve a balance between primitive instincts and the seat of emotions by showing us how to dwell in the seat of reason. This is achieved through 'observer awareness', a process where we become the observer of our own thoughts. When we emote from impulse there is no control, but when we emote with reason there is control. For instance, when dealing with a disobedient child, instinct tells us to be angry, while

reason tells us to exercise the wisdom of patience and understanding. This is ahimsa in action.

The brain and the mind are two different things. The brain could be described as the physical storehouse – the hardware – whereas the mind is the process by which we access the brain – the software. The brain is the object, the mind is the activity associated with use of the object. Again, this notion creates an interesting overlay between MacLean's concept of the three levels of the brain and Patanjali's three levels of the mind. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali refers to *manas* (the sensory mind), *ahamkara* (the ego identity) and *buddhi* (the higher mind). Here we see an interesting parallel between MacLean's model and the ancient wisdom of yogic philosophy, particularly in relation to understanding mental processes and how we need to use the intellect to overcome primitive impulses such as rage.

In a civilised world we survive by *negotiation* rather than by demand. But unfortunately, according to Gregor Maehle, director of The 8limbs of Ashtanga Yoga in Perth, we are now in the age of *kali-yuga* (the final stage of four ages), an age of moral decline. The Bhagavad Gita states that *kali-yuga* began with the death of Krishna (circa 1350 BCE) and is associated with three significant influences:

1. *materialism*: it is an age where we identify with our bodies and our wallets;
2. *warfare*: there will be a lack of peace as war continually makes its presence felt;
3. *false doctrines or teachings*: there will be a constant propounding of false teaching or information.

Now, more than ever, it is important that we choose to maintain our ability to be *civilised*, to live in the *buddhi* state. *Kali-yuga* is fuelled by human insensitivity – from our ignorance of *dharma* (right action). It appears that our evolutionary cycle may be returning to a more primitive state. Have we come full circle? I prefer to think not. After all, we are thinking, feeling, acting beings who are capable of knowing the difference between right and wrong – that alone gives us hope.

The simple act of standing in a queue is a good example of how to use the *buddhi* mind. Next time you are in a queue, instead of being impatient and annoyed, worrying about where you have to go next, focus on the present – breathe in life's energy and be thankful for the moment. When you get angry and annoyed over wasting time, what you are really wasting is the quality of your time. Remember, time can't be bought or sold, it can only be spent. Spend wisely!

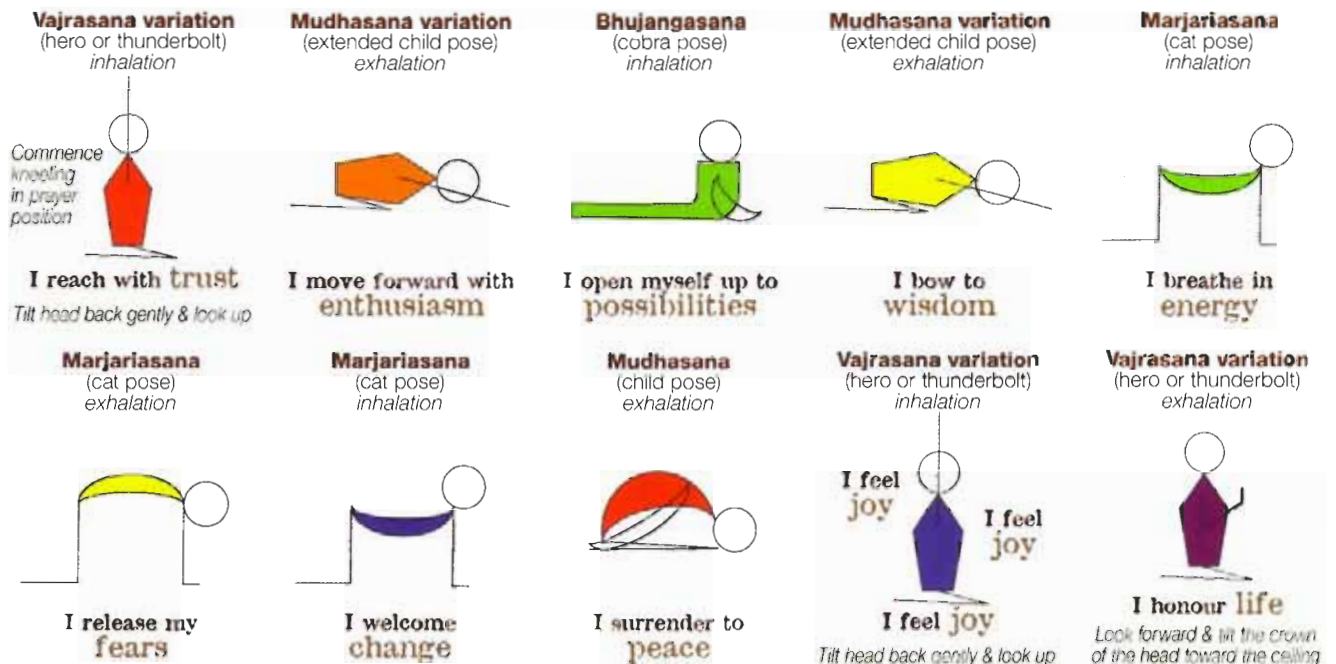
As civilised beings, we like to manage things. What we can't manage makes us feel uncertain – even fearful. A study of stress levels carried out by Hans Selve shows that our greatest stress comes from a sense of uncertainty. This explains why some of us experience such debilitating forms of rage – the more out of control we feel, the more we experience negative emotions. Hence, when our fears are more pronounced our instincts revert to primitive responses. This is because, when influenced by the reptilian brain, we are driven by the need for survival, both physical and emotional survival, and this invites irrational responses – an anything-to-survive mentality.

