

Prem Yatra Volume 1

Chapter 4

Non-stealing

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The Meaning of Non-stealing

Even Saints are Thieves

Anecdote: The angel and the hyena

Anecdote: The theft of a cloth

Yogic Secrets are Kept for the Protection of Yoga, Not for Stealing

Anecdote: Dala Tarvadi

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The Meaning of Non-stealing

Sadhana requires preparation, whether it is yoga sadhana or bhoga sadhana; otherwise, the difficulties one encounters cannot be overcome. It is not easy to perform a task while overcoming obstacles at the same time. For this reason, the best seekers prepare for sadhana by surveying the potential obstacles and erecting a line of defense against them to prevent unexpected difficulties from arising. Preparation forms the foundation for any task.

Since we perform all work through the medium of the mind, mental peace and steadiness are essential to the accomplishment of every task. A task is only as easy as the mind is steady, and the body works only as efficiently as the mind is peaceful. Success in any field of one's choice is possible only when one attains peace of mind. Thus, before beginning any task, we must prepare ourselves thoroughly by laying a firm foundation. Many difficulties will arise later if we do not realize the importance of this foundation and construct it properly before beginning.

A yoga sadhak is born with a love for yoga, so his primary goal in life is to attain peace of mind. Only that seeker who squarely confronts the mind's disturbances can practice yoga sadhana.

We should learn to tackle only one task at a time. So the sadhak should not need to concern himself with external purification when he is purifying himself internally; and when he is purifying externally, he should not need to be concerned with internal purification. Only when the thought stream flows in a single direction does the sadhak achieve quick success.

Non-stealing is the fifth discipline prescribed and defined in the scriptures as not desiring anyone's wealth by thought, word, or deed, and not taking anyone's possessions, no matter how small, without their permission. When we obtain what we desire by honest means, our mind remains at peace, free of fear; whereas when we obtain what we desire by dishonest means, we lose our peace of mind and become victims of fear.

Not only does the act of stealing expend mental and physical energy, the fear that is generated makes the mind agitated and restless. A thief may seem courageous, but his so-called courage is actually a form of fear. Moreover, having faith that stealing will provide our needs is weakness rather than faith, and developing stealing skills is a sign of foolishness rather than cleverness.

Even Saints are Thieves

Some people say that the words "thief" and "theft" are useless; that these words do not belong in the dictionary. They claim that because this entire world is the Lord's creation, everyone has equal right to what is in it. "Where is the question of stealing, if we are using our own things?" they say. "Since the whole world is one family, everything we acquire, either secretly or openly, belongs to our own relatives and is, therefore, ours."

Many people are totally convinced that this world is a large marketplace full of thieves; in many ways they are correct. Yet, there are different types of thieves: ordinary thieves, skilled thieves, and master thieves. Master thieves are called aristocrats, skilled thieves are called gentlemen, and ordinary thieves are called saints! Here, I cannot resist telling you a story.

Anecdote: The angel and the hyena

During medieval times, civil wars were rampant. In those days, kings used to erect forts to protect their towns and villages. The fortress gates would be opened in the early morning and closed every evening at fixed times. One day a traveler named Marvadi came to one of these villages. He saw the gates closing from a distance and he ran to get inside, but he was too late; they were closed tightly just as he arrived. He repeatedly begged the gate-keeper to open the gates, but to no avail. It was winter, too, and he was extremely cold. Not only that, but the surrounding forest was filled with fierce animals. However, this traveler was a country peddler, and his experience with such circumstances helped him pass the night safely even without the shelter of the fortress.

That night, however, was filled with suspense. There was a cemetery close to the spot where Marvadi slept. In the middle of the night, he was startled awake by a strange sound. By the light of the moon, he was able to see a hyena digging up a freshly buried corpse. In no time at all, that fierce animal had opened the grave and dragged the corpse away.

