

Mindfulness Education

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Abstract

In the frenetic, stressful world of academia, it often seems impossible to incorporate any semblance of mindfulness, patience and peace into our daily lives. But as classroom practitioners, we need time to reflect and assess, and to bring the best practices of education to our students and our institutions. Modern educators can reach back into antiquity – to yoga and yogic philosophy – to infuse our profession with a renewed vigor for mindfulness, ethics and peace. Through empowering ourselves with the wisdom of the Vedic scholars and the sages of yoga, particularly the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and the Yamas and Niyamas, we can find ourselves in a new paradigm of relating more fully, more honestly and more purposefully with our students and colleagues, and creating enhanced opportunities for our students to bring mindfulness to their own lives and educational journeys.

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Educators face multi-disciplinary agendas each day, and must navigate the tenuous waters of academia dealing with students, colleagues and administrators. The path forward can be as fundamental as it is life-changing: to integrate peace and mindfulness into our lives, our relationships, our connections to our students, and our global sphere. How can we achieve it? How can we embrace mindfulness at the academic level, and within our educational institutions? I hope to offer an engaging and provocative look into the world of yoga and yogic philosophy as a means to bring this elusive and ethereal concept of mindfulness and peace into a workable, practical realm for all of us to use.

We are inescapably products of our time. As the 21st century wraps us in its coils, we're smothered by the insistency of e-mail, text messaging, inter-office communications, postings and tweetings with students and colleagues. All of these add to our sense of frenzied and relentless movement, stress, pressure and deadlines.

We all lament our loss of time and “quality” communication with our loved ones, friends, colleagues and students, and we often throw up our hands, shake our head, shrug our shoulders and decide that things just can't change. We can't make things better. We can't accommodate more demands, more meetings, more to-do lists unless we just give ourselves over to a sub-par, unsatisfying existence.

But if we tilt the table of time and let wisdom and insight from the past inform us today, there are clearly defined ways to bring mindfulness to bear in our professional and personal lives. Because my profession is teaching, and because I'm invested in finding ways to better serve the students at my college, I've been engaged in a search for applied mindfulness techniques that will help me connect with students and colleagues.

There are all manner of brain research studies, showing how people learn, different modes of learning, Bloom's Taxonomy, the Kagan methodologies, et al. We've all attended these seminars and professional development events. There is nothing wrong with any of them, except the takeaway for me has been limited at best.

What else could there be? How can I find some solid techniques for mindfulness education and cultivate a sense of peace?

As a longtime yoga practitioner, I've experienced the benefits of this mind-body-breath connection. I intensified my yoga practice beginning in 2012 by taking a 30-hour intensive yoga program offered by the studio where I take classes. I then continued my immersion in yoga by embarking on the Yoga Alliance certification program – a 200-hour, multi-disciplinary training that led to my becoming a Registered Yoga Teacher in 2013. I teach yoga classes at my local studio, and I have facilitated presentations on yoga and yogic philosophy for my studio, my college's Honors Program students, and for my college's adult learning lecture series program.

Historically, yoga is made up of Eight Limbs. Each limb helps the individual move from outer to inner, from gross to subtle – a transformative process that can take a lifetime. It's notable that the first two limbs – the No. 1 and No. 2 crucial elements of yoga – are the Yamas and Niyamas, which derive from Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. Patanjali lived in India somewhere between 500 BCE and 200 BCE, and wrote the Sutras as a series of aphorisms – short, minimalist lines, phrases or ideas that would be relatively easy to remember and could be connected to other sutras. It's interesting, too, that Sanskrit word “sutra” means “thread.” It's the word from which we derive the medical word “suture.” To stitch up; to connect. And by doing that, we facilitate healing.

The Yamas are the ethical practices of yoga. The Niyamas are the personal, self-care observances. Together they form a practical, meaningful, powerful core from which changes emanate – physically, mentally, spiritually and otherwise.

