

## The Yoga of Money

**Yoga's ethical precepts teach us to tell the truth and do no harm, but few realize that these teachings can also help us to manage our money.**

By Alan Reder

March/April 2003

When, in the wake of 9/11, President George W. Bush urged all Americans to buy more to fight terrorism, he was not just handing punch lines to David Letterman. Tortured logic aside, he was asking Americans to do something that few of us normally consider: Let values drive our financial behavior.

Unfortunately the shop-til-Osama-drops plan echoed the usual messages from our national leaders in other ways—its pitch for orgiastic consumerism and its blindness to environmental consequences, for starters. We're pushed from almost every corner of society to "get ahead"—in the careers we choose, the lifestyle we maintain, and the money we spend and invest. If we do those things within the bounds of the law and cut the occasional check to the United Way, we're assumed to have covered the values part, September 11 notwithstanding.

This notion leads to some unwitting discrepancies between our actions and intentions. Few Americans celebrate the devastation of individual lives, families, and local communities that occurs every time a corporation orders a mass layoff to bump up its stock price. But that didn't stop us from cheering as our 401Ks swelled fabulously in the late 1990s—helped in part, yes, by layoffs. Given a simple choice on a ballot, most people would vote against polluted water, sweatshop labor, and global warming. But all three problems enjoy landslide victories every day at the checkout stand in the form of non-organic food, cheap clothing, leaf blowers, and other ethically questionable but popular products.

What does all this have to do with yoga? More than you might think. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, composed around 200 ce and still considered the most succinct statement of yoga philosophy ever written, describes yoga as a path with eight limbs, of which asana is only one. The first two limbs, the *yamas* (moral restraints) and *niyamas* (observances), together lay out a set of 10 valued principles that Patanjali and virtually every yoga master after him say are crucial to one's progress along the yogic path. Yes, money and possessions are only explicitly referred to in a few. But it doesn't take much of a stretch to imagine that Patanjali meant for the whole program to cover a yogi's fiscal

dealings. He clearly intended his text to apply to a yogi's entire life—and what touches more parts of our life than the way we handle our finances?

## Money Do's & Don'ts

Almost everyone, it seems, gets a little crazy about money. Even the wealthy sweat about having enough, notes **Brent Kessel**, a certified financial planner and president of Abacus Wealth Management, Inc., in Pacific Palisades, California. For instance, some of his richest clients worry that the next market plunge will take their pricey lifestyle down with it, he says. And that's exactly why **Kessel**, a longtime student of Ashtanga Yoga whose financial counseling is influenced by the Yoga Sutra, thinks money is an underrated spiritual tool. "It can become a bell of awakening in your spiritual practice just by watching how you react to it," he says. "Where am I holding tension in my body as I do this transaction, pay bills, watch my portfolio increasing or decreasing? All of these are just opportunities to be conscious. I think that's my primary passion in my work—to use it that way."

Writing nearly 2,000 years ago, Patanjali may not have envisioned **Kessel's** particular application, but he clearly had money and material possessions in mind when he laid down at least some of the *yamas*. Take *aparigraha*, which is commonly translated to mean "nongrasping," i.e., not being greedy. The challenge for yogis, of course, is to figure out what Patanjali meant by "need," because he didn't specify. He rendered the sutras in exceedingly spare prose—intentionally, we might assume, so yogis could fill in the details with insights from their own developing wisdom. But need takes on a much different connotation in 2003, in a world of diminishing natural wealth and stark divides between rich and poor, than it did in Patanjali's time.

For example, an environmentalist would be quick to note that even the ordinary American consumes at a voracious level the planet can't sustain—Americans make up 5 percent of the world's population but hog nearly a third of the Earth's natural resources. Marshall Glickman, author of *The Mindful Money Guide: Creating Harmony Between Your Values and Finances* (Ballantine Wellspring, 1999), feels that any conscientious yogi who understands the sustainability dilemma ideally should factor that into his lifestyle choices. "No matter what path a person is on, it's crucial to ask, 'Am I being aware of other people and having their interests at heart and not just being selfish?'" says Glickman, a dedicated meditator and former stockbroker.

