

AHIMSA

Ahimsa is the Sanskrit name for non-violence, which embodies compassion, care, loving-kindness, respect and to honor all of life.

Ahimsa is the most important quality that we weave into our yoga practice to give it a heart and soul. But, how can we cultivate a genuine experience and expression of Ahimsa, of non-violence? I believe violence comes from our frontal brain and non-violence from our ears!

I know that might sound crazy, but let me explain:

LOVE is LISTENING

Our frontal brain is our analytical brain, or dialectic brain, which is the tool we humans need to help us navigate through our daily lives with planning, decisions and accomplishments. As a comparison the bats have their sonar that they use to navigate themselves through their lives. We have our analytical mind that help us face current activities with the analysis of "right and wrong", "good and bad", "better and worse. These are qualities of our human brain that we need to plan and create food sources, build houses, make computers, and help us plan our daily activities. Unfortunately the side affect of our dialectic mind, with its continual analysis of "right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse", is it also leads to criticism, judgement, discrimination, self righteousness, conflict, violence and war.

On the contrary, when we listen with both ears, the frontal brain is quiet. We can not totally listen with both ears and also compute with our analytical brain at the same time. The power of listening and the power of thinking are two different channels in our brain. Sometimes though we listen with one ear, and at the same time analyze, criticize and judge with our frontal brain. Yet, a total active listening with both ears quiets the analytical brain. The practice of Yoga in essence is: Yoga Chitta Vritti Nirodha, or in our words, "Yoga is the practice of quieting our analytical mind, the Chitta Vrittis", the monkey mind, so we can experience the essence of Yoga, the union of the body and the mind with the Soul.

Mr. BKS.Iyengar or Guruji, as we called him lovingly, often told us that the ears are the channels to our Soul. When we listen deeply we connect with our soul, with other souls and with the Soul of Life. The analytical brain always seeks comparison and division, but the soul seeks union. Yoga is the union with the Soul, which we can only experience in "Ata Yoga", the Yoga of Now, when being fully present in the "Power of Now".

THE EARS ARE THE CHANNEL TO OUR SOUL

So, when we listen to our own bodies' history with its accumulated experiences, needs and abilities, our hearts naturally opens up with understanding, compassion, and loving kindness. When we listen deeply to our history, we experience a connection to our mother and father, to our grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great grandparents..... We experience our connections to the past and that we are not separate, but are walking around in an "heirloom" that we have inherited for thousands of generations, yet which has evolved into its own unique qualities and abilities. This gives us a true "experience" of wanting to take care of this precious heirloom that we have inherited with Ahimsa in our hearts. And we add the expression of Ahimsa, by daily giving our bodies healthy activities, yoga, relaxation, nourishing foods, meaningful work, compassionate relationships and a mindful living with care in our hearts; honoring this precious gift of life.

And when we listen deeply to our family members, our friends, or people on the street; to their needs, values and histories, our hearts naturally open up with a genuine "experience" of Ahimsa; with understanding, compassion, care and respect. Unfortunately, our analytical minds often take over and it's easier to criticize and look for what is wrong, what is missing, what we don't like, how our ideas are better than their ideas, how my lifestyle is better than their lifestyle, my God is better than their god and my yoga is better than their yoga..... leading to judgement, self-righteousness, discrimination, conflict and war.

Interestingly all humans alive today come from the same grandmother 60.000 years ago in Africa. Whatever our skin color is, our religious believes, or cultural habits, we are all a big family of human beings. We are all related, living on this amazing Earth, which from the moon is viewed as one big, beautiful, blue planet floating in space without any borders. Yet, our analytical and dialectic minds have created borders together with fear, greed, and the need for power.

In my experience from traveling around the world, visiting over 100 countries, I have always had the experienced of a heart to heart connection with the local people after having spent some time with them, either with pigeon english, eye contacts, laughs or interactive activities. Back in 1971 I took the Trans Siberian Railroad from Leningrad to Nakhodka, by the Japan Sea. Growing up in Sweden during the 50's and the Cold War, my impression of Russians was dark, gloomy and even scary, feeling threatened by their neighboring presence and a possible invasion. But, after spending a week on the train, sharing the cabins intimately with the Russian people, while interacting with them through sign languages, songs and chess games, my impressions changed dramatically. The Russian people were actually fun, passionate and very caring traveling companions. So, the analytical mind with its fears and expectations separates us, but the soul unites us.