Soon it was daybreak, and the gates to the village were opened. As Marvadi prepared to leave the forest, a Muslim family came to offer flowers at the same grave that the hyena had dug up during the night. Seeing the open grave, a child who had come with his father said, "Father, why is the tomb empty? Where has grandfather gone?"

The father concealed his despair, though he knew that an animal had stolen the corpse. To satisfy his child, however, he said, "An angel must have taken him away."

Marvadi heard them talking in Urdu, the language of the Muslims. Using his working knowledge of that language, he said, "Brother, I slept here overnight and saw a hyena come, dig up the body, and drag it away."

If the Muslim family were to believe that the corpse had actually been dragged away by a wild animal, they would have been upset. So to prevent this, the elder spokesman for the family raised his fist in anger and denied the traveler's statement.

But Marvadi was a practical man, so he toned down his statement a bit to avoid unnecessary trouble. Diplomatically, he replied, "Brother, let's not quarrel. It's just that we speak different languages. The word "hyena" in my language means "angel" in yours, so I merely made a mistake in translation. Still, however, the corpse was in fact taken by a hyena."

In this anecdote, Marvadi's last statement was the same as his first. Thus, just as he used the word hyena in two different ways, when someone in this world of thieves is referred to as an aristocrat, a gentleman, or a saint, he is still actually a thief.

Stealing is the religion of life: goldsmiths steal gold, blacksmiths steal iron, carpenters steal wood, tailors steal cloth, and teachers steal knowledge. We all develop thievery skills, and the one who becomes most supremely skillful is called a great yogi.

Even deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti incarnate as thieves. They steal too! Does it matter much whether they steal your mind or your money? They are thieves just the same. In fact, we could say that they are first class thieves, masters of the art of thievery, forerunners in the skill of stealing, and the supreme propagators of thievery.

Literature is one of the various forms of entertainment available today. All forms of entertainment have developed and prospered because of our pervasive and widespread entrapment in delusion. Eggplants grown on farms are different from eggplants shown in pictures; those from the farm can be eaten, but those in pictures can only be looked at.

Stealing was considered an art in India for ages. As illustrated in the story that follows, many arts involve in-born skills, and stealing is no exception.

Anecdote: The theft of a cloth

Since stealing was considered to be an art in ancient times, arrangements were often made to cultivate its expression. We must remember here, however, that it is one thing for an artist to develop a career as an artist, and another for a thief to make stealing his vocation in life. In ancient times, even kings and aristocrats taught their children the fine art of stealing to sharpen their intellect. In those days, if a theft could not be solved, the king would issue a proclamation of amnesty. The guilty thief, upon hearing this, would then fearlessly present himself to the state assembly and disclose the trick he used in committing the crime. He would be set free and given a reward of a specified number of gold coins.

Since stealing was considered an art, a seminar was once arranged on the subject during a state assembly. As the seminar ended, it was decided that an expert in the art of stealing should be questioned and asked to demonstrate his skills. The first name that occurred to the participants was that of a prosperous tailor in town, who was a favorite among the king's family. After the seminar, the king sent for him and said, "Mohanbhai, two days ago, we held a seminar on the art of stealing. Many participants nominated you as the leading expert in the art. Is this true?"

"Your Excellency," Mohanbhai replied with dignity, "having served your family for many years, I am naturally quite prosperous. Let it be clear that I have never stolen anything to acquire wealth but only to practice the art. No art can develop without practice. Stealing is unacceptable only if it is done for the sake of acquiring wealth and not practiced as an art."

The king replied in a friendly way, "It is all right if you want to steal for the sake of the art, but what would you do if I ordered you not to steal at all?"

"You are the king," Mohanbhai respectfully replied, "and you are powerful. I would honor your command. Nevertheless, since I am an artist, I must say that even if I could not steal a lot, I would always get away with a little bit."

The king replied, "And if I would not allow you to do even a small amount of stealing, then what?"

