Yoga and Alignment

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From the Upanishads to B.K.S. Iyengar

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6474-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6474-9

This book is dedicated to the memory of Sri Krishan Mantri

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Senior Commissioning Editor, Rebecca Gladders and the team at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their support in the publication of this work. They would also like to express their appreciation to editor Kerry Fast for her meticulous and dedicated work. Both authors would like to thank Kathryn Curtis for her contributions and dedication. This work was completed in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and our thanks go out to all the front line and health care professionals who allowed for some semblance of normality in the face of an unprecedented challenge to us all.

Although it is not customary to thank your co-author, Gitte and Gillian wish to express their gratitude for the work they have done together over many years. Since 2003 we have taught at Vidya Institute, and written, envisioned and created curriculum together. Both personally and professionally this relationship has been a tremendous gift. We deeply value our friendship, and feel grateful for the many ways that we share in this journey.

Gillian would like to express her gratitude to Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell who introduced her to the field of South Asian religion and who completely transformed her ideas about spiritual practice. I also wish to thank Shivaram who has been a mentor and teacher for many years. I would also like to express my gratitude to Sri Krishan Mantriji for his teachings,

inspiration and support. He imagined this book, and larger work, long before we did. I would finally like to thank my family and friends for their support, interest and encouragement.

Gitte Bechsgaard would like to express her gratitude to her teacher and mentor Sri Krishan Mantriji. Without his expert guidance, daily private teachings and blessings this work would never have been possible. You are in my heart every day. Your example, wisdom and generosity of heart will always be an inspiration to me.

Also, I wish to express my gratitude to Yoga Master Sri B.K.S Iyengar, who have taught me about the transformative and healing power of Yoga. To write about Yoga without the personal experience of sadhana would not have been possible for me. It is out of love for the practice, that this book has come in to being. I thank all the Iyengar yoga teachers who have shared with me over the last thirty years, and hope for many more years of Iyengar yoga sadhana together.

My appreciation must be expressed to all who assisted and supported me through the process surrounding this work. A special thank you goes out to my colleagues Gloria Goldberg, Sheila Haswell, Bharathi Venkatachalapathy and Michael Highburger. It has been an honour to teach and share together. And to Amy Renee, whose kindness, unfaltering support and vision has meant so much to me.

I must also thank the Vidya Institute team: Daniel Ruberto Bechsgaard, Leah Futalan and Katy Curtis. You saved the work at a very vulnerable point in time. Your committed intervention and unconditional support has been outstanding. I am forever grateful, and know in my heart of hearts, that Krishan Mantriji would have been as well. Truly, there has been no

challenge which you have not been able to face and overcome. Your integrity, steadfastness and dedication to the teachings have touched me profoundly. You have worked together in a beautiful manner, bringing your different skill sets and strength together. It has allowed me to write and teach, trusting in your overseeing many other tasks.

And to everyone at Quo Vadis in Tiruvannamalai, India. You opened your doors for me to come and stay and write at a crucial time. For two months you took care of me in a way that I never expected. A special thank you to Rev. Joshua Peter Annamalai and Mrs Shekinah Penita, and to the watchman. Also, Nikolaj Stubbe from the Brorsons Kirken in Denmark and Maria. Thank you. And to Michael, Kaya, Adeel, Janine and Nariman. Thank you for lending hands of support in your own unique ways.

Also, a profound thank you goes out to the many dedicated practitioners of yoga around the world. You are a true source of inspiration. Your commitment, sincerity and whole-hearted participation in the teachings have touched me deeply over these years. It is in many ways your questions and our dialogue together which have brought this book into being. Many of you have opened your doors, yoga-studios and hearts to me as I have travelled away from home. Your generosity will not be forgotten.

And last, but not least, I would like to thank my children Daniel Ruberto Bechsgaard and Maya Ruberto Bechsgaard. You are always in my heart, and I couldn't dream of a life without you. You have showed such resilience in these years, and I hope for so much joy and fun memories together in the coming years. And to my family in Denmark for always, and unconditionally, supporting my children and I. I have no words to

express what your love and example means. Before my Guru, I was taught by you in many more ways than words can express.

