

Unlocking the Secret Power of Yoga An Interview with Nischala Devi

Nischala Devi's book, The Secret Power of Yoga, reinterprets Patanjali's Yoga Sutras for our modern times and from a woman's perspective. She views the path of Raja Yoga as a path with eight facets that are interconnected and interwoven. In this interview, she shines a light on the five yamas, illuminating what can happen when we live our lives according to our divine essence and higher nature.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): You've studied the *Yoga Sutras* since 1973. How has your relationship with the *Yoga Sutras*, and specifically the *yamas*, evolved over the years?

Nischala Devi (ND): The *Yoga Sutras* are my love. I started teaching Raja Yoga in 1974 and, at that time, I taught them according to how I had been taught. Gradually, how I had been taught, merged with my inner experience in meditation, but I didn't have the courage to start expressing them in that way. Quite a few years later, I started to teach the *Yoga Sutras* again, yet in a new and different way—perhaps a more heart-centered way. Students responded with so much encouragement that it encouraged me to start writing down some of the ways I was experiencing the *sutras*.

When I first began to study the *yamas*, I read them as “nons”: non-violence, non-stealing and so on. I thought of the *yamas* as restraints, as negatives. Now, I prefer to approach them from a place of what to do vs. what not to do. I like to reflect on them in a way that asks, “What can I do to improve and to find my own heart in this?”

This is so important, because the old world concept is that we're bad people and we need scriptures to tell us how to be good so we can realize who we are. But, that's not the way I look at life or scriptures. Scriptures can be a reminder of who we are. We can utilize them to remember who we are and how we behaved when we remember who we are. When you know who you are, you have love and reverence for everyone. Maybe you've forgotten that, so go back. I think this is a very important concept: We don't need to change the essence of who we are, we just need to remember. Our essence is already divine, we just have to remember that and live accordingly.

IYM: Sometimes the *yamas* and *niyamas* are referred to as the “Ten Commandments” of Yoga.

ND: I don't think of them as commandments but as an inspired offering. When the biblical Ten Commandments were given, the people they were given to were in a very confused state. They forgot who they were in their essence and they were doing things that took them further away from that. That's not a judgment, but rather a statement about the time during which the Commandments were given. The *yamas* and *niyamas* came to us during the *Satya Yuga*, an age when truthfulness and goodness reigned. It was a time when people knew who they were. When we study the *yamas* and *niyamas* we're essentially considering how to live if we are divine beings.

IYM: Do scriptures need to change with the times?

ND: All scriptures have to change with time—not so much what they say, but the way they are approached and interpreted. For example, Patanjali took the philosophy and truths contained in the **VEDAS**, *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and simplified them; he reinterpreted them for what he saw as the needs of that time. He was a true reformer. I think we need to do that to keep our scriptures alive. Otherwise, they become stone rather than living scriptures.

IYM: How do you interpret *ahimsa*?

ND: *Ahimsa* doesn't pertain just to acts of physical violence, but includes the words we use, our thoughts (**OUT and non-violence**) not just toward humans but toward everything in creation. Do we think of ourselves as people with reverence and love for all or do we see ourselves as violent by nature and we try to curb that violence through *ahimsa*? When the Dalai Lama was asked about his religion, he said, “My religion is kindness.” He's very aware of the essence of *ahimsa*.

The *yamas* reflect our true nature—our inner and outer true nature, meaning inward to ourselves and outward toward others. *Ahimsa*, to me, is about embracing reverence and love for all, including ourselves. Bathing ourselves in love and compassion, letting go of guilt and shame, is important and it reminds us of who we are inside: divine beings. Look at our bodies: the coronary arteries feed the heart. The oxygenated blood first goes into the heart. That means that the heart feeds itself first so it can nourish the rest of the body. I don't think we really understand that—that's the heart of Karma Yoga. When we have love and reverence for ourselves, we can have it for all, we sanctify every moment and we

can experience oneness.

I'm reminded of Oprah Winfrey's close friend Gayle King, who once was asked about what it felt like living in Oprah's shadow. Gayle replied, "Why does everyone think I live in her shadow? I live in her light." *Ahimsa* is about reflecting back the light in others as well as in ourselves. This takes *ahimsa* out of the arena of non-violence and non-harming and places it in the realm of seeing others as ourselves. That takes us back to the *Satya Yuga*, to higher consciousness, and that's what *ahimsa* really is to me.