"Then, I must confess," Mohanbhai said, "that I could not be considered an expert artist if I could not steal at least something anyway."

"Then we will have to conduct an experiment," the king said. The princess is about to be married. Many dresses need to be made for the wedding. I will have you sew the dresses, but you must do so under the watchful eyes of the state inspectors."

"As you desire," Mohanbhai consented.

The king ordered the cloth for the dresses. Mohanbhai sat in the palace under the close observation of the inspectors and began sewing the dresses. At the end of each day, the king ordered the inspectors to check Mohanbhai's pockets before he went home. One day, Mohanbhai's twelve-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son came to the palace. As the two stood at the door, the daughter said loudly, "Father, my brother will not stay at home. He's very mischievous and bothers everybody."

"Go away!" Mohanbhai said. "Take him home! Can't you see that I am busy?"

"But he wants five rupees," the daughter said.

One of the inspectors was surprised. "Five rupees?" he said. "Why does he need so much money? Mohanbhai! I think you've spoiled this child with too much affection. Otherwise, why would this little boy ask for five rupees?"

"Father," the child immediately said, "Give me five rupees!"

"I didn't bring any money with me," Mohanbhai said. "Go home! I will give you some when I come."

"No! No! Rupees!" the boy said.

Mohanbhai picked up his wooden tailor's gauge and threw it at his son, but he did it in such a manner as to scare the boy and not to hurt him. "Are you going, or not?" Mohanbhai said.

"No! No! I want rupees!" his son insisted. In anger, Mohanbhai threw a shoe at his son. "This is the only kind of rupees I have!"

The inspector was afraid the child would be injured and said, "Mohanbhai, don't continue throwing things at your child. He may get hurt."

His son, however, kept the shoe and said, "I will only give back your shoe if you give me rupees."

"Oh really?" Mohanbhai said, "Then take these rupees!" And he threw his other shoe.

The two children ran away with the shoes. The inspector burst into laughter. "Mohanbhai," he said, "Today you will have to go home barefoot."

"I don't mind," Mohanbhai said, "It is enough that those kids are gone. I can't stand to be disturbed when I am working. From now on, I'm going to keep some stones here to make sure they stay away."

"Mohanbhai," the inspector said, "Don't keep stones with you or you may hurt the children."

"I know that," Mohanbhai said, "I will take care that I don't hurt them. But I must scold them in this manner or else they won't believe me."

When Mohanbhai had finished sewing the dresses for the wedding, the king called the inspectors and said, "Did you watch carefully to make sure that there was no stealing?"

"Yes, your Excellency," the inspectors said. "We checked his pockets every day before he went home. We are sure that he has not stolen anything."

Then the king called Mohanbhai. "Well, Mohanbhai," the king said, "Have you succeeded in your art or failed?" Mohanbhai took out some stolen cloth and said, "By your grace, I have succeeded."

The king was pleased. "You are truly an expert at this art," he said. "How did you steal this cloth?"

"If you are really pleased," Mohanbhai said, "Give me a reward of 25,000 rupees in addition to my regular payment for sewing the dresses, and I will disclose my secret." The king agreed.

Mohanbhai described the whole incident with his two children and said that he had hidden the cloth in both shoes!

The king's face lit up with a smile.

Yogic Secrets are Kept for the Protection of Yoga, Not for Stealing

One person may desire to be a yogi and another may strive to be a sanyasi, but no one wants to be considered a thief. Whenever we conceal something from another person, however, we become thieves.

Yet, not everything that is concealed is stolen. For example, the science of yoga is extremely esoteric, and its secrets are always concealed from the undeserving. However, the great yogis are protecting truth rather than committing theft. They protect the truth for those who deserve it.