CHAPTER ONE

HIGHER LAW AND ALIGNMENT

Alignment is a foundational concept in the yoga tradition and is related to the ancient idea of sacred order. The word *rta* (order) appears in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest and most sacred writings of the Vedic tradition. Tripathi (2004) refers to *rta* as "the most fundamental and at the same time the most ancient concept of Indian thought" (vii). This principle of cosmic order is part of the structure of creation itself. We are told that at the very beginning of creation, "order [*rta*] and truth were born from heat as it blazed up" (*Rig Veda* 34.10.190). This description of structure emerging from primeval chaos establishes the vital blueprint for all philosophical thought that followed.

The assertion of an intrinsic and immutable pattern of order and meaning conditions all aspects of the cosmos. Connection to this sacred order is the basis of the created reality, and in order to thrive, it is necessary for human beings to align themselves with this order. From a spiritual standpoint, beliefs, behaviours, social and legal codes, rituals and ceremonies are all part of the larger set of practices and behaviours that make it possible for the individual to be in a living relationship with the sacred.

Rta is the source of natural law and its underpinning. It is also the root of the word *rtu*, the four seasons. Klostermaier (1994) describes it as "the

sequence of the seasons, which in their regularity embody constancy and lawfulness" (154). This foundational belief reflects the understanding that the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm. The laws that oversee cosmic order ensure the creation and maintenance of the world and the unfolding of the days, nights and seasons. These laws also directly impact human life and embodiment. According to the logic of Vedic thought, human flourishing can only come about through alignment with *rta* and natural law. This approach stands in direct contrast to the current North American obsession with the search for novelty and constant change.

An affinity with regularity, structure and order is accompanied by a parallel horror of the *anrta*, that which is "untrue" or "disordered" (Smith 1989, 17). The opposite of *rta* is agitation, disharmony and imbalance (Khanna 2004, 3), and no real health, be it physical, mental or emotional, can come from chaos or disorder.

The link between the divine and underlying structure is demonstrated in the figure of the god Varuna. The *deva* is described as being the guardian of *rta* and as the upholder of law, in the earliest scriptures. This intimate connection between the divine order and human life is depicted in a hymn that resonates thousands of years later. Suffering from a guilty conscience, the composer of the prayer pleads, "The mischief was not done by my own free will, Varuna; wine, anger, dice, or carelessness led me astray" (*Rig Veda* 114.7.86). The human tendency to fall out of alignment with higher law is depicted here in a way that remains clearly recognizable in the contemporary world.

The earliest forms of Vedic ritual were meant to bring the individual and community into alignment with the divine and subtle realms. In the

thousands of years of development of South Asian civilization, a wide of variety of techniques for remaining aligned have been developed including: worship, pilgrimage, participating in spiritual community, *mantra*, yoga, meditative practices, charitable giving and selfless service. All of these share the goal of creating and maintaining a clear and open channel between the individual and the divine.

From the Vedic period onward, it has been understood that one of the most important ways that human beings can remain connected with *rta* is through ritual practice (*sadhana*). Smith (1989) notes that while human beings have a biological birth they also have a religious birth; "the divine self is born out of the sacrifice" and is a "ritual construct" (116). This larger logic understands the person as being refined and developed over time. The maintaining of alignment with cosmic order is not a given but must be overseen by teachers, tradition, practice and custom and is an ongoing process through the different stages of life.

Rta is not a cold, rigid, authoritarian set of laws but contains within it the understanding that there is a meaning, purpose and pattern to the world. Knowing this results in unshakeable security and the recognition that one can rest in this pre-existing, supportive structure, not unlike being in a well-built and beautiful house—the design supports what goes on in the space.

A belief in *rta* does not mean that there is no room for spontaneity, creativity and improvisation. The dynamic relationship between structure and innovation is illustrated in the *ragas* of classical Indian music. A *raga* is a set pattern of notes but within this, musicians improvise on a theme.

The *raga* provides the skeleton for the players to flesh out as they please, expressing their individual creativity.

Satya, or truth, is closely allied with *rta*. It is an aspect of the divine characterized by the qualities of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. As Khanna (2004) writes, "*rta* and *satya* are two facets of the principle of order governing the outer cosmos and our inner reality" (2). To be truthful and to see things clearly and without illusion, is to be in harmony with *rta*. Sri Aurobindo (1990) refers to *satya* as "truth consciousness," the opposite of chaos, and describes it as a "guiding truth and harmonious self-vision" (143). There is a recognition, however, that the truth of a situation is not always clear. We can easily be misled by our own desires, wishes and the turbulence of our minds and feelings. This makes it necessary to consult scripture, observe the lives of saints and sages, and attempt to live a principled life.