From fear to joy

How do we overcome our fears and defuse negative emotions? We create feelings of joy. Joy, put simply, is the absence of fear. This may sound oversimplified but it is the goal of yoga and it is achievable. Fear is manifested from a destructive internal reality – one that depletes our ability to truly experience joy. One specific way is by working with the affirmation/asana/pranayama sequence (or emotive-influence sequence) presented on page 50. By using a sequence such as this, we are able to re-train our minds and reduce the impact of subliminal activators (Patanjali's term for what most of us refer to as Freud's unconscious mind). Subliminal activators are basically triggers or emotional imprints (*samskaras*) that condition our thoughts. The Buddhists refer to this as 'conditionality' – conditional thoughts that arise from events that then condition further events.

This brings us to one of the most significant phrases of our time: "I believe". It is what we believe that defines

[Emotive Influence Sequence]



The poses above focus on grounding - feeling strong and steady. Breathe in and out through the nostrils. There is an emphasis on 'opening up' while breathing in and 'releasing' while breathing out. While practising this sequence be with the emotion - feel the energy flowing

through the body and embrace a sense of certainty and joy. Allow yourself to fully experience the inspiration of positive emotions. The affirmations can be spoken out loud or said silently in the mind. Repeat the sequence two or three times throughout the

day (if possible). The sequence can be practised with the eyes open or closed. Smiling during the exercise is thoroughly recommended. Yoga works to dissolve negative emotions and to enhance positive feelings.

us. False beliefs about our worth or the value of others keep us on a negative emotional cycle. By using the affirmations explained with the 'emotive-influence' sequence we gradually transform the contents of "I believe" to a more positive level. We generate thoughts that are directed by empowering - rather than by disempowering - beliefs. In other words, we learn to become silent witnesses of our own thought processes and to direct our emotional responses in a more rational manner.

Become a silent witness

For instance, when we believe that life is against us or that we don't deserve the best in life, we tend to make choices that fulfil our expectations. We self-prophesise failure. As an individual you have a choice. You can decide what kind of person you want to be and create a belief system that supports what you want to become. In other words, you can observe your negative self-talk and actively seek to change it.

The principles for becoming a silent witness (an observer of thought

processes) are contained in Patanjali's eight-fold path. This discipline promotes right conduct on all levels: mentally, emotionally, physically and, most importantly, socially. The eightfold path is simply a blueprint for living. Earnest Wood, author of *Practical Yoga*, views the eight limbs as the path to peace.

1. *Yama*: caring for the other (restraint in thought and action towards the other)
2. *Niyama*: caring for the self (restraint in thought and action towards the self)
3. *Asana*: a method for enhancing meditative absorption
4. *Pranayama*: breathing techniques (note that the words 'psyche' and 'spiritual' both mean 'breath of life').
5. *Pratyahara*: sense withdrawal and centering
6. *Dharana*: concentration, becoming the silent witness
7. *Dhyana*: meditative absorption
8. *Samadhi* (ecstasy, also referred to as *ecstasy*): self-realisation or liberation

by way of a complete transmutation of consciousness. This 'standing outside oneself' involves a significant shift in one's sense of identity.