I had another experience a few years ago criticizing a person I often saw at Yoga Conventions, who was always rubbing shoulders with Guruji, and acting "dorky". Well, a few years later I had the opportunity to spend 3 days with her as an assessor at the San Diego Assessment. During our weekend together I got to hear her life stories and challenges, and to my surprise my heart opened up with understanding and compassion for her. When I now see her, the judgements

are gone and what is left is just loving kindness. Our minds play unfortunate games that tear us apart, yet the soul brings us together.

Sadly to say, during my 45 years of studying Iyengar Yoga, I have also found that we Iyengar yoga students are some of the most judgemental of any people studying yoga in the world today. We often criticize yoga students from other methods, that their poses are bad, wrong or sloppy and that their yoga practice is less worthy. I myself am guilty of having had that judgement in the past, but I now try to shift my mind from judgement to active listening. It feels better to listen to people's needs and values and to experience that there are more than one way. We can "agree to disagree" with understanding, compassion and respect for all the different journeys of yoga that people are choosing for their own personal needs and abilities. Instead of criticizing other schools of yoga, I now often get inspiration from other methods for my own practice and teachings that are enhancing my own yoga journey!

CHANGE IN THE WORLD will not happen with PRAYER, but with ACTION

Currently we have a strong movement of discrimination growing rapidly in the States, and it's also happening in Europe, which is seriously harmful and will most likely lead to more conflict, violence and maybe another big war if we don't wake up.... and grow up.

As I mentioned, we all come from the same grandmother 60.000 years ago. We are all related, even with different skin colors, different life styles and different Gods. Underneath the skin color we are exactly the same humans with the same organs, nervous system, and mental capabilities. And all the religions in the world in essence preach the same core values of loving kindness, forgiveness, care and respect, and to honor the divine essence permeating all of life. I now believe that this is a very critical and important time in history that we humans need to grow up and learn to listen to each other's needs and values even more than ever. Instead of discriminating people with darker color, different religious beliefs or political views, we need to open our hearts with Ahimsa; with understanding and respect and to honor each other's inherited qualities, needs, belief systems and life choices. There is more than one way and we can "agree to disagree" to invite a more civilized, harmonious and cooperative relationship within our families and communities, but also greater cooperation between different countries on our little, blue planet floating in space. I also believe that we yoga people now have a big responsibility with our practice rooted in Ahimsa to speak up and become a strong force to help awaken an awareness of acceptance, respect and cooperation in the world today. The Dalai Lama recently said that change in the world will not happen with prayer, but with action.

Ahimsa also relates to how we treat or mistreat our natural world, and all other living creatures on Earth. Vimala Thakar, in her Glimpses of Raja Yoga, sums up beautifully the essence of Ahimsa in these words:

When you are dedicated to the awareness of the wholeness of Life, to the inter-relatedness of everything you see in life, naturally your life becomes a dedication to Ahimsa, or non-killing, non-violence. That becomes a value of your life, it becomes a demonstration that you do not hurt anyone intentionally; you do not want to destroy anything or anyone. You want to have an intelligent, cooperative and harmonious relationship. Ahimsa is an intelligent, harmonious relationship. Harmony is the essence of non-violence.

(When the Indians use the word intelligent, it often means awareness.)

HARMONY IS THE ESSENCE OF NON-VIOLENCE

So, what does Vimala mean with "inter-connected, inter-being"? Well, we have 76 trillion cells in our body and all our cells are recycled! Some cells are recycled every day like the skin cells, some every 3 months like the red blood cells, and some every few years like the bone cells. Our cells in the body are continually being recycled from what we eat, drink and breathe daily. The calcium in the broccoli you or somebody ate yesterday might have been broken down in the soil for many years with the help of worms and other critters. In turn the calcium molecules originally might have come from mouse dead in the ground a year ago or a dinosaur a million years ago, giving you calcium and strength in your legs today to walk around freely thanks to the worms, mouse and the dinosaur. We are all interconnected with nature. When we pollute our earth, food, water and air with harmful chemicals, we create violence to the earth. And when we pollute the earth, we pollute our own bodies. We create violence to our bodies with harmful and destructive chemicals. We are not separate beings, but inter-connected with the entire nature around us in every way.