Without an understanding of higher law, it is easy to fall into thinking that pursuing pleasure and our desires is the correct way forward. But what is pleasant and convenient is not always what is good in the long term and can result in behaviour that leads a person to act outside of *rta.* The power of discrimination is needed to live according to *rta* and discern the good from the pleasurable. This is described in the Upanishadic discussion of *sreyas* versus *preyas* which emphasizes the need to focus on the meaningful rather than the pleasant (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1989, 45).

To be aligned with *rta* is also to live in accordance with the rules of nature. There is a direct link between Ayurveda, the ancient healing system, and higher law—we become physically ill when we go against the iron-clad dictates of nature. The basic founding principle is logically echoed in all

aspects of life, evident in the fields of law, aesthetics, ritual practice, health and medicine.

There is an intrinsic connection between the self (*atman/purusha*) and the divine, between oneself and nature and between oneself and other living beings. While this alignment doesn't guarantee a carefree and easy existence, it does ensure that the individual and society function in agreement with higher law. Just as telling the truth isn't always comfortable or appreciated, it is at the same time right and allows for a sense of stability and groundedness. It functions as a true-north no matter what the challenges are either internally or externally.

Rta stands in contrast to many secular philosophies that have gained in popularity in the Western world, such as postmodernism where each person has to establish their own meaning in a fragmented and random world. In contrast, as Khanna (2004) writes, *rta* assumes a "universe [that] is not amorphous and inconsistent but a harmonious and ordered whole" (2). This understanding is anchored in a sense of pattern and order that supports all aspects of both individual and collective life.

The concept of *rta* can be understood as the blueprint that orders communal life. This principle is foundational to the well being of the individual who can feel secure and grounded knowing that they exist in a meaningful and ordered world. The necessity of inner stability is recognized within Western psychology, and as Westen (1985) writes, the "inability to form a coherent set of ideals and commitments renders one less able to carry out stable plans and long-term goals, which in turn produces a subjective sense of incoherence" (376). It is not difficult to see that a belief in *rta* provides an unshakeable sense of structure and order

that is immoveable and unchangeable. This understanding offers a form of inner and outer stability that allows individuals and societies to thrive.

Based on the foundational principle of *rta*, the Vedic tradition has developed a multitude of paths, scriptures and technologies of the sacred. This multiplicity of paths is based in a belief that there are many approaches to the same goal. Yoga is one of the six orthodox schools of philosophy and is a recognized path to the ultimate destination of *moksha* (liberation).

Dharma: higher law in daily life

The question that naturally follows is what does *rta* mean in terms of every day life. Within the yoga tradition, it functions at every level and in every aspect of the created world. It is typical for human beings to become "lost in the weeds" and to lose track of higher principles. This confusion and lack of orientation can result from a variety of factors that characterize life in the world. A person can also be thrown off course by internal forces that are psychological and emotional or by the dramas and challenges that typify human life.

One way to quickly align with *rta* is to live within the rhythms and laws of nature, which are themselves an expression of higher law. In the Ayurvedic system, scripture includes a branch of writings on health and healing, and the tradition directly connects human health and well being to respect for the power of nature. This principle is to be followed in daily life, partly by sensitivity to the moon cycles, times of day and seasonal changes. Ayurveda teaches that human life and activity mirrors the rhythms of the day and seasons and recommends that the individual live in accordance with the inherent structure of the natural world.

However, because many of us in the contemporary world live unnaturally, going from air conditioned cars to brightly lit high rises, we easily fall out of balance with the natural world. Anyone who camps knows that in that setting you are thrown into the larger patterns of nature: It is impossible to sleep past a certain time, because the tent is too hot, or to stay up late, because the night is pitch black. Camping can be one way of hitting the re-set button, which is probably one of the reasons for it popularity as many urban dwellers instinctively recognize their alienation from natural time and rhythms.

While getting back to nature periodically is an important part of life, on a day-to-day basis the majority of the world's population now lives in urban areas. As a result, we need to make an effort to retain an embeddedness in nature, which is possible even in large cities with their parks, ravines, lakes and rivers because cities are complex ecosystems that involve many urban plants and animals. Walking and biking, rather than driving, are ways to be in relationship with the landscape.