All of the qualities of the eightfold path have their own unique value. The yogi works towards attaining the ultimate liberation, but it is essential that our discipline does not become an obsession or a burden, or else it will negate what we are trying to achieve. All too often I have seen yoga practitioners who set such high standards that they lose sight of the goal of yoga - peace of mind. Don't beat yourself up. As a concept, yoga is paradoxical: it teaches that you will only experience some degree of certainty (control) in life when you completely let go of the need for control.

As social beings, the way we feel about ourselves, our self-consciousness, is connected to the way we relate to others and to our environment. And, as individuals we have our own way of reacting to each other or to any given situation. The goal of yoga is to stop us

from reacting emotionally and to teach us to become *cognitive observers*. Yoga shows us how to become the silent witness, governed by the principles of wisdom and insight rather than impulse prompted by emotional demand. For example, if we experience road rage directed towards us, we can either react to it and accept our own emotion-driven thoughts, thoughts that make us angry and upset, or we can choose not to react. We can, instead, observe our own inclinations to react and decide to change the outcome. We can act with wisdom rather than react in anger.

In essence, yogic philosophy suggests that particular circumstances do not determine the individual's response to life. It is what the person thinks about these circumstances that determines the response – it is always our choice. Hence, the state of our consciousness is our making. When we are caught up with the side-effects of fear, such as when we experience fits of anger, we are out of touch with the silent witness, closed off from the wisdom within us.

A wise friend once said to me that “all human beings really want is to be appreciated”. Patanjali suggests that we must not only learn to appreciate each other but we must also learn to appreciate *life* – embracing and enhancing the life-force or energy within (*prana*). Patanjali claims that contented relationships are born of a peaceful mind and cannot be achieved if we react negatively to others. Furthermore, Patanjali argues “if you control the way you react to others, you control your own peace of mind”. Ultimately, frustration and anger occur when we place unrealistic expectations on each other.

Bliss is our natural state

The goal of yoga is not to reject all human emotions, but instead to “emote” with clarity and wisdom. After all, joy or bliss is a feeling, and according to the Buddha, bliss is our natural state of being. Unfortunately, our innate sense of joy is often overcome by a fear-induced discontent. When a person lashes out in anger on the road it is a reflection of this discontent. It reflects the individual's attachment to a negative self-image. When

it comes to road-rage, drivers use their cars as an extension of their ego – whatever they are experiencing in life is mirrored in their driving e.g. hostility, insecurity, frustration, resentment. Show-offs and hoons reflect feelings of inadequacy. These emotions are destructive to our well-being. Again, classical yoga does not condemn all human emotions. It just accentuates the need for directed emotional responses rather than uncontrolled emotional reactions.

According to Feuerstein, yoga practice works to achieve the transmutation of negative emotions into positive feelings. Instead of our emotions controlling us, we are able to direct our emotions positively and constructively. When we sit in a quiet, meditative practice we acquire a sense of peace and stillness. Peace of mind is found in the silence within, in the gap between thoughts. Furthermore, when we manage our negative emotions through the practice of yogic techniques and principles such as asana (yoga postures), pranayama (breathing techniques) and dhyana (meditation), we learn to let go of





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false beliefs about who we are and what we should be. The peaceful calm we experience through yoga helps us to avoid becoming angry and shows us how to deal with other people's rage. Yoga teaches us to embrace a state of *abhaya* (fearlessness) which is the fruit of Self-realisation (*atma-jnana*, self-knowledge or self-vision), or as Buddhist doctrine suggests, enlightenment (*nirvana* – a sense of oneness with all things).

Self-realisation is the goal of Patanjali's eightfold path and ahimsa is a very important aspect of this journey. But ahimsa is not just about non-harm of the other; it is also about non-harm of the self. Inward liberty comes through dispelling negative emotional reactions – freedom from fear. Managing anger is all about self-acceptance, which inevitably leads to tolerance and peace on a social, collective level. So, to care for the world, firstly, we need to care for ourselves. When it comes to fear, yoga shows us how to use the body and the mind in unison to dissolve negative emotions and to replace them with a sense of infinite peace.

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'There is no true power in any sphere of life except through inward liberty.'

EARNEST WOOD PRACTICAL YOGA

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