

The Mahāvratas of the Pātañjalayogaśāstra: A Philological, Exegetical, and Comparative Annotation of Yoga Sūtra II.30-31

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The Soteriological Imperative of Unconditional Ethics in Classical Yoga

The *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, constituting the aphorisms of Patañjali and the *Bhāṣya* of Vyāsa, presents a rigorous soteriological framework wherein the ultimate objective is *Kaivalya*; the metaphysical isolation of *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) from the evolutes of *Prakṛti*. Within the *Sādhana Pāda*, Patañjali delineates the *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga* (Eight-Limbed Yoga), beginning with *Yama* (restraint) and *Niyama* (observance). While later limbs such as *Dhyāna* (meditation) and *Samādhi* (enstasy) frequently dominate phenomenological discourse, the *Yamas*; specifically their elevation to the status of *Mahāvrata* in *Yoga Sūtra* II.31—constitute the non-negotiable foundation of the entire system.

A granular analysis of the Sanskrit text, the divergent interpretations of the classical commentators (Vyāsa, Vācaspati Miśra, Śaṅkara-Vivarana