Dharmanidhi Sarasvati, spiritual director and yoga teacher at Tantric College of America in Berkeley, California, agrees. He adds, however, that *aparigraha* should not be read to imply any kind of objective yardstick, considering yoga's focus on inner awareness. "The real need we have is whatever we need to sustain ourselves while still making a contribution to those we have dharmic obligations to—family, employees, and so forth," he says. "Anything that's accumulated beyond that is supposed to be distributed for the benefit of others. It's not supposed to be hoarded." That would still seem to leave lots of wiggle room, but as Glickman puts it, "I can't answer what 'appropriate need' is for you,

but we have to look more closely at our own hearts and minds. I think we know when we're being hypocritical."

Financial planner George Kinder, cofounder (with colleague Dick Wagner) of the "life planning" movement in his profession, turns the entire idea of need on its head in his book *The Seven Stages of Money Maturity* (Dell, 1999) and in his practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Life planning means organizing a client's resources to support their deepest aspirations, as opposed to financial planning's usual focus on maximizing wealth and financial security. Kinder, whose seven stages in his book title are tied to yoga's seven chakras, begins his workday with clients by taking them through a self-inquiry process designed to uncover those aspirations. The process culminates with the question: If your doctor told you you only had 24 hours to live, what would you have missed?

"Ultimately people's aspirations are usually spiritual," says Kinder. "Most people talk about their family, relationship, creativity, social causes, or spirit." Once clients are staring at their bottom-line priorities, the real planning can then begin. For most people, Kinder has found, that means simplifying their everyday lives—such as cutting back on their normal workload and expenses so they can write the Great American Novel, spend more time with the children, or whatever else their "death sentence" revealed.

Besides *aparigraha*, the other *yama* that appears to refer directly to financial affairs is *asteya*, or nonstealing. Glickman looks at this principle in broader terms than the theft prohibited by law. He suggests that we ask ourselves how much of our lifestyle is based on exploitation: "Are the products we buy made fairly? The people we hire—do we treat them well? The people we work for—do we try to get the most we can from them for the least money?" But he also emphasizes *asteya*'s inner dimension. "We tend to steal to try and get more because we're not satisfied with how things are at this moment," he notes.

Dharmanidhi points to *asteya*'s more subtle aspects as well: "The esoteric principle behind *asteya* has to do with a kind of pride. The ancient teachings on this say that to think of yourself as really important is to steal your soul from God. That means that we're not surrendering ourselves to the larger view that we're this one consciousness. Once you separate yourself from the striving for this experience of oneness, then you're becoming self-absorbed and you're going to steal, either symbolically or literally."

He regards *ahimsa*, nonviolence or nonharming, in a similar vein: "The root of *ahimsa* is that any violence is caused by separation. As soon as I think that I'm independent and that what I do is not going to affect others, I've performed a violent act. We can never be perfect. I'll never know exactly how everything I'm consuming affects everyone along the chain, but I'll do the best I can, without becoming neurotic, to decrease the impact I have on others through consumption." **Kessel** feels that the external aspect of *ahimsa* also has a fiercely practical, internal side—namely, when we do violence to others or life itself, we suffer too. Classic example: the business executive whose relentless drive to succeed wrecks his marriage, family, and ultimately his financial life. *Ahimsa*, **Kessel**

says, has to include self-love—a sort of personal non-aggression pact not to do things for short-term gain that will undermine us in the long run, emotionally or financially.

He also finds financial counsel in a place few yogis might think to look, the yama of *brahmacharya*. This term is usually taken to mean moderation and self-control in sex, but **Kessel** feels pretty sure Patanjali would expand it today to include another form of lascivious relationship: the one many of us have with money. He points out that the original thinking behind *brahmacharya* assumed a vital connection between spiritual and physical energy. To develop your full potential of the former, you have to conserve the latter, the yoga tradition teaches.

"In our culture, I don't think losing sexual energy has nearly as much effect on people's long-term well-being as the leaking of financial energy, if you will, like frivolous spending," he says. To Dharmanidhi, *brahmacharya* means the ability to resist seduction, including by the sirens of advertising and marketing. "A yogi is supposed to be beyond reactivity," he notes.