Some time ago, beloved Vinit Muni asked me a question. The question he asked concerned an advanced stage of yoga sadhana that was beyond his present experience, so I did not answer it. He is a sadhak on the path of nivritti marga and has practiced sadhana for the last four years. He is my disciple and my son; whatever is mine is his also. And yet this knowledge of yoga is spiritual knowledge rather than wealth. It is only given gradually as one develops the capacity to understand it experientially.

The spiritual seeker's face radiates with joy when an esoteric secret is revealed to him through his personal experience in sadhana. This is the supreme means to realize sadhana's esoteric truths. Usually a description of the most important yogic experiences is available in one of the scriptures. Since a Sadguru is generous and just rather than selfish and cunning, he conceals nothing from a deserving disciple. But, the disciple must reach a particular stage of sadhana before the Sadguru will reveal the secret of that stage. If for some important reason he must reveal the secret early, the Sadguru will only give a clue, because the disciple can only realize that particular secret after attaining that stage.

One constantly faces delusions in yoga sadhana, because his emotions are heightened. These delusions are one type of obstacle, which all sadhaks must contend with until they attain samadhi. In my sadhana, also, this type of obstacle has continually occurred. I have been deluded in my sadhana, because I considered these experiences to be significant yogic experiences. But as my sadhana has progressed, I have discovered how to discriminate between a true major experience of sadhana and a delusion by evaluating the experience over and over again. Now, I consider an experience to be a major attainment only after it passes my final test.

There is a vast difference between bonafide and misinterpreted yogic experiences; yet, hyper-emotionality has led even the best seekers astray. The spiritual seeker must keep this fact clear in his mind: genuine and nongenuine attainments only appear to be similar because of the seeker's emotional attachment. In fact, these attainments are as different as day is from night. The seeker is simply deluded if he believes otherwise.

If a seeker does not allow such delusions to lead him astray and if he continues on the correct path, sooner or later he will see that the experience was a delusion rather than a true yogic experience. However, if the seeker follows his misinterpretation and takes the wrong path, he will continue to believe that the delusion is real. Seekers who are led astray in this way are behaving contrary to the ultimate truth. Consequently, any scriptures written by them are erroneous, and anyone who practices sadhana under their guidance is led down the path to delusion. The major difference between true scriptures and deluded scriptures is that the true scriptures of the great, realized yogis make it patently obvious that the nivritti path is only for an extraordinarily great person. On the other hand, the scriptures of a deluded yogi represent the nivritti path as a social religion which everyone can practice.

We can gather good thoughts either by listening to inspiring orators or by studying the works of excellent authors. However, when we speak or write these same thoughts, we should express gratitude towards their originator, or it is a theft of thoughts. Yes, we steal not just for material wealth but also for fame; that is, we steal the thoughts and conduct of another. This is like a crow wearing the feathers of a peacock.

Stealing is immoral, and non-stealing is moral. Anyone who desires to travel on the path to the Lord must practice morality.

Concentration is essential to thieves both while planning and while stealing. But this type of concentration is a doorway to spiritual downfall rather than spiritual ascent. The yogic scriptures provide instructions for concentration of a pure nature. Yoga sadhana must be done with effort in an appropriate place. During the day we are usually engaged in rajasic or tamasic concentration, so naturally we don't need a meditation room for that! When we engage in these forms of concentration while sitting in meditation, however, feelings of attachment and hatred quickly develop and potentiate the concentration.

Causing disturbance in someone's mind is a subtle form of violence. Thus, stealing is a form of violence since it disturbs the mind of our victim. Moreover, not only do thieves need to act dishonestly to steal something, they must lie to conceal their theft. Their possessions are consequently contaminated, and they break their vow of nonattachment and non-stealing. Thus, one simple theft is enough to destroy the entire fortress of spiritual discipline. I will tell you a story which I hope will illuminate this subject for you.

Anecdote: Dala Tarvadi

Anyone can write or speak religious thoughts, but not everyone can practice them. Religious behavior requires austerity, and anyone who cannot consistently practice austerity cannot absorb religion. To be religious is to be an ascetic.