IYM: What do you mean by **HAVING REVERENCE AND LOVE** (OUT non-violence) toward *everything*?

ND: I give an example in my book about an experience I had when traveling with Sri Gurudev many years ago. We arrived at the talk and someone opened the car door for Gurudev. After he got out of the car, the person then slammed the door shut. Gurudev stopped, turned around and asked the person to apologize to the car. Thinking he was joking, she smiled and was about to walk on when he asked her, "Don't you realize what service this car has done for us? Without its assistance we wouldn't be able to come this distance. It has brought us here safely and in comfort. For that service you, thoughtlessly, have slammed its door and cause the whole car to vibrate and be hurt." The cars I drive, even today, still benefit from this great lesson of long ago.

IYM: What is *satya*?

ND: When we are dedicated to truth and integrity, our thoughts, words and actions gain the power to manifest. Real truth is not something that varies. It is in everyone. The problem comes when we try to express it. I say, "This is the truth," and another says, "No, this is the truth." How do we access the truth? We need to go within and feel it; that's the *shakti* of the truth. The power of truth is created through the alchemy of personal integrity, knowledge and humility. If someone says something to you, you feel it in your body as truth or not, more quickly than the mind can grasp it. Have you noticed that? Remember a time when you read something that was very beautiful. Maybe it resonated with you and you even felt tears come to your eyes. There's a blessing of the heart when you are in truth.

I always tell people that in order to lie, you have to have a very good memory, but to tell the truth you don't. Trying to hold onto a lie is not easy—it's almost like the whole world is there to expose you. Lying slowly erodes your whole integrity. There's

a lot being said about transparency. I don't understand how people don't realize that others see it when we're not being authentic. I always go back to the visceral feeling when someone says something that's true and they don't have to convince you of it. Transparency is important in everything we do.

There's a Sufi saying that's a favorite of mine: "Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?" That is the *tapas* of speech: being able to discern if something is beneficial to someone. *Satya* is a way of expressing the truth—whether through words, thoughts or actions— that has a soothing, rather than agitating effect. When you listen to someone speaking with integrity, there's a feeling you get. Great teachers help us to know what truth and integrity is. By hearing them, we feel in our bodies where that resonates, and that helps us to find the truth and integrity within ourselves. It's very powerful.

Swami Sivananda said that our words are like a bird and our teeth like the cage. If we let the bird fly away, we can never get it back. That's why, when someone says, "I'm sorry I said that, please forgive me," the apology may be accepted but the sting and hurt of those words can last for years and years. People on their death beds often recount a painful thing someone said to them. We have the saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never harm me" but it's not true. Sometimes harsh words last longer than an injury from sticks and stones.

IYM: How can we tell the truth yet **STILL HOLD TRUE TO AHIMSA, REVERENCE AND LOVE FOR ALL** (OUT-be non-harming)?

ND: Let's take an example of someone who comes up to a friend and says, "How do you like my new dress?" You may think, "That's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." If you are striving to practice *satya*, **WOULD** (OUT-should) you say that?" You're supposed to tell the truth, right? Stop for a moment. Ask yourself, "What are the consequences of telling her *my* truth at the moment? It will ruin her evening, but I don't want to lie either." What would you do? Swami Vivekananda said, "When in doubt, always go with *ahimsa*." You could say: "You always look beautiful" or "The color is lovely." You can always find something that's your truth without harming the person.

I think we get caught up in the truth when we're actually dumping on people. There's ways to speak the truth in love and *ahimsa* and that's a gift of *satya*. Someone truly established in *satya* and *ahimsa* can say anything to anyone and not hurt the person. Also, on the flip side, there are some who even in giving a compliment can hurt someone. One of my favorite quotes from Maya Angelou

is, “Most people will not remember what you said, or what you did, but they will remember how you made them feel.”

IYM: What distinguishes *asteya* from *aparigraha*?

