



WHAT DO THE HINDU ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS TEACH US ABOUT ENERGY POLICY?

*A New Ecological Interpretation
of Ahimsa and Asteya*

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At the intersection of Hindu thought and environmental conservation or advocacy are familiar and important concepts, people, and communities: the Bishnoi sect and their amazing devotion to protection of all life, the importance of the Chipko movement as being the original ‘treehuggers’, the phrase *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* signifying the world being one family, the importance of Gandhi’s promotion of nonviolent non-cooperation as a political tool, to name a few. I’d like to go beyond these examples to examine four other facets of Hindu ethics and practices that, when viewed through the lens of attempting to live placing less of a burden upon planet Earth, of creating societies firmly rooted in ecological sustainability, offer a powerful foundation from which we can all build our lives, our practices, and our society.

What I will discuss here is the importance of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the first two limbs of the yoga practice as described in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, in shaping our relationship with our environment. This will be followed by how these principles can be seen to support some of the policy recommendations supporting strong action on climate change and supporting renewable energy.

In the Yoga Sutra, the passages mentioning the *yamas* (abstentions) and *niyamas* (observances) are found in the second section, on practice. Yoga Sutra II.30 says (using Edwin Bryant’s translation into English¹): “The *yamas* are nonviolence, truthfulness, refrainment from stealing, celibacy, and renunciation of [unnecessary] possessions.” In Sanskrit, those are: *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahamacharya*, and *aparigraha*. Yoga Sutra II.32 reads, “The observances are cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study [of scripture], and devotion to God.” That is, *saucha*, *santosha*, *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *Ishvarapranidhana*. According to Patanjali these are absolutes for aspiring yogis; they are non-negotiable prerequisites for pursuing the rest of the practice (physical postures, breathing practices, concentration and meditation, as preparation for experiencing samadhi). While nearly all of the *yamas* and *niyamas* can be interpreted through an ecological lens, here I will focus on the *yamas* *ahimsa*, *asteya*, and *aparigraha*, and the *niyama* *santosha*, as to my

1 Bryant, Edwin F., and Patanjali. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators*. New York: North Point, 2009. Print.

mind these are where the applicability to our most pressing environmental problems is most clear.

In doing this I should emphasize that what I am doing is offering how I personally interpret these principles. As a Hindu, a yoga practitioner, a student of Hindu thought broadly, and environmental writer and policy expert, this is how I see the words laid down by Patanjali so many years ago applying to what I am observing in the world today and how they offer an ethical underpinning for our actions. As such I make no claim as my interpretation being ‘the’ interpretation of these concepts. Rather, I am offering ‘an’ interpretation, one which I hope readers will find useful and applicable to their lives and work.

In its strongest sense, *asteya* calls for examination of how fossil fuel use deprives all living beings of a stable climate, the sustainable basis for life.

Ahimsa is the first *yama* and as such underpins all the other observances and practices outlined in the Yoga Sutra. In English it is regularly translated as ‘nonviolence’, but ‘not causing harm’ is probably better, as sometimes action that could be interpreted as ‘violent’ is required to prevent a greater harm. *Ahimsa* is described as being the highest *dharma* (*ahimsa paramo dharma*), but for all people other than ascetics, not causing harm is a situational and relative concept. That is, there are times and situations where and people for whom using force, even destructive force, is not considered a violation of this principle. Police are sometimes required to forcefully stop criminals; soldiers stopping an attack on their nation often must kill; any of us stopping someone or something attacking ourselves, our families, or someone else rightly can and should use force to prevent a greater harm—all of these uses of force are not violations of the principle of *ahimsa*, again except for those people who have taken vows of renunciation. In fact, the less-quoted next line in that Sanskrit maxim about nonviolence is the highest *dharma* is “*dharma himsa tathaiva cha*” (so too is violence in service of *dharma*).

So what then is *dharma*? The term has layers of meaning and association that aren’t easily encapsulated in the usual one-word English translations, such as duty or religion. *Dharma*, broadly defined, is a set of principles and practices that both sustains the cosmic order, as well as binds us in harmony with that order. An understanding of *dharma* informs how we behave and guides what we do, on a daily basis as well as throughout our lives, as we all love, attempt to have a good life, look for inspiration and insight, and ultimately strive for liberation.

This outlook provides a very practical ethical touchstone for our own efforts to promote environmental conservation, ecological sustainability, and responsible use of energy. How can each one of us, each in our own way suited to our own particular inclinations and abilities, live so that our actions are minimal in the harm they cause, using upholding the welfare of all beings as the benchmark of our success?

Ahimsa in your dietary choices points to a largely plant-based diet: the carbon and ecological footprint of industrialized agriculture², in particular animal agriculture, is hugely damaging to our planet, deeply deficient in terms of animal welfare, and needlessly energy intensive. (For more information on this point, see *Dharma of Sustainability, Sustainability of Dharma: A Hindu Energy Ethics* in this collection.) In terms of our energy usage, it means striving towards using less energy and using energy that comes from sources that are non-polluting and low-carbon: Given what we now know about the harm unfettered consumption of fossil fuels is causing to our planet, and knowing that we have today the technology to fully exploit renewable energy sources, continuing to explore for fossil fuels and exhausting our current proven reserves is an ethically untenable position.

