

THE YOGA SUTRAS: FROM CONFLICT RESOLUTION TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

By Rama Jyoti Vernon

Rama Jyoti Vernon has applied the Yoga Sutras in the resolution of international conflicts affecting Russia, China, Cuba, the Middle East, Ethiopia, Armenia, the Ukraine, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, and other countries. One of Yoga's most senior teachers, she shows how, through the Sutras, conflict can not only be resolved but transformed, moving the way we deal with conflict personally and globally to a new evolutionary level.

The word, "Yoga" comes from the Sanskrit, "Yuj," which means to yoke or bring together; to join the individual with the universal. The *Yoga Sutras* teach us how to release the impediments that keep us from realizing the oneness that already is. Light and darkness, heat and cold, sun (*ha*) and moon (*tha*), represent the polarities that Yoga brings into balance. When we bring about physical and mental, emotional and spiritual alignment there is transformation.

This also applies to the field of conflict-resolution. There is only conflict where we perceive separation. In mediation, as in Yoga, we learn to stay in the center of polarities. When we are able to do this, our presence can help bring balance and healing to a situation. Conflict can be used, like Yoga, as an evolutionary force for positive change.

The goal of Yoga is quieting that which gives rise to turbulence and conflict—the *vruttis*. There are five types of *vruttis*. The first one is correct perception. Patanjali divides perception into three phases: direct, indirect and inference of others. The further we get away from the direct experience of a situation, the more potential we have for conflict. Like the game of telephone, the further we stray from the original experience the more convoluted it becomes. This leads us to the second *vrutti*, incorrect perception, which is the source of prejudice, stereotypes and much conflict in our lives and world.

Growing up, I inherited the cultural belief that the Soviets were our enemy. When I became involved in citizen diplomacy and went to the Soviet Union, however, I began to see the Soviets as people like us—with hopes, dreams and aspirations. I had to redo my concept of "enemy." During the 1980s, our organization (the Center for International Dialogue) was able to take thousands of U.S. citizens to meet their Soviet counterparts over a period of eight years for the development of joint projects in an effort to keep people from our two countries connected. Sri Gurudev even joined us on two of the trips. Clergy met clergy, doctors met doctors, actors met actors, and so on. This process changed impressions and when we met with Mr. Gorbachev, it was an honor to hear him say

that it was groups like ours that ended the Cold War, not just the efforts of our two governments.

Today, we have to contend with the war on terrorism. Who is this faceless enemy? In my work, I have met with members of Hamas, Hezbollah and other extremist groups, including the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan. About two years ago, my daughter asked me to meet with Ashim, a young Lebanese man living in America. During an Israeli bombing in south Lebanon, Ashim lost 27 family members. He was so devastated that he decided to leave his wife and newborn child and go to Lebanon to do a suicide bombing. When I sat down to talk to him, I thought there was nothing I could say because his anguish had turned beyond justice to vengeance. I held his hand, shared his tears and in his loss, and felt his pain. Then, he told me what he wanted to do to the enemy. I said, "Have you thought of Gandhi's principles of nonviolence?" I expected him to get upset with me, but he just sat in a long silence. Then he said, "Maybe one day, but not now."

The next day I flew to Moscow where I was invited to teach conflict-resolution to members of the Russian parliament. One evening, I was a dinner guest at the assistant Israeli ambassador's home. Their 18-year-old daughter was just leaving to join the Israeli army. As she was going out the door I asked her if she was afraid. She replied, "No, I hate Arabs." I thought of Ashim, who wanted to join a terrorist group so he could kill the Jews. I asked her if she would sit and talk with me a moment. Using a method we teach called "compassionate listening," we talked about her life and what brought her to such hatred. She explained, "I hate Arabs because I love them." She began to cry, saying she had once had very close Arab friends but they had cut off communication with her. She spoke of how she missed them and had been so hurt, then angry, and now, wanted to hurt them. I asked if I could bring her together with her Arab friends, would she meet with them? She said she would. I told her I would arrange that and she fell into my arms sobbing. We had gotten to the depth of her love and yearning and the anger that had turned into rage and hatred. This is what I mean when I tell people that we can't separate personal, interpersonal and international conflicts.