ND: When we abide in generosity and honesty, material and spiritual prosperity are bestowed. In some ways, *asteya* and *aparigraha* are close. I translate *aparigraha* as, acknowledging abundance and *asteya* as abiding in generosity. *Asteya* is often translated as non-stealing. Why do we steal? We feel lack. The best way to get over feeling lack is to be generous. There’s a story about Mother Teresa giving a talk to a group of wealthy women about her charities. They could afford to give generously in support of her charities. At the end of her talk, Mother told the women, “I want you to open your pocketbooks and get out your checkbooks. But before you write the amount, I want you to make sure it hurts a little.” Their idea is that the more we give, the more generous we are, is how we get over the idea of lack. The more we give, the more nature brings back to us. When we’re not bound by the idea of loss, we realize that everything comes and goes. To everything there is a season, as the *Bible* says.

Gurudev always said that his culture, the Indian culture, taught him that “The guest is God.” Give the guest whatever you have even if you don’t have much to give. Many years ago, we were invited to Russia (then, the Soviet Union), to share Yoga with those who were trying to learn and there weren’t many Yoga teachers there at the time from whom to learn. We were invited to homes of people who had stood in line to get us food and, in doing so, they had used up their monthly ration coupons. Knowing this, I made sure to eat before I went so I wouldn’t take too much of their food. But, they soon became insulted and wanted me to eat more. That’s generosity.

IYM: We can get so attached to material things.

ND: Gurudev used to always tell us that the more “mines” we keep around us, the more explosions! We attach strong pronouns to our things as if we have control over them. “It’s *my* house.” Can you move *your* house to Florida for the winter? If you sell your house and the new owners move in, will you be offended if they change the wall color, the carpet?

But, *asteya* is not just about material things. It’s also about generosity of the heart—giving of your time and heart. Giving of yourself, being generous with your time, helps bring you back to your own heart. And, speaking of time, *asteya*

also relates to showing up on time when you have an appointment. It means that you give your full attention to the person you're with. Imagine you are talking on the phone with someone and while doing so, an email arrives. Where does your attention go? To the email? If so, that's not *asteya*. We can give generous gifts in many ways, including giving someone our full attention. **(OUT-I've got a) A** dear friend in Thailand who years ago, when he didn't have a car, would take a taxi. It would cost him the equivalent of \$2 to take the taxi and he'd give the taxi driver \$5. I once remarked, "Wow, that's a big tip." He replied, "Yes, did you see his face? The whole day he'll be happy now. It was worth the \$3 just to see his face." What an example of *asteya*, of generosity. Do you know what Swami Sivananda was often called? Swami Givananda.

IYM: What are the benefits of *brahmacharya*?

ND: When you are devoted to living a balanced and moderate life, the scope of one's life force becomes boundless. I love approaching the *yamas* in this way. Can you feel how life-affirming and empowering, rather than contracting, they are? *Brahmacharya* is one of the messages of the *Gita*, which Swami Sivananda summed up in his song, *The Yoga of Synthesis*:

*Eat a little, drink a little,
Talk a little, sleep a little,
Mix a little, move a little,
Serve a little, rest a little
Work a little, relax a little,
Study a little, worship a little,
Do asanas a little, pranayamas a little,
Reflect a little, meditate a little,
Do japa a little, do kirtan a little,
Write mantra a little, have satsanga a little.
Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize.
Be good, do good; Be kind, Be compassionate.
Enquire 'Who am I?' Know the Self and be free.*

All the Yoga teachings are about balance—the glorious dance between our divine and human nature. Each step is fueled by the vital energy that is generated as we emulate rather than resist nature’s beautiful patterns. We need to let go of this idea that we constantly have to restrain ourselves in order to be spiritual beings. That’s not the only way to find your spirit. Some people dance and sing to find their spirit. We can get into this contracted, limited mindset: “Only if I am a celibate monk, eat one meal a day, or do this or that, then I’ll be a spiritual person.” Sometimes these seemingly highly disciplined seekers are the most miserable people. Spirituality is all about *joie de vivre*, it’s about being expansive.

We don’t have to let go of discipline or structure, but within that there’s an expansiveness that should evolve. In modern society it’s challenging and we tend to overindulge. Then, we put unrealistic restraints on ourselves, which makes me laugh, because it’s either feast or famine! Some go out with various sexual partners and then are celibate. What about having one partner? When you invest time and energy in a relationship and really sharing yourself with someone, you learn so much about yourself.

IYM: How can we respect our vital energy and not repress our sexual energy?

