

Non-lying (*satya*)

Satya (SAH-tyah)

Definition: “To one established in truthfulness, actions and their results become subservient.”—*Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, translation and commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda

Satya, or truthful speech and actions, first requires you to find the truth. In yoga, the truth is considered oneness with the eternal spirit. Once you connect your conscious with “the truth” then you will always speak the truth. Instead of viewing this concept through an anthropomorphized lens, I have come to view the yogic concept of this spirit as more of an idea. Personally, I try to see this universal soul as something very pure, as in when you experience a flash of pure, unselfish love for another person. You can also imagine it as a powerful, eternal, and universal force that knows not physical and temporal boundaries. Yoga does not ask that you subscribe to any particular religion or belief system. All that yoga asks is that you realize your true self, which is united with something that transcends your current situation. Your true self is boundless and eternal. Your true self is unaffected by transitory things like bills, zits, and traffic.

Once we begin to see that that the daily, worldly self does not limit who we really are, we begin to see this same eternal force in others around us. Several things jump out at me when I contemplate the truth in yoga. Racism is a lie. If I am really part of a universal truth, or universal spirit, then so is my neighbor. Since we are both one with this universal spirit, and since skin color is an impermanent condition, I cannot judge her based on the color of her skin because doing so is a lie—the truth is that we are all one. As I teach my son about eating fruit, I also teach him lessons of our true nature: we have to dig through the bitter skin to access the nourishing, juicy stuff inside. Bigotry of all sorts is a lie, because gay or straight, black or white, man or woman, elderly or young, we are the same inside. In the yogic perspective, wherever you are right now is where you need to be. So if you happen to be gay, right now you are meant to be gay. When you align with the truth of an eternal spirit you transcend all labels.

As a meditative exercise, go to a park, or another public space, and sit quietly with your eyes shut for several minutes, visualizing a pure light glowing inside of you. Try to see yourself as simply pure light. Then, open your eyes and try seeing the same light glowing in other people. This takes a lot of work, but give it a shot. If this visualization

doesn't work for you, try to see that everyone has two lungs, just like you. Just for one day, try looking at everyone around you as being of the same essence inside. Once you find this truth, you can truly speak the truth. If you are truthful, and see others as sharing the same eternal force that you do, then non-violence will naturally follow.

“The only way to tell the truth is to speak with kindness. Only the words of a loving man can be heard.”—Henry David Thoreau

We distinguish between real honesty and the “Can I be honest with you?” mean-spiritedness, which some people masquerade as honesty. Real honesty can only come when we are truthful with ourselves, not when we are using honesty as an excuse for cruelty. Too often we do not speak the truth. For example, when a teenager yells to his parents, “I wish you were dead,” that is not the truth. The truth is that he is angry about something, like his parents not buying him a new video game console. (Notice that often our attachments—especially to material things—cause such pain.) Truthful speech does not mean blurting out things in anger; it means getting to the heart of the matter. This concept can improve your communication, as many bitter arguments mask the truth of frustration. Often we will argue about a superficial topic when really something deeper is the problem. Before feuding with someone in your life, reflect deeply on the source of your anger. Of course, once you can get to the source of the anger, you can work to transcend it, but the first step is awareness.

Realistically, getting to that level of liberation—where we remain as peaceful as a mountain lake at sunrise no matter what the situation—takes tremendous dedication and time. I often tell my classes to look at our evolution as over a lifetime, or perhaps multiple lifetimes. But before we can get there, we must face our emotional warts first, and it's much better to face your memories once they surface than to bury them even further. Yogis call these deep memories *samskara*, or mental impressions, and use the process of yoga to first face these mental impressions, then liberate themselves from the impressions. Trust that you can handle anything you unlock, trust that you can get help to cope with what you have long suppressed, and trust that as you liberate the emotions trapped inside, you will liberate yourself.