Today we strive to bring together bright minds, open hearts and eagerness for new ideas that will change our paradigm of peace and connectedness in our increasingly fractured world. I've experienced the change that yoga can bring personally. I've witnessed that change in my yoga students, and many of my college students to whom I've related yogic concepts. Even brief exposure to some of these ideas can be an engine for significant change. If we seek a multi-disciplinary approach to mindfulness and peace, it's important to be open to ideas that may seem out of the realm of “academia.” But just as clinical research has shown, over the past 100 years or so, that yoga, meditation and mindfulness practices have measurable and long-lasting positive effects on health – lowering heart rate, lowering blood pressure, lessening the toxic effects of stress hormones like cortisol, derailing the flight-or-flight response, easing the pain of arthritis, calming and harmonizing the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, alleviating insomnia, and on and on – it's also been shown that mindfulness practices and yoga can help in “institutional” settings, such as schools and prisons, and where the populations of certain institutions have been prone to agitation, violence, aggression, stress, low productivity, absenteeism, and general malaise.

Sound like your school or college?

While your professional or academic situation might not be as dire as a prison (and let's hope not!), we can intuit that the same things that work to calm stress and aggression in certain populations can also be transformative for other social, cultural or institutional ills. Peace and engagement sounds lofty and idealistic, and certainly we'd all like to have more peace in our lives and in the world. But let's not stop there. Let's actually attempt to apply certain core concepts to affect real and long-lasting change (peace) in ourselves and our approach to our students, colleagues, the greater college community and, yes, the world.

We start with the Yamas, yoga's five ethical practices. The words are Sanskrit, which is the language of yoga “asana,” or postures. But the ideas are easily accessible, so don't get weighed down in the oddity of the words. The five Yamas are Ahimsa (non-violence or non-harming); Satya (truthfulness); Asteya (non-stealing or non-taking from others); Brahmacharya (conservation of vital energy); and Aparigraha (non-hoarding or non-possessiveness).

Next are the Niyamas, the five personal observances. They are Saucha (cleanliness of the body, mind and surroundings); Santosha (contentment); Tapas (practice causing positive change); Svadhyaya (study by and of oneself); and Ishvara-Pranidhana (humility and faith).

The Yamas clarify our worldview, our mindset, and our interactions with others. These ethical practices can be applied to any profession, or simply to our personal development as human beings. Because my profession is teaching, my emphasis is to use these yogic principles in the education/educator realm. I'm not going to assess all ten Yamas/Niyamas, but will instead explore only the first three Yamas as examples of how we can use yogic concepts to enhance teaching, create better classroom environments and assist in changing the culture of our academic institutions.

Ahimsa (Non-Violence or Non-Harming)

Who would willingly or deliberately harm a student? Most of us would be aghast at such a thing. But we're not talking solely about physical harm. That's the gross and the obvious. The subtle may be harder to discern. What is our first contact with a student? The first day of class, for example. How do you enter the classroom? Are you smiling and open, making eye contact with those in the class? Or do you rush in with your briefcase and books, tense and closed off? Do you convey a sense of excitement about the new semester, and of looking forward to getting to know these students?

Or are you mentally rolling your eyes, thinking, “I’ve probably got another class of lazy dullards.” Do you answer questions and queries with ease? Or do you rigidly go through the procedures of passing out the syllabus and handouts, and then explain them in the same droning way as last semester? Do you ask if there are any new students to the school, or it’s their first time in college? Do you look at their faces and get a sense of who might be nervous or anxious, or who might feel a little intimidated? And what do you do to allay their fears and worries?

Harm can be done via your attitude, your body language, your tone of voice, your unwillingness to be flexible, your own boredom with your subject matter, or a lack of energy or creativity. When you practice Ahimsa, or non-harming, you realize that every contact you have with a student may have far-reaching effects. Perhaps a student had a rough couple of hours with the registrar trying to get his classes paid for, and then he came to your class a little frazzled, or a few minutes late, and missed your explanation of the testing procedures. When he asks about it, do you snap a harsh retort about “getting to class on time.”? Or do you roll with it, and just explain it again. That ONE response can be the difference between a student who hangs in there, stays in your class and feels you are approachable, and one who says, “Wow, this place is full of mean people.” Is that student more likely to be one incident away from dropping his classes and quitting? Or are YOU the one incident that makes him stay?

Inherent in Ahimsa is the idea that when you harm others, or allow harm to occur, you also are harming yourself. So we strive to do no harm, or to counter harm that may have been done. Harming can occur via thoughts, words, actions and attitudes.

