

Reflections on a Culture of Peace
The Role of Yogic Values in Promoting a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence

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Good afternoon, and Namaste! It is truly an honor and a privilege to be invited to speak at the United Nations on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the *Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace*. It is a particular honor to speak about the role of Yogic values in promoting a culture of peace and nonviolence. This is a topic to which I have dedicated much of my scholarship over the course of my career: a career which happens to coincide with the twenty-year period we are celebrating today.

Specifically, my work has focused on the role that the philosophies of India—philosophies such as Vedanta and Jainism—can play in rethinking how we human beings approach religious and cultural differences. All too often, such differences are used to justify the violence and dehumanization of the Other that continues to plague human life across the globe. If we can begin, as a species, to conceptualize religious, cultural, and philosophical difference, not as a threat to our own way of thinking and living, but as a source of wisdom that can supplement and deepen our own approach to truth, whatever it may be, then perhaps we can begin to view our neighbors not as rivals, or as people whose beliefs are false or dangerous, but as potential teachers who can share with us some part of the universal wisdom with which we are as yet unfamiliar, and with whom we can also share our own understanding of truth, not in an effort to proselytize or to convert, but to advance knowledge for the benefit of all. This is the vision found in the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna, when he says, *yato mat, tato path*—Each religion is a path to the Infinite—and in the famous teaching of the *R̥g Veda*, *ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti*: Truth is one; the wise speak of it in various ways. It is enshrined in the Jain doctrines of *anekānt* and *syādvāda*, and in the teaching of the Buddha's skillful means, in which the way to enlightenment is presented in many ways, according to the needs of each spiritual seeker.

When we speak of Yogic values that might promote a culture of nonviolence and world peace, to what are we referring? One way to answer this question is to turn to the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali. The values expressed in this text are clearly enumerated in the *yamas* and *niyamas*, or injunctions for Yogic living, which make up the first two of the eight limbs of the Yoga that Patañjali taught. These begin, not accidentally, with *ahiṃsā*, which is not simply nonviolence, but the absence of even the desire to let any living being come to harm. It is, in other words, nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. And it does not simply refer to avoiding active harm against living beings, while otherwise remaining indifferent to them. *Ahiṃsā* is the desire to ensure that all living beings live happily and free from fear of injury. Next comes *satya*, or truth. After the well-being of all, one who is committed to the Yogic path values truth above everything else. This value commits one to a spirit of open inquiry and to the scientific method, and to rejecting all forms of obfuscation or

misdirection. After truth comes non-stealing. This value, like nonviolence and truth, commits one not only to avoiding thievery in the obvious sense, but also to taking only as much from the earth as it can sustain. Unbridled greed robs future generations of the resources they will need to survive, and is thus, itself, a form of violence. After non-stealing comes *brahmacharya*, or self-restraint, particularly in the realm of sexuality, which is followed by *aparigraha*, or non-possessiveness. Overall, the values one finds expressed in the *yamas* of Patañjali amount to a commitment to truth, and to not allowing one's own selfish desires to impinge upon the well-being of others.

Similarly, in the *niyamas*, we find virtues expressed and practices cultivated that, if they were to be promoted globally, would certainly diminish our human tendency to impose our will on others and to do harm both to one another and to our physical environment. First, there is *śauca*, or self-purification. This refers to maintaining a clean environment, both inwardly and outwardly. Then there is *santośa*, or contentment. Contentment is followed by *tapas*, or self-discipline, which is in turn followed by *svadhyāya*, or self-study. Finally, there is *Īśvara praṇidhāna*, or 'contemplation of the Lord.' In our diverse world, of many religious belief systems, and of many philosophies which are non-religious in nature, 'the Lord' need not be taken to refer to any particular vision or concept of the Supreme Being. It can refer, rather, to whatever is of greatest value to us: the ideal which motivates us most deeply. This is the idea, also found in Patañjali's text, of the *iṣṭa devata*, or 'chosen deity.' The practice of *Īśvara praṇidhāna* invites us to ask ourselves, "Who or what is the lord of my life? What matters to me more than anything else?" Patañjali composed his *Yoga Sūtra* in the religiously pluralistic environment of ancient India, and his system of Yoga lends itself to being practiced by persons with a wide array of religious beliefs and commitments. For some, *Īśvara* might mean Lord Śiva. For others, it might mean Lord Viṣṇu. For others still, it could mean one of the many Buddhas or Jinas of the Buddhist or Jain traditions. For some today, it might mean any of these things, or it might refer to other concepts of divinity from other traditions, other ideas of God, or to an abstract ideal of truth. For some, it may refer to humanity itself.

The Yogic values enumerated by Patañjali are not simply ends in themselves. They are cultivated with the ultimate aim of achieving *samādhi*, or complete transcendence: a state of total absorption in the object of one's contemplation. Some might well question the value of a practice aimed at transcendence for the improvement of life here and now, in the material world, where humanity struggles, and where the United Nations seeks to do its work of nurturing a culture of world peace. In response, I would cite Swami Vivekananda, one of the first historical figures to promote Yogic values on a global scale. In his lectures on Karma Yoga, the Yoga of Action, Vivekananda says that there is really nothing we can do to help the world. The world, he says, is like a dog's curly tail. We can try to straighten it out all we like, but it will still return to its previous shape, despite all our efforts, the moment we let it go. This may not seem like an encouraging message for those of us who are committed to making the world a better place. But that is not all Vivekananda has to say on this subject. He goes on to say that the *effort* to make the world better, if pursued with an attitude not of arrogance, but of selfless service, is an ideal way to transform ourselves. He then

says, “The world is a grand moral gymnasium, wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually.” (CW 1:80) The problems of the world are exercise equipment. Through our attempts to solve them, we transform and improve ourselves. And indeed, it is not that there is any single problem in the world that is irresolvable. But with each problem we solve come new ones. This is the meaning of the image of the curly tail of the dog. Life itself, to quote Swami Atmarupananda, is problem-solving. Transcendence is to be found not in abandoning the world, but in facing its problems honestly, in a spirit of what we could paradoxically call passionate detachment: passionate in being fully engaged with addressing the problems at hand, but detached inasmuch as we rest assured in the confidence that no problem, however formidable, can destroy the spiritual essence of our being, which, the sages tell us, is infinite.

In what other ways can Yogic values inform our promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence? If we can continue expanding our exploration of these values beyond the *Yoga Sūtras*, Yogic values are the values of the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions, as well as other traditions which have informed and been informed by the Yogic quest. Again, in the philosophies of all of these varied traditions can be found wisdom with the power to transform how we see one another. The Jain teaching of *anekānt*, or the complexity of truth, affirms that reality has many facets, and that many, seemingly contradictory visions of truth can be reconciled in a larger vision of reality, in which they are seen not as contradictory, but as complementary. This is the gist of the ancient Indian parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. In the Vedāntic teaching of the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, we are taught that divinity is in all beings. We should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated because, at the highest level, they *are* ourselves. This is the meaning of the traditional Indian greeting, *Namaste*: that I honor the divinity that resides within you. The *Gītā* also teaches that many paths can lead to realization of our divine nature. As Lord Krishna says, in words cited by Swami Vivekananda in his famous welcome speech at the 1893 Parliament of Religions, “In whatever ways living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths lead to me.” (BG 4:11)

May the Yogic values of pluralism, of loving detachment, and of seeing the divinity in all continue to inform our efforts to cultivate a culture of peace and nonviolence everywhere in this world!