While each of the other *yamas* and *niyamas* stands on its own, in terms of environmental action each illuminates another aspect of how we can reduce the harm our actions cause, each indicates how we can enjoy lives that promote the welfare of all beings.

What is the essence of non-stealing, of *asteya*? At the most basic it is taking something which you have no right to take. In a legal sense those

2 “The Carbon Footprint of 5 Diets Compared.” *Shrinkthatfootprint.com*. N.p., 23 Apr. 2014. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

rights generally revolve around the concept of property and ownership, violations of that being deemed theft. There also a sense of fairness at work. Through this lens, stealing can be interpreted as using resources to such a degree that it deprives others of that which is sufficient for them to have enough so that they have the ability to sustain healthy lives. This baseline standard varies from place to place and in time, based on available resources.³ It doesn't mean flatly equal access to resources or overflowing abundance for all. Rather it sets a minimum standard of what is required for life to maintain itself. Using resources to a degree that deprives others (both human and non-human) of their opportunity to live at even this basic level is, in essence, stealing. Applying the principle of *asteya* in this way means living your life so that no other being is so critically deprived that they cannot live theirs. It's a natural extension of *ahimsa*, as well as being truthful with yourself about your needs and how these needs impinge upon those of others. In its strongest sense, *asteya* calls for examination of how fossil fuel use deprives all living beings of a stable climate, the sustainable basis for life.

Aparigraha builds on the the previous *yamas*, further building upon the foundation established in *ahimsa* and *asteya*. Given that overconsumption of natural resources is the root of humanity's out of balance relationship with the rest of life on this planet, reducing one's possessions to only those which are necessary is an imperative. This doesn't mean everyone living like renunciates. Rather it means being thoughtful, frugal, and considered in purchases of goods and use of resources. It means prioritizing long-term durability and utility over short-term convenience. 'Necessary' is a loaded term. Everyone's necessary is different. But starting to examine what you truly need will likely result in you finding out that you need less than you thought you did. It also often means coming to the conclusion that lasting pleasure is more often found experience than possessions.

Under the umbrella of *santosha*, the second *niyama*, we are urged to seek contentment, joy, and serenity in life. We are encouraged to be friendly, express constant gratitude for all that we have, be it a lot or a little. We are encouraged to live life in the eternity of the moment. From an environmental

3 By Maintaining and Strengthening the National Footprint Accounts and Creating Global Ecological Footprint Standards, We Are Ensuring Accurate, Consistent, and Comparable Footprint Analyses. "Science Overview." Science Overview. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

perspective, witnessing the state of pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and the myriad other green issues we face, cultivation of *santosha* is both a critical imperative and at times difficult. One essential challenge is witnessing this suffering, trying to alleviate it, but still remaining content and joyful.

Our past choices for energy usage here have created a strong predisposition to continue along the same path, even when there is increasing knowledge that doing so is harmful individually, collectively, and on a planetary level.

How we each take action on environmental and energy issues is deeply connected to the path we take in life? In the pluralistic tradition of Hinduism, there is it no one universally right path, one way of being or thinking or believing applicable to every person, in every situation, in every stage of life. Pluralism means that each of us has our role to play. We can't presume what someone else's path and role might be. We're all seeing and interacting with the same cosmic order, the same creation, but from different perspectives. We all have different likes, dislikes, and abilities. Finding our own personal path, determining how we each can best contribute to society is crucially important, but there is no one 'right' contribution. The questions we must ask ourselves here is, "How can I best contribute; how can I be of service?"

In asking ourselves that question we must recognize that our individual *karma* and our collective *karma* predisposes us to certain actions and thoughts. What we have done individually and collectively in the past and today makes certain future choices more likely, easier, to be taken than others. This applies personally, as well as at the community or national level—though obviously the former is more easily influenced than the latter. On a physical level, we have built out our cities and suburbs in the past half century based on the ubiquity of the automobile, superhighways, and spread out housing.

We have deep separation between where we work and where we live, perhaps wise for heavy industry and the pollution that comes with it, but less so for most everything else. What has resulted? Long commutes, pollution from fossil fuel combustion, destruction of neighborhoods and community. Physical, emotional, and spiritual disconnection from place also often accompanies this pattern of building. Certain less polluting technologies, such as electric vehicles, can reduce some of the environmental impact of this sort of development, but our future options are constrained by these past actions, making a transition towards less ecologically harmful living that much more difficult. Similarly, the wealthy countries of the world have grown to be so dependent on fossil fuels, using so much energy and making their producers so much money, that efforts to use renewable energy sources or rein in pollution are frequently met with opposition, though this is slowly changing. Our past choices for energy usage here have created a strong predisposition to continue along the same path, even when there is increasing knowledge that doing so is harmful individually, collectively, and on a planetary level⁴.

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When it comes to specific climate change and energy policy recommendations, how can the *yamas* and *niyamas* be used as guidance?