In an academic environment, there are multiple opportunities each day to do harm (or, of course, good) all over a campus, from the professors, to the deans, to the bookstore and library staffers, to the cafeteria and janitorial workers. Students, and all of us in education, live in real-time, constantly-changing Venn diagrams – moving into and out of the orbit of various people, overlapping our experiences with others, and integrating those daily contacts into a larger view of that institution, community and world. By practicing Ahimsa, we make sure that all whom we touch are given the best possible interactions with us. If it’s not overtly positive, then at least make it neutral or benign.

Take the time to talk to the student who comes to see you after office hours, even though you’re tired and want to go home. Explain an assignment again to the student who seems overwhelmed and on the verge of dropping your class. Give your colleague another copy of your syllabus, even if you just gave him a copy two days ago. Walk a student over to another office or building when you see she’s confused about the campus. To do otherwise, in any incidents like these, is to do harm. The harm could be negligible, or almost imperceptible. But it’s there. Don’t be a catalyst for harm. Eliminate it. Alleviate it. Don’t engage in perpetrating it.

As with all the Yamas and Niyamas, mindfulness is part of the package. You need to make these concepts part of your life and thought processes to effect change. But, like yoga, it is a practice. It takes time and some commitment.

Satya (Truthfulness)

The second Yama is about the truth, in all its forms. How can we be good stewards of truth as educators or in academia? Again, the daily interactions with students, faculty, staff and the larger college community give many opportunities to practice this Yama.

According to author Nicolai Bachman in his book *The Path of the Yoga Sutras, A Practical Guide to the Core of Yoga*, Satya (ideally paired with Ahimsa) is “clear, honest, appropriate, and helpful communication that considers the short- and long-term consequences.” (p. 150)

Students, particularly, need to view teachers and educators as responsible, honest and consistent. Students need constructive criticism and they need sincere support and encouragement. False praise is as detrimental as unjustified put-downs. Being truthful about where a student stands grade-wise, or whether he’s in danger of failing, may be difficult. But it’s a means to an end – offering the student options for improving, suggesting campus resources or tutoring, or putting in a little extra time to explain your grading policy or weightings of assignments.

Be truthful about your students’ abilities when you grade their work. This moves into an area that can be a teacher’s downfall – being seen as someone who has “favorites” in the class. Yes, there are students who you like more than others. There are students whose work puts them above others, and makes them a pleasure to work with.

Conversely, there are students whose personalities may grate on your nerves or whose work seems sloppy or careless. Even so, use Satya in your assessment/grading practices. Is your “A” student able to improve in any areas? Make sure you give her some opportunities for growth and self-discovery. Is your “C” student working hard, attending all classes and turning in his work on time? Reward that with some truthful kudos.

Practicing Satya also ventures into the realm of your own expectations as an educator. Have you taught your class the exact same way for years and years? Have you given the same tests, and handed out the same topics for assignments? You need to keep your subjects fresh for yourself as well as your students. If you’re not engaged, neither will they be. If you’re weary of reading their work, your judgment is clouded and cynical when grading it. You are hindering your truthfulness.

Create some new assignments, or incorporate some new ideas, movies, music, technology and interactive projects. Go to your college’s Instructional Technology staffers and ask what you can do to enhance your classes. Maybe you’ve seen the “Smartboard” on your computer in class, but have never used it. Get some training in the “clickers” and response devices that are helping students to engage in real time during class.

Applying Satya to your teaching modes, you may realize the truth is that you are intimidated or afraid of these new technologies, or feel they somehow undermine your usefulness as an educator. You may say, “I’m old school. I think this is all nonsense.” Or, “I’m too set in my ways to change how I teach.” Say the truth, acknowledge it, and then resolve to create a new truth for yourself. If you are telling your students to open themselves up to learning and to new concepts – whether it’s trying to untangle the Pythagorean Theorem or grasping the symbolism of Alexander the Great’s unique untying of the Gordian Knot -- then you have to be willing to take that journey, too.

Look for ways to truthfully assess your own motives and desires as a teacher. How are your instructor evaluations? What are the students saying about you? What is the dean commenting on when she observes your class? Communicating truthfully is important, but so is hearing truthfully and perceiving truthfully. Only then can you begin to amend things that aren’t serving you, parcel out the truth from amid gossip, and let go of defensiveness to really absorb beneficial comments and suggestions.

Asteya (Non-Stealing)

If these Yamas sound familiar, it may be because they allude to those other famed admonishments from Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments.