Nature can also be brought in doors through houseplants, which filter the air and bring natural beauty with them. Pets also demonstrate daily how to live beautifully in nature with their necessary cycles of activity and rest. Unlike other beings in the created order, human beings can go against *dharma* and *rta* because of their consciousness, whereas animals are bound to instinctual patterns that are tied directly into the higher order of natural law. Human beings, uniquely, can flout these limitations if they choose, which also means that the negative impact of transgressing nature's laws will rebound on them.

The Ayurvedic approach to eating connects dietary choices to the higher laws of nature. In the contemporary world, disconnection from nature has resulted in confusion and the proliferation of faddish diets. These are generally aimed at weight loss rather than health and are notoriously difficult to maintain. The principles taught by Ayurveda call for sattvic, fresh food adapted to one's personal constitution. The principles of eating fresh, unprocessed food, local and organic if possible, provide a guide to eating that doesn't change from year to year.

Dharma and higher purpose

In contemporary usage, it is much more common to hear the word *dharma* than the word *rta*. In many ways, *dharma* has taken over *rta*'s most salient characteristics. *Dharma* is a word that is notoriously difficult to translate. It is often glossed as duty, but this does not capture its nuance. *Dharma* differs from *rta* in that it is context specific and in classical Hinduism was tied to gender, caste and stage of life. *Dharma* is defined as proper and moral conduct in all aspects of life and as "essential for the sustenance and welfare of the individual, society and creation" (Srivastava et al. 2013, x).

In the yogic paradigm, *dharma* is connected to an individual's unique spiritual purpose. Though life holds diverse roles and duties for a person, the underlying pattern of meaning and purpose is the connecting thread. When we follow this thread of *dharma*, we are more likely to be at peace and have a sense of contentment within.

Concepts of *dharma* are intrinsically linked to living in a way that allows for individual flourishing but also in a way that is good for the larger world, community and environment. The concept of *dharma* has always been a dynamic one and has allowed for differences of culture and for

specific circumstances. Therefore, cultural laws, which interface directly with lived reality, have changed and evolved over time.

There are different *dharmas* for renunciants/yogis than for householders. Because most people do not live a monastic life, there needs to be a balance between how principles are applied to ascetics and those managing a challenging career and/or a busy household.

Because determining one's *dharma* is a challenging process, many well-known Hindu scriptures are preoccupied with it. The epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are fundamentally about trying to follow one's *dharma* when it is obscure and difficult to discern. Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, when treated unjustly and sent into exile because of the machinations of his stepmother, continues to respect his parents and leaves without quarrelling. He does not stoop to the strategizing and plotting of those caught up in worldly power.

The factors that cause people to reject *rta* and *dharma*—to lose focus of higher law and the common good—are highlighted in all the world's spiritual traditions: ego, pride, jealousy, envy, anger and sexual desire can result in actions that overstep the limitations. Lack of discrimination and an ignorance of higher principles can also contribute to undharmic behaviour and beliefs.

Traditionally, *dharma* was supported by codes that oversaw all aspects of life. The classical tradition, in looking at the life of the householder, developed the idea of the acceptable goals of life, which are duty and spiritual purpose (*dharma*), gaining a livelihood and material resources (*artha*), enjoying aesthetics, relationships, sensuality and love (*kama*), and liberation (*moksha*).

Within the Vedic discipline of astrology (*jyotish*), an individual's horoscope is used to analyze the balance between these four life-goals and is meant to guide the individual through the phases of life. The aspect of time is crucial in dictating what times of life are to be best utilized for pursuing the different goals. Traditionally, more time was dedicated to spiritual goals in the latter stages of life.

A larger sense of pattern and periodicity is also upheld through the practice of rituals that move the individual through the life stages. Khanna (2004) writes that these practices were meant to ensure that "the actions, behaviour and thinking of a person correspond to the universal *rta*" (viii). From this perspective ritual practice is effective way of binding each person to higher principles.

Even for the householder, the goal of enjoying money and sensuality is regulated by the spiritual limitations of duty and liberation. That said, it is recognized that during the householder stage of life, individuals need to attend to acquiring the necessary resources to live in the world in order to support their families and to contribute to worthy causes, such as the financial support of renunciants and those in need. Ideally, by late middle age, a person's focus should shift from their worldly life to spiritual practice.