How the remaining yama, *satya* (being truthful, sincere, genuine, and honest), relates to the financial world seems pretty clear. But *satya* also underlines a point **Kessel** makes about the yamas overall—their wisdom is demonstrated by the way they apply to economic systems as well as individuals. The dishonest accounting practices of Enron, Worldcom, Arthur Anderson, et al.; the disingenuous reports by the stock analysts at Wall Street's major brokerages; the resistance by Congress and federal regulators to genuine reform and oversight—all combined to create the stock market's meltdown of mid-2002 and its sluggish performance afterward, leaving the U.S. economy wobbling in the balance.

**Kessel** believes most successful businesspeople are good, honest types whose wealth comes from contributing value to others' lives. But the cautionary tale still holds: "If we don't practice basic honesty, our economic life is bound to fall apart, just like the market did."

In a sense, notes Dharmanidhi, the *niyamas* and *yamas* comprise a set of yogic do's and don'ts. The *niyamas*, or do's, describe spiritual "observances" and attitudes that are designed to build character and deepen our yoga practice. One of them, *santosa* (contentment), is relevant to our financial actions, because contentment lessens or eliminates greed. The connection between the other *niyamas* and finances may not appear to be so obvious. But as we've learned with the *yamas*, one does not have to scratch too deeply into any part of Patanjali's program to find pointed advice on money matters.

In fact, Dharmanidhi thinks the *niyamas* speak even more directly about a healthy approach to materialism than do the *yamas*. *Tapas* (a burning desire to reach self-realization), *sauca* (purity of body and mind), *ishvara* (concentration on and surrender to God)—all these yoga practices help keep us in touch with our inner essence, he points out. That focus in turn tends to keep us from being too greedy, ignoring the violent

consequences of our actions, behaving dishonestly, consuming frivolously and wastefully, and disregarding the welfare of others—in short, the whole slate of ignorant, damaging behaviors that the yamas aim to prevent.

**Brent Kessel** appreciates how the niyama of *svadhyaya* (self-observation) can inform a sane, and spiritually sound, level of consumption: "You have to self-observe to know if you really need something or if it's really trivial or for show or image." Applied to hatha yoga, *svadhyaya* also teaches us about the destructive side of ambition, he feels: "If you fight your hamstrings and tell yourself, 'Dammit, I'm going to get my chin to my knees,' you're going to get hurt and you're not going to get flexible as fast as if you observe where your limits are, observe your breath at those limits, and wait for the opening." He finds an analogy in his own field, where the rule-of-thumb is that financial security is built by investing patiently for the long term—that is, being accepting of modest but steady gains—and taking only calculated, affordable risks. It's the speculators, the get-rich-quick types who risk all for the big payday, who tend to be investing's biggest losers. In other words, *svadhyaya* of one's own circumstances and long-range goals, seasoned with a generous dose of *santosa*, leads to financial and yogic success.

### **Practicing the Yoga of Money**

If we adopt the yamas and niyamas as a financial ethic, we still need a plan for carrying it out. A number of strategies, popular mostly in progressive and countercultural circles, would seem—on first blush, anyway—to offer some well-considered ways of accomplishing just that. Socially responsible consuming and investing, right livelihood, high-impact charitable giving: We can imagine that if he were alive today, Patanjali would applaud all such efforts by yogis.

As long as they were sincere, that is. Sincerity—*satya* again—holds the key. As with asanas or any aspect of yoga, our fiscal activism accomplishes little if performed in an off-handed way—for example, casually writing a check to a visible, brand-name charity that turns out to spend most of its money on salaries and fund-raising. Just as a little focused attention can mean the difference between a bungled asana and an adroit one, it takes just a small extra effort to turn an inconsequential ethical stand into a powerful one. Here are some ideas, drawn from Marshall Glickman's *The Mindful Money Guide* and other thoughtful sources:

**Earning Ethically.** The Buddha not only coined the term "right livelihood" but also made it part of his Eightfold Path to spiritual well-being. To begin down that road, take an inventory of your talents, interests, and values. Then research related careers and create an action plan to create the work you want, including getting the necessary training. If you don't feel good about your current work but can't leave it right now, perform it in a way that doesn't compromise your values, to the greatest extent possible. And try to find the deep meaning in your current situation, which could be as basic as supporting the family you love.