But the Yamas are more complex and ethereal than the fabled etchings on stone tablets. “Thou shalt not steal” seems very explicit. Asteya, though, is subtle and asks us to delve more deeply into what “stealing” is, or can be. And it’s not about feeling guilt. Remember that piece of candy you took from the five-and-dime counter when you were 7? How about your brother’s favorite “Star Wars” action figure when you were 12? And let’s not forget taking a glance at the test answers of your classmate in language arts class. Was that an independent clause or a dangling modifier? It must have been dangling enough to entice you to take it.

We feel badly about these things. And they are easy to grasp because they are tangible. A toy. A book. A piece of jewelry. Money. An A.

Asteya moves beyond the obvious to help us understand what else can be lost, taken or stolen. Non-stealing is about living with “integrity and reciprocity,” according to Deborah Adele, author of *The Yamas and Niyamas, Exploring Yoga’s Ethical Practices*. (p. 60).

If our main mode of operation as educators is dissatisfaction, fear, stress, boredom and just phoning it all in, we are engaging in stealing – stealing from ourselves, our students, our academic culture, our colleagues, our future and our students’ futures.

We steal from ourselves by not allowing ourselves to relish the pure joy of what we do – we open new worlds to eager minds. We steal from ourselves by being envious of others and their accomplishments. And we steal from others through that envy or ungraciousness.

Did a colleague recently get tenure? Or get published in a prestigious journal? Or get that endowed chair that you applied for three years in a row unsuccessfully? Instead of sitting sullenly with your bruised ego, cultivate your sincere congratulations and express it. And then resolve to work on your goals – for the umpteenth time, if necessary.

There's a Sanskrit mantra in yoga – “loka samasta sukhino bhavantu” – may the universe be filled with peace and joy, love and light. Another oft-used Pali mantra from the *Metta Sutta*, typically attributed to Kuan Yin, goddess of compassion, is “Sabbe satta sukhito hontu” – may all beings be happy. Imagine how freeing it would feel to truly wish, and seek, happiness for all beings. But by discounting others – our colleagues or students – we steal from them. By not giving them honest and mindful attention, we steal from them. And all this theft leads to a selfish culture. “Me” and “mine” become the norm. Others are afterthoughts. Asteya asks us to be generous with others, and not ask for anything in return.

If a student seeks you out for advice or just needs to vent about his grades or her home life, be generous and listen. Just this act can have profound effects. You may be providing them a safe place to sort out an issue or problem, or to garner the courage to make a change in a major, or try an Honors-level class. Don't steal this opportunity from them.

You may have to look at yourself and assess whether you are a giver or a receiver. Some of us are more comfortable in one role, and may have to work to amend our behavior. And we have to be mindful that “giving too much can deplete us if we are not receiving at all,” (Bachman, p. 155). Make sure you replenish yourself, so as not to steal from your own peace of mind and your ability to approach your classes and students with positive intentions.

The final two Yamas – Brahmacharya (Conservation of Vital Energies) and Aparigraha (Non-Hoarding or Non-Grasping) are also instructive to our lives as educators. But as a former professor of Composition I and II, I'm aware of what I used to impart to my students in those classes: Summarize, edit and make your work concise! I leave you with the assignment of exploring, on your own, the fourth and fifth Yamas, along with the Niyamas mentioned at the beginning of this article.

When I teach yoga, I refer often to the ideas of the *Yoga Sutras* and try to make them relevant for the 21st century Western practitioner. One of the main ideas is that yoga meets you where you are. It doesn't matter how far along the path you may be, or how often you've taken a walk-about. Yoga is always ready to join up with you, again and again. In fact, the word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word “yuj,” which means “join.”

Education and academia may seem to be unlikely partners for a 3,000-year-old tradition focusing on the joining of body, breath and mind. But we know, through modern science, neural imaging and brain chemistry, that we are our thoughts. And we can literally change our biology and our brains by creating new neural pathways. Each thought is a tiny chemical footprint that can, with time and focus, become a well-traveled avenue filled with light, awareness and compassion. If your light of enthusiasm for teaching has dimmed, rediscover it by forging a new path. Join a road that may be “less traveled” in typical academia, but can lead to a rejuvenation of your passion for teaching.

The light in me honors the light in you.

Namaste'.

Sources

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