The concept of *kama*—sexuality, aesthetics, the arts and sensual life in all its forms—is also important to the householder. The most famous text on this topic, the Kama Sutra, is not first and foremost a sex manual. Rather, it looks at how to live a good life that appreciates the arts, poetry and literature, dance and music along with cultivated and refined forms of sexuality.

Systems such as yoga contain a set of codes and principles to guide the practitioner, the connecting concept being that we should be in alignment with *rta* and higher law. Yoga offers one of the clearest and most accessible pathways to connect to the divine and provides step-by-step guidance in the journey towards higher consciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES THAT ALLOW FOR FLOURISHING

The yoga tradition builds on the basic assumptions of *rta* and provides a system that connects the individual to it in the form of the eight limbs (*angas*). In the West, there has been a tendency to pick and choose which limbs to work with and a focus on posture practice (*asana*). However, yoga is a holistic system in which all the limbs play a vital role in moving the practitioner towards a positive transformation.

It is important to understand ethical behaviour (*yama)* and self-discipline (*niyama*) in the context of the larger philosophy of yoga. These two limbs, which are foundational to the practice of yoga, grow out of the first principle of *rta* discussed in the previous chapter. This reflects the integrated nature of the tradition, which includes ethical, emotional and physical aspects that are aimed at transforming the whole person within a holistic system.

All the limbs work synthetically in the yogic system to create optimal conditions for human development and eventual access to higher states of consciousness. The first two limbs establish a set of higher principles and then speak to day-to-day practices, habits and attitudes, which work at

every level to create the conditions necessary for the unlocking of human potential.

From this perspective, the *yamas* and *niymas* are the enabling attitudes and approaches that lay the groundwork for practice and move towards the ultimate goal of working with the mind. This approach is the opposite of the Cartesian mind/body split that has characterized much of Western culture since the nineteenth century. From the yogic point of view, a calm, clear mind cannot emerge from within an unethical, chaotic, unreflective life. Research is bearing out these maps of practice that were created thousands of years ago.

According to the yoga tradition, practitioners have to purify themselves at every level in order to access the higher states of consciousness. Even for those who aren't aiming for liberation, the classical goal of the eight limbs, the changes to one's psyche can be experienced almost immediately. The impact of a healthier body and clearer mind can only be positive and constructive.

As Fields (2002) writes, "a person's practice in matters such as diet, sleep, hygiene, exercise and mental attitude constitute a fabric of daily life grounded in one's fundamental values" (106). Rather than being viewed as punishments, the *yamas* and *niyamas* should be viewed as setting the stage for health and well being. The effectiveness of these ancient practices is borne out by increasing research that reveals that religious people are, on average, physically and mentally healthier. [1]

[1] See Jeff Levin 2001 *God, Faith and Health: Exploring the Spirituality- Healing Connection*. NewYork: Wiley. and Brian Bethune, "God is the Answer", *Macleans,* April 6 &15, 2015, 45.

The yamas: the universal commandments

The word *yama* is translated into English as rule, universal moral duty or major observance (Klostermaier 1994, 212). *Yamas* are meant to purify the practitioner and orient them in a healthy way towards other people and the larger environment. Transgressing these limits, which are underwritten by *rta*, will accumulate negative karma, which hinders progress on the road of self-realization.

Thus, unskilful attitudes and actions spin a web that becomes denser and denser over time. All of us have witnessed how lies feed on and require more lies or greed creates an ever greater degree of craving. This is why principles have to come first as they set the path forward either towards greater clarity or more and more delusion.

There is no definitive interpretation of these concepts as they have to be applied to each generation. For example, the teaching of greedlessness and non-attachment, which originally spoke to absolute forms of asceticism, fits neatly in a number of emerging movements in the Western world, one being minimalism. What is remarkable is the way that that these ancient principles remain vitally relevant and necessary for a well lived life and healthy society. The wisdom held within these key concepts can be discovered anew and made relevant to the problems of our time.

Ahimsa: the central role of non-violence

The concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) came into Western consciousness largely through the writing and success of the political actions of Gandhi. Fewer people, however, realize that *ahimsa* is an ideal that lies at the heart of most South Asian spiritual traditions. So while yoga was originally a

teaching for renunciants, the value of *ahimsa* applies to all in a spiritual worldview.