WHEN WE HARM NATURE, WE HARM GOD

For many years we humans thought we could just throw toxic wastes into the earth, rivers, air and our oceans and it would disappear magically and not effect us. As technology is continually advancing to expand corporate productivity, profit, and our comfort of living, the technology also brings with it an increase in toxic chemicals that are now seeping into our soil, food, water, and air in an alarming quantity. This toxic contamination have escalated out of control and is now creating greater harm to nature, animals and are also harming the health and future of our human lives. For example, the oil and plastic revolution are now beginning to show its harmful effects, with billion of gallons of oil transported in pipelines leaking into the soil here in the US, Fracking poisoning our waters, plastic containers accumulating on beaches and ending up in the stomachs of sea lives and shore birds. There is now an island of plastic floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean the size of Texas! And a study recently said in the year 2050 there will be more plastic in our oceans than fish! Current research is now revealing that many of our plastic containers for food and the plastic bottles for water also leek toxic and harmful chemicals into our daily food and water consumption. Our modern technology and addiction to oil and plastic is gradually harming and causing more and more violence to our lives. We already know that the exhaust from our oil driven cars is adding to global warming and destruction to our future life on earth. It is now time to leave the oil in the ground and to invest in alternative energy sources.

So, what are we to do? And how does this all relate to our yoga practice? Well, it won't matter how many dog-poses or drop backs we do daily to be healthy and happy, if the water, air, and food we eat are toxic to our health and future. As mindful yogis, I believe we now have the responsibility to speak up strongly to our politicians and corporations, both locally and globally, to demand clean, safe and healthy water, air and food. We need to demand Ahimsa; a more cooperate, intelligent and harmonious relationship with nature and with all living creatures to promote a more sustainable life on earth for us, for our children and future generations. There are certainly more intelligent alternatives available to divert us away from our addiction to oil and plastic that we now need to research and implement towards a more sustainable relationship with the earth. We are not separate, but interconnected with nature. And the essence of nature

is within us. I love what the Pope recently said in an interview: "When we harm nature, we harm God!"

ALIGNMENT is AHIMSA

Well, if we want more Ahimsa in the world it starts with our own practice. How we practice yoga on our mat is a mirror and a reflection on how we live our daily lives. Let's see how we can awaken a genuine experience of Ahimsa in our yoga practice. In Iyengar Yoga we use three qualities that enhance the experience and the expression of Ahimsa. They are *Alignment*, *Action* and *Breath*. First, the focus on *Alignment* is simply physics. It's the science in how to stack up the bones in harmony with the force of gravity to create a balanced muscular support to all the joints in the body. When the alignment is off, there is an imbalance in the muscles supporting the joints, creating wear and tear, strain and pain and violence to the body. Most back, neck, knee and shoulder problems are due to an imbalance in the muscles supporting the joints. When you focus on alignment, you naturally strengthen the weak muscles and stretch the tight ones to invite balance, health and healing. You invite Ahimsa into your back, neck, knees and shoulders. Learning to use your body in the yoga poses with this profound awareness of alignment, will also enhance your daily activities and athletic sports, like walking, running or skiing with a more balanced posture that will improve your performances and create less violence to your body. And when you focus on the alignment in each yoga pose, it also sharpens the skills of concentration by quieting the mind, cultivating the power of listening. It's like a mantra that brings you into the Presence of Now.

Second, in each yoga pose we focus on the *Action*, which is a movement with a counter movement, and a trademark of Iyengar Yoga. A dynamic action creates flexibility with stability and a balanced space and support to the spine, neck, knees and shoulder joints. Any imbalances in the muscles are caused by a compression, which Gururji's used to call the "dark areas" in our body. The dynamic action creates balance, space and freedom for the circulation to move freely, energizing the dark areas with fresh blood, nutrients and healing power. Also by mindfully focusing on an action in a yoga asana, you can't daydream or plan your shopping list. Instead it sharpens the skill of concentration, (Dharana) by quieting the monkey mind and cultivating the Art of Listening, the gateway to Ahimsa.