People spend thousands of dollars on psychiatrists while probing for the truth. “What's really bothering you?” The sources of our grief often lie encrusted in plates of safety buffers. The meditative practices of yoga often uncover deep-rooted thoughts and ideas. When you begin a process of deep meditation and exploration, I recommend

reaching out when intense memories resurface. Most yoga teachers are not qualified in this realm. (Some yoga teachers do have degrees in psychiatric counseling, but most do not.) A good yoga teacher can definitely mentor you through the process, but if something comes up and knocks the crap out of you, I think you should find a professional to help you through it. You do not have to spend your lifetime in therapy, but you should take time to really dig in and figure out what lies beneath.

However, this runs contrary to everything written in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a foundational yoga book written in the 15th century. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* states that yogis should only practice under strict tutelage of a guru and that yogis should trust the guru completely. While I agree that a guru is an incredible gift, and that attending yoga classes definitely helps with the physical practice, I don't believe that most yoga teachers are qualified to counsel someone struggling with past physical abuse, for example. That is outside of the scope of practice for most teachers and is outside the training most instructors receive.

If you seek help from a close friend instead, just make sure your friend is honestly willing to help. Sometimes friends mean well but have ulterior motives. For example, you might feel distraught over something and decide to stay in on a Saturday, but your friend might rush over and cheer you up and convince you that partying will make you feel better. Your friend could be right, depending on the intensity of your emotions. Your friend probably does care, but at that moment she might care more about going out herself than she does about your emotions, and perhaps she does not want to go out alone. As long as she is attached to going out, she cannot truly put your interests first.

Sadly, we spend way too much time defining ourselves by falsehoods. We are not our cars, our jackets, or even our tattoos. Yoga teaches us to control the fluctuations of the mind (*citta*). These fluctuations lead us to project onto ourselves a false portrait of what we truly are. Ultimately, we are eternal light, eternal sound, and eternal energy. Ultimately, we are no different from what we consider sacred and divine. You can begin by letting go of your attachments and stop identifying yourself with the impermanent. Of course you have to work to pay your bills, but the minute you define yourself by your work, you are lying.

When I meet people at a party they will often ask, "What do you do?" which, given some of my employment history, I consider the

least interesting aspect of who I am. I often answer, “I do many things,” and then when I get asked the follow up question, “But what do you do for a living?” I will answer, “Do you want to know what I do that makes me feel alive, or what I do to pay the bills?” (I admit to losing a conversation partner on several occasions.) Many of us have jobs that do not fuel our spirit; they are not what we do to live, but without them we could not eat.

Some people advocate utopias where everyone is an artist, which sounds lovely in theory, but someone needs to haul the garbage and clean the sewers. If everyone spent their days just creating art, we would live amongst piles of garbage and rivers of wastewater. Of course you should pursue a job that you love—but even a dream job is not a sum total of who you are as a person.

Even people with truly honorable jobs, such as those working for Doctors Without Borders, need to practice some detachment from their jobs. Their jobs are transitory—there was a time when they were not doctors and there will be a time when they will no longer be doctors; who they really are cannot be contained in a mere title.

Next time you meet someone at a party, instead of asking them, “What do you do?” ask them, “Who are you?” or “What would you like me to know about you?” If they look at you strangely, so be it. Ask yourself, “Who am I?” and try to answer without using labels. When we define ourselves by our work, our romantic partners, our youth, or other temporary situations, then we feel tremendous loss when we lose those external things. But when we realize the truth, that we have something greater and more permanent inside ourselves than our work, then we lose our attachment to our labels and can face change without fear.

Incorporating truth into your yoga poses: Be honest with yourself in the poses. If a pose feels too easy, try to recruit more muscle activity, go deeper in the pose, or lengthen your breaths. If you feel the body tremble, recognize that you have gone too far and back off from the pose. Also, you can practice truthfulness by keeping your focus on the present moment; focusing on your breath will help you keep your focus. In some poses, you can close your eyes and fix your internal gaze on the space inside your head just behind the center of your brow. Yogis consider this the center of intuition and inner knowledge.