Soon after, I returned to the USA and my daughter asked, "Mother, what did you say to Ashim?" I thought, "Oh no, what did I do!" Ashim had told her he was not going to join Hezbollah, but that he would devote his life to peaceful solutions like Gandhi. In both these seemingly impossible cases, I realized that people just need to be with one another. We can't change the world all at once but the work seems to be changing one heart at a time. When we feel another's pain as our own, anger dissolves into a healing for all involved. The further away we get from correct perception, the more distorted the mind waves become and the more we see separation. In separation we see an enemy different from ourselves. It's so simple and yet it seems so difficult. It's right there in the *Sutras*.

I once heard of a swami who went to meet with a terrorist group in Kashmir. He went to find out why they were doing these acts. That is what my husband and I do in our work. We go and meet with people in conflict to understand what is really wanted. I believe in listening to everybody. When the swami asked this group what they wanted, he was shocked by their answer. They said, "We want three wells in our village. We have no wells and have to walk for miles." This is why I say that conflict is rarely what it looks like on the surface. The swami asked the youths, "If I get you these wells, will you all agree to stop these acts of violence?" They agreed and they stopped the violence.

When we get into the distortion of the "enemy" concept, we also couple that with a third *vritti*, which is *vikalpa*. "*Vi*" means "no" and "*kalpa*" is "time." It is interpreted as imagination beyond time. Imagination often causes us to project things onto another and, then, we get upset when the other doesn't live up to our expectations. Sri Gurudev always said, "No appointments, no disappointments," which is a fabulous teaching. A very simple example of how conflict arises from incorrect perception and the imagination is the proverbial, "Why didn't you return my call?" scenario. You call someone, they don't call back. Suddenly the thoughts flood in, "Oh, they don't like me, it must be something I said the last time I saw them." Then, we start building a case against the person. A few days later we get a phone call and an explanation, "Sorry I just got your message, I was out of town."

The fourth *vritti* is *nidra*, or sleep. Psychological sleep is when we go into denial, and this can cause a lot of conflict for the one in denial and those affected by that denial. When we want to go to sleep to what the true facts are, this eventually brings us to the fifth mind wave, which is *smriti*, memory. This *vritti* distorts the memory. It's like the saying, "A lie repeated one hundred times becomes truth." Deep in the psyche, however, we know what the truth is and, if we don't live according to that truth, we



Rama Jyoti Vernon with Sri Gurudev (L.) in Russia, 1986.

begin to live in turbulence. The ideal *sadhana* is to train ourselves to catch the distortions in the mind waves themselves, before they are expressed or repressed.

Over the years, many people have asked me how I was able to succeed in bringing dialogue and conflict resolution where others had failed. I realized it was because I was applying all my years of work in the Yoga field. *Avidya* (ignorance) is not seeing that we are one. *Asmita* is thinking we are separate. *Raga* and *dvesha* are the polarities that keep us apart. *Abhinivesha* is fear—fear of being alone, out of control, not having enough and so on that causes people and nations to become aggressors. The goal of Yoga is to bring us to the center where we are not tossed about by the polarities but where we can simultaneously hold the two. It's all there in the first chapter of the *Sutras*. "When the waves of the mind become still," Patanjali says, "then the seer and the seen become one." In the realization of this oneness, if we can see others as ourselves, we transcend all conflict.

Rama Jyoti Vernon founded and co-founded numerous organizations including the California Yoga Teachers Association (original publishers of the *Yoga Journal*), the California Institute for Yoga Teacher Education, the B.K.S. Iyengar Association of Northern California, Unity in Yoga International, Women of Vision and Action, the Center for International Dialogue, and the International Yoga College. She and her husband, Rev. Max Lafser, co-designed an extensive curriculum for conflict resolution and peace studies based on the *Yoga Sutras*. For more information, please visit: www.internationalyogacollege.com