**Living Lightly.** Consider simplifying your life so you can switch to a dream career as soon as possible, even if the pay is modest. Keep in mind, though, that it may be psychologically daunting to transform your lifestyle, even if the result is a life that's more exciting to wake up to every single morning. Messages we received from our parents about money, expectations from our spouse or children that we bring home a certain level of income, our self-image as a "successful" person—all these things may stand in our way. "It's very easy to upgrade our lifestyle when we can earn more money—buy a better car, travel more, buy a better place," states George Kinder. "It's much harder, once you've gotten accustomed to a way of living, to reduce it. Also, we tend to be creatures of habit. So we can be convinced that our work is damaging us yet not let go of it because the habit of it somehow gives us comfort." Given that, you may want the assistance of a life-planning professional to get you started. A skilled planner can help you wind your way through the emotional thicket, take practical steps that will ease the transition to the new vocation, and frame your goals in a way that is fulfilling for your family as well. Look at the planner's fees as an investment in saving a life—yours.

**Voting with Your Dollars.** Become more informed about the social issues imbedded in products, so your purchases can reflect your values. If you boycott a company's products, drop the company a note or e-mail explaining your action (you can probably e-mail them from their Web site)—especially if no official boycott of the company has been called. That's far more effective than quietly spending your few bucks elsewhere. And remember the crucial strategy of buy-cotting too. Buying organic food, for instance, not only may be healthier for you but also keeps pesticides out of the soil and groundwater, protects workers and soil, and often supports family farmers. Think of the extra cost as a donation to those worthy causes. Energy-efficient lightbulbs and appliances, fuel-efficient cars, and manual lawn mowers are other examples of socially positive purchases that make a significant environmental impact by preventing pollution and global warming.

**Investing from the Heart.** As with consuming, anonymously choosing not to invest in a company for ethical reasons has little impact by itself. In fact, it might be more effective to own a few shares so you can become a shareholder activist—i.e., exercise your rights as a shareholder to influence corporate management. If like most people, you're too busy or financially unsophisticated for all that, here's how to be an activist, disinvest in corporate bad actors and invest in better ones all at the same time: Buy shares in a socially responsible mutual fund (e.g., the Domini Social Index Fund, a historically strong performer) that engages in significant shareholder actions on its investors' behalf. This assumes that the fund represents your values, of course—most of the brand-name funds follow a progressive agenda that is pro-women and minorities, pro-labor, pro-environment, anti-war profiteering, and so forth. (You can learn more about socially responsible consuming and investing by simply visiting [www.coopamerica.org](http://www.coopamerica.org).)

**Giving Effectively.** "It's really important for us to be generous and hold money lightly," says Glickman. But that doesn't mean giving with your eyes closed. Investigate the groups you're considering for track record, potential impact of current projects, and percentage of donations that goes to overhead (35 percent is a reasonable maximum).

You can check out the largest national groups at the Wise Giving Alliance ([www.give.org](http://www.give.org)) or the Better Business Bureau's Philanthropic Advisory Service ([www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org)). And do not forget to volunteer as well—local groups may value your time even more than your money.

## **Living in Balance**

Money may be a crazymaker, but the yamas and niyamas can be too—if we try to shape them instead of letting them shape us. Take those who would twist Patanjali's ideas to justify questionable attitudes they already hold, such as self-denial, miserliness, and contempt for the better-off. Glickman warns us about what he calls "money-hating," or reverse materialism. "For instance, if we're too much in control, we're as obsessed by money and unfree as if we're spending, spending, spending," he observes.

Glickman contrasts the money-haters with kind, generous people whose favorite sport happens to be shopping. They're not particularly possessive of all the stuff they haul home; they just love life and all it offers. Dharmanidhi believes it is a core objective of yoga to enjoy life—"My guru talked about it constantly," he says—although he notes the Tantric teaching that we can only enjoy outer pleasures to the extent that experience exists within us already: "If the experience of the fulfillment is already present in the being, then certainly a lot less is needed because you're not going around trying to fill the hole all the time."

**Kessel** thinks the real key to properly applying the yamas and niyamas may not come from that part of the Yoga Sutra at all, but rather in the two aphorisms right afterward, the ones about correctly performing asanas. Patanjali recommends that our asanas be stable, comfortable, and tension-free while our spirit remains benevolent. While the sage was writing about posture, it's not as if we're forbidden to draw a broader lesson, **Kessel** says: "Steadiness without rigidity. Balance. Relaxation, but not sloppiness or overindulgence. Doing good for others, not just profiting personally. How can we miss the financial lesson in that?"

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