In the past few years the calls from environmental advocates for institutions to divest from fossil fuel companies have grown ever louder, with a number of high profile actions persuading cities and universities to pull their money from fossil fuel investments. Such action clearly is in line with the application of *ahimsa*: This principle applies not just to actions, but our words, and

⁴ Sarma, EAS. "Coal Is Not the Answer to India's Energy Poverty, Whatever Tony Abbott Says | EAS Sarma." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 07 Aug. 2015. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

thoughts as well. Where we choose to put our money in the hopes of turning a profit encompasses all of these. Knowing the harm that continued burning of fossil fuels causes, knowingly financially profiting from them is contributing to a form of harm.

But what about continuing to use fossil fuels individually and what about the harm potentially created to people working for fossil fuel companies? Unfortunately at the moment, in most places, entirely avoiding fossil fuels is an impossibility for anyone who doesn't live a life of ecological asceticism, for anyone who lives in the world, travels only under their own power, and uses goods that they themselves have made. Knowing this, guided by the *yamas* and *niyamas* we can reduce our energy use and wherever possible choose non-polluting energy. Increasingly, many options exist for choosing low-carbon lifestyles, eating, transport, home electricity supply, and personal and institutional investments. As for the potential harm created to people working in the fossil fuel industry by pulling investments, clearly this harm too is to be avoided as much as possible. For these people we need to ensure that other job opportunities are made available, with training and assistance provided to all who need it.

Accompanying the calls for divestment there is a growing chorus of voices saying that we need to leave as much of remaining fossil fuel reserves in the ground, cease exploration for potential new reserves, and cease expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure. Here too a solid ethical case based on the *yamas* and *niyamas* can be made. In the balance our use of fossil fuels is causing more harm than good. The ecological damage of climate change is stealing from future generations the possibility of living lives that we today would think would be 'good', and those of us in wealthy nations are using a disproportionate share of them. For whatever good fossil fuels have had in bettering our lives up until this point in history, the balance has solidly tipped from them helping increasing our wealth to them increasing illth. Recent analysis of the increases in greenhouse gas emissions that will result from our current trajectory of fossil fuel usage shows that there is no way we can keep temperature rise to reasonably safe levels without forgoing the exploitation of more fossil fuels. While markets and economic forces always do have a role to play in the transition away from fossil fuels, at some point

we as people, community, and nations have to say forcefully and confidently that we will only use low-carbon energy sources, that is as unthinkable to use them in the way and to the degree we have been as it would be to suggest we can enslave our fellow human beings. We need to have the courage and confidence to say we can no longer explore for more oil and natural gas and coal. We need to accept that we cannot even burn all that exists in proven reserves if we want to preserve a climate similar to the one in which all of human life has evolved⁵.

Finally, a less publicized but no less important issue, and one with particular relevance to the global Hindu community: ending energy poverty. While segments of the human family use copious amounts of electricity, a disturbing number still live in a state of energy poverty⁶, and could benefit immensely by having a small fraction of what those of us in the wealthy nations of the world take for granted. Roughly one third of those billion or so people in the world without access to electricity, and one quarter of those who rely on biomass for cooking, live in India. This has many deleterious effects on human health and education, with the burden falling disproportionately on women and girls. It also can have negative effects on land use, deforestation, and wildlife habitat, when you consider collection of wood for cooking. Providing these people with clean, low-carbon energy sources (and in many places currently worst-affected by energy poverty, decentralized), would alleviate a great deal of harm in the world directly, while simultaneously safeguarding the lives of future generations through reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Fortunately, as solar power prices continue to fall, there should be less and less temptation to repeat the polluting patterns of development from the last century and deploy coal-fired electricity⁷. In places without current grid access there is the opportunity to not mimic the methods of the past and instead lead the way with renewable energy, generated close to the point of use.

5 @_rospearce. "Analysis: Only Five Years Left before 1.5C Carbon Budget Is Blown | Carbon Brief." Carbon Brief. N.p., 19 May 2016. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

6 "Five Surprising Facts About Energy Poverty." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

7 "Deutsche Bank Report: Solar Grid Parity in a Low Oil Price Era." – *Deutsche Bank Responsibility*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Where is *santosha* in these? *Santosha* provides a sort of counterbalance to the heaviness of these issues and what at times seems like a constant uphill struggle.

We need to have the courage and confidence to say we can no longer explore for more oil and natural gas and coal; we need to accept that we cannot even burn all that exists in proven reserves.

Despite what at times can seem like slow to no progress on the path towards more of us living more environmentally-aware lives, and towards alleviating the suffering caused by the current general lack thereof, through our practice of contentment we can see these seeming setbacks or undesired situations as opportunities for growth and learning. We can strive and work, while not being personally attached to the outcome of actions and trying to be content with the work we have done, with our place on the path, even if sometimes it seems we are off of it for a bit or the goal still seems far away. The Bhagavad Gita advises, "Always perform with detachment the work you must do; only by work performed with detachment does man reach the highest...Whatever a great man does, that others will also do. Whatever standards he sets, the same the world will follow." (3:19–21) Now, it is up to all of us to set a standard that rooted in an ecologically aware sensibility, minimizing harm, and ensuring the welfare of all beings.



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