ND: We have to respect our vital energy. We tend to think, “I’m tired, I’ll have coffee.” We don’t realize something isn’t right with our energy. If you eat moderately, live moderately, we’ll wake up refreshed. But instead, we do too much. We eat too much, watch TV too much and constantly deplete our energy. Then, we wonder why we don’t have the energy to meditate and remember who we are. This is purpose of *brahmacharya*—to respect our vital energy and to have a lightness and happiness about us.

We can’t repress sexual energy without it coming out in other ways. One of the most detrimental consequences of pushing away or denying nature is that we then separate spirit from nature. Or, we go to the other extreme and just indulge our “human nature.” Instead, we should feel that Yoga is about our human and spiritual nature entwined. There’s a beautiful chant: “*Radhe, Radhe, Radhe Govinda bolo!* Spirit and nature dancing together.” Remember, it’s human connection that brings us back to our spirit!

The more that we respect and esteem this vital energy within us, the more humbled we are and we realize that energy is there to create another human being. How powerful that is!

IYM: Now, we come to the last *yama*, *aparigraha*.

ND: When we acknowledge abundance, we recognize the blessings in everything and gain insights into the purpose for our worldly existence. It makes me relax just saying that. *Aparigraha* clears the way. We worry about so many things and when we're worried, we're not clear. People are always asking themselves, "What am I doing here, what's my purpose?" If you can remove the worry about having enough, you soon realize your purpose is what you are doing at the moment. Here we are. This is what we are doing. The ultimate ideal is that we remember who we are. In that remembering we know this is the purpose and there isn't something else we're supposed to do.

I call it the secret of earthly life: to find the blessing and gratitude in every moment. Rather than greed, we're thinking about the blessings in the moment. Rather than worrying that something will run out, that our good karma will run out, count your blessings! I love reading historical novels. I'm always amazed that in those days, there was no warm bathroom to walk into with a thermostat to adjust and hot water to run. They had to draw the water, heat the water—and that was the wealthy! Just recognizing all that we have, brings about an awareness of abundance. Most of us can walk into the kitchen after we get up in the morning, go to our full fridges and ask ourselves, "What should I eat today?" How blessed we are!

IYM: What about how much we hoard and how much we waste?

ND: A powerful word we don't use is: enough—I have enough. I am enough. Most of us say, "More, more." Then we get bogged down in the clutter of our lives because we want more. Live within your means. Don't spend more than you have. We're in a credit card nation that worries how to pay the bills. Most people are in huge credit card debt. That's not living in abundance, it's living in lack. The statistics are staggering. The other part is how much we waste, which is against *aparigraha*. We brush our teeth and let the water run, we throw out food because we bought too much or cooked too much. We put too much on our plates and it affects our health. All this affects us and the whole planet.

We buy a dress for one occasion, wear it and then keep it in case we might need it someday. But, we never wear it again and, years later, there it still hangs in the closet. Give it to someone else. There are so many charities that give clothing to those in need. One of best things you can do is to go in your closet, take things out and give them to those in need.

There are other aspects of *aparigraha* that are easy to overlook. For example, our thoughts and ideas are things we can hoard. How much are you able to allow your opinion to change? The abundance of thoughts and ideas can't come through if you're not open to change. It's very difficult for people to change and harder to let someone else change. We also tend to think of ideas as ours. I thought of this, it's my idea. Instead, why not feel that ideas are flowing through you from the universe and offer them for the benefit of all?

There's a beautiful quote from the *Gita* that I included in my book and is so inspiring to me. Perhaps the perfect closing to this interview:

“What is it that you lost that you are grieving for? What is it that you brought into this world that you have lost? Whatever you gained, you gained from this world. Whatever you lost, you lost to this world. What belongs to you today, belonged to someone else yesterday and will belong to someone else tomorrow.” ~Bhagavad Gita

Nischala Joy Devi was graced to spend over twenty-five years as a monastic disciple of Sri Gurudev, receiving his direct guidance and teachings. Her landmark research in pioneering Yoga for life-threatening diseases, Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease and Commonwealth Cancer Help Program, culminated in the creation of her Yoga of the Heart® certification course for teachers and health professionals. She now serves as a member of the Advisory Counsel for the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Author of several CDs, and the books, The Healing Path of Yoga and The Secret Power of Yoga, A Woman's Guide to the Heart and Spirit of the Yoga Sutras, Nischala Devi's teachings reflect a heart-centered perspective of spirituality and scripture. For more information, please visit: www.abundantwellbeing.com.