Steam is generated from water and heat, and, yet, no work can be performed with that steam if it is not properly channeled. Likewise, thoughts that are not channeled into behavior remain impotent.

There once was a man named Dala Tarvadi who lived in a small village. He had read a few religious scriptures. One day, without any apparent reason, Tarvadi took a walk to the outskirts of the village. Suddenly, he noticed a small garden owned by a man named Vashrambhai and walked over to see what he had planted this year. In the distance, he saw Vashrambhai himself, tending his garden.

Tarvadi called out loudly, "Hey Vashrambhai, how are you?"

"I'm fine," replied Vashrambhai casually, "What brings you out this way, Tarvadi?"

"I had a little work at the outskirts of the village," said Dala Tarvadi. "I happened to see your garden and thought I would go and see what you had planted. What have you put in this year?"

"Vegetables," replied Vashrambhai. He took Dala Tarvadi on a tour of the entire garden. Then he said, "Here, take home a few of these eggplants; they're great!"

Tarvadi gratefully took the eggplants and went home. That evening he prepared the eggplants for supper and liked them very much. Two or three days later he remembered those delicious eggplants again; but he knew that Vashrambhai would not give them away free every time. And yet, he did not want to pay the expensive price for them either. Engrossed in thoughts about the eggplants, once again Dala Tarvadi walked to the outskirts of the village. He looked around to make sure that the orchard was empty. Then he trespassed into the garden and went to the small mound where the eggplants were growing. But just as he was about to take some eggplants, he remembered a line from the scriptures: "If you take anything without the owner's permission, you are stealing."

Tarvadi knew that the owner was not around and that even if he was, he wouldn't just give away expensive eggplants for nothing. It took a few minutes to wrestle with his conscience, but eventually Dala Tarvadi devised a way to take the eggplants without cost and still feel that he was observing the scriptures. He softly said to the garden, "Oh Garden! Sister Garden."

But how could a garden of vines, vegetables, and trees give a response?

Dala Tarvadi spoke in reply for the garden in a feminine voice: "What do you want, Dala Tarvadi?"

"May I take two or three eggplants?" Tarvadi said in his own voice.

Then again he replied in a feminine voice, "Sure, brother, help yourself! Take ten or eleven." So Dala Tarvadi took home as many eggplants as he wanted.

After learning the exact time at which Vashrambhai went home and the garden was empty for the day, Tarvadi began to come for eggplants every evening.

Eventually, Vashrambhai realized that someone was stealing his eggplants. So, one day he hid in the garden when he normally would have gone home. Soon, he spied Dala Tarvadi come and start picking eggplants in his usual manner, taking permission from the garden. Vashrambhai came out from his hiding place and caught him.

Dala Tarvadi was embarrassed and ashamed, but Vashrambhai did not scold or hit him. Instead, he tied a rope around Tarvadi and lowered him into the well. When the water came up to Tarvadi's neck, Vashrambhai called out, "Brother well. Oh, brother well!"

Then Vashrambhai changed his voice, and spoke in reply for the well. "Hello, Vashrambhai! What did you say?" "Shall I dunk him two or three times?" Vashrambhai said with his regular voice.

Changing back to the voice of the well, he said, "Oh brother, dunk him ten or eleven times!" So, with the consent of the well, Vashrambhai dunked Dala Tarvadi eleven times before pulling him out of the well.

Dala Tarvadi was totally exhausted and unconscious, for he had swallowed lots of water. Eventually, after he had pulled himself together, he went home with soaking wet clothes and drenched in despondency. He had learned his lesson, and from that day on gave up his habit of stealing eggplants!

There are five scripturally prescribed spiritual disciplines: nonviolence, truth, celibacy, nonattachment, and non-stealing. When any of these are broken, the mind becomes restless. While a flame in a windy place flickers unsteadily, a mind in the shelter of the spiritual disciplines burns on steadily.