THE BODY IS A LIVING ORGANISM THAT CHANGES FROM DAY TO DAY

Last in each yoga pose we integrate a conscious awareness of the *Breath*. With each inhalation you invite fresh oxygen and life force to all the 76 trillion cells, and each exhalation releases carbon dioxide, toxins and tensions out of the body. This mindful integration of a relaxed breath in each yoga pose brings about a harmonious balance between "effort and letting go", or Abhyasa and Vairagya. When the breath is strained and labored it's a sign that there is too much force. People often injure themselves in yoga poses, when there is too much mental expectation of achieving a desired result. I recently had that experience myself in a workshop straining my knee while forcing my legs into a lotus pose after a long week of biking, expecting my legs to go into its usual easy lotus position. I was not listening! Live and learn!! So, the body is not a machine, but a living organism that changes from day to day depending on what you did yesterday, or didn't do, your body rhythms, the stars or just simply aging. Instead of being a "pusher", expecting greedy results, we cultivate the "Power of Listening", quieting the monkey mind and letting our inner voice, our inner guru, guide us to our happy edge, breath by breath,

moment by moment. There is nothing magic about a finished yoga pose. The power in our yoga practice is exploring our happy edge in each asana with the balance of effort and letting to awaken our hidden potentials of health, positive transformation and a Presence of Mind.

Injured areas in your body also need extra Ahimsa. And I am giving my knee extra love and care currently to invite healing. We often get frustrated with any strain or injuries in the body when they occur, or get afraid and resist them. Instead, an injured area in your body needs extra care daily, using your inner guide with confidence to invite health and healing. I tell my students that I have healed all my past injuries to my back, knees and shoulders with my ears, and their eyebrows always go up! So, I am using my ears daily now with the power of listening to help heal my poor knee!! It is my passion as a yoga teacher to also help my students develop their own power of listening, to trust their own inner healer using all the wide variety of yoga asanas, breath and awareness.

ONLY BY LOVING YOUR BODY, CAN YOU TRULY TRANSFORM AND HEAL

Another way that we habitually cultivate violence on the yoga mat is with our criticism. Have you ever criticized the way your body looks in comparison with other bodies in class? Or have you ever compared yourself with other bodies abilities and criticized your own inadequacy? Any criticism is violence to yourself and to others. Instead it's important to reflect that your body is a unique "heirloom" that you have inherited for thousands of generations, with individual needs and abilities that you are now enhancing, giving your body loving care daily with your yoga poses, breath and mindful living. They say only by loving your body, can you truly transform and heal. I know it's not always easy to love our own bodies, but it's essential for a genuine experience and expression of Ahimsa.

The wonderful Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Thich Nathan Hahn once said:

Only by loving ourselves can we truly love others. And only by forgiving ourselves can we love ourselves, and only by forgiving others can we express genuine love and care.

It's important to forgive ourselves for any abuse, misuse or neglect that we have brought upon ourselves or others and to welcome each new day as the beginning of the rest of our life with love in our hearts.

So, the, understanding and forgiveness seems to be the key to Ahimsa, to cultivating an intelligent, cooperative and harmonious relationship with ourselves on the yoga mat, in parenting, marriage, with our co-workers, neighbor's, neighboring countries and with all living things as life continually changes and evolves.

We yogis use our bodies in the yoga asanas to cultivate the , which is a gateway to Meditation and a gateway to our Soul and to the Soul of life. And when we chant AOM in the beginning of our yoga practice it's a vehicle to connect us with the Core of our Being. AOM is the sound of the universe that permeates all beings and living things always seeking balance, harmony and peace, Ahimsa. When we chant AOM it connects us with our innate intelligence that is always within us with a pure experience of Ahimsa.

And at the end of each yoga class we say, "Namaste", which in essence means, "the Light in me Honors the Light in you", whatever your skin color, religious or political preference, lifestyle or path of yoga you prefer.....

.....THE LIGHT IN ME HONORS THE LIGHT IN YOU♥

Love is listening. When we listen we have to let go of all criticism, otherwise we are not truly listening. Listen with intuition. Swami Radha.

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.* Martin Luther King Jr.