The yoga tradition, developing as it did in close conversation with Buddhism and Jainism, shares a commitment to non-violence. Jainism makes *ahimsa* foundational as its central teaching: *ahimso paramo dharma* (ahimsa is the highest truth) (Wiley 2004, 15). Considering all actions through the lens of whether or not it is harmful to oneself or others is a powerful spiritual orientation.

This ideal is not only applicable in relationships with human beings but also includes animals, the natural world as these too possess soul and therefore have to be treated with care and respect. The belief and practice of *ahimsa*, then, positions the individual fundamentally within the world in a way that emphasizes relationality, care and respect.

In the yoga tradition, *ahimsa* is not simply a negative commandment but also a positive instruction to develop a friendly and cooperative attitude towards others. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali refer to this as a "spirit of friendliness" and state that the practitioner should strive for "a spirit of compassion for those in distress, a spirit of good will towards those who are treading the path of virtue and a spirit of benevolent indifference towards those who are steeped in vice" (Swami Hariharananda 1985, 77).

Ahimsa does not only refer to physical violence but to the more subtle spheres of speech and thought. It is rooted in a sophisticated understanding of human psychology that recognizes that our actions begin with mental attitudes that are expressed through speech and physical action. Therefore, to get at the root of violence of any kind, the way the psyche works needs to be examined as it is the seedbed of action, whether positive or negative.

From a theological/philosophical point of view, the three Indic traditions recognize that violent, unskilful and malicious action, thought and speech lead to the creation of error which, in turn, contributes to the creation of negative karma. This karma becomes like dust on a mirror that obscures an individual's ability to discriminate in their actions. It is for this reason that scripture, teachers and community are necessary as they offer guidance until the individual has developed enough insight to recognize the impact of these principles through their own experience.

From a spiritual point of view, and one that is borne out every day, violence begets violence, which turns into a never-ending cycle that harms individuals and societies. Fortunately, most of us have the capacity to develop *ahimsa*, and the number of people who are psychopathic without a mental template for empathy is very small. Nonetheless, for most, the ability to practice *ahimsa* fully has to be developed and refined.

On a subtle level, the principles of *ahimsa* are also applied to speech, and Buddhism makes Right Speech part of the Noble Eightfold Path. This may seem strange, as in the contemporary world the spoken and written word are often used thoughtlessly on a wide variety of platforms. The negative use of the written word is evident in much of what goes on in social media, with people having little regard for the impact of their words on others.

From a spiritual perspective, words are powerful, a recognition that the *Rig Veda* shares. We are told that Vac, the goddess of speech, can make a person whom she loves a "sage, a wise man, a Brahmin" (*Rig Veda* 10.125.5). Negative use of speech, such as malicious gossip and slander, is destructive both to the person being slandered and to the person uttering or writing the words.

All wisdom traditions recognize that people don't naturally act according to the principles of *ahimsa* but have to be trained to default to this position. It is the nature of the human psyche to be prone to a variety of states of unconsciousness that lead to negative thoughts, words and actions. According to the *Hatha Yoga Pradika*, one of the six destroyers of yoga is "useless talk" (Iyengar 2019, 47).

The yogic tradition has developed numerous ways of working with the mind and body to help the individual cultivate non-violence, an example being the practice of a vow of silence (*vac tapasya*) as a form of austerity and purification. Silent retreats have become more popular in the West as many people instinctively recognize the need for periodic breaks from daily life in which speech is often used unconsciously. Many of us are immersed in noise and chatter as well as being bombarded by advertising and unceasing amounts of useless information. Retreats are an opportunity to recalibrate and detox from overstimulation and demands on one's time and energy.

Taking a vow of silence for a period of time is meant to cultivate reflection and an awareness of how speech is used in daily life. This process is challenging as we come to realize how often speech is used negatively. The powerful psychology behind this practice is evident in the connection between constant use of negative and harmful speech and state of mind. As Tiwari (2002) writes in *The Path of Practice*, "every battle or war or fight, whether personal or political, sprang from someone's disharmonious thought, followed by verbal articulation of that thought" (264).

Negative speech is not only directed at others; it is often directed internally. Observing our inner monologue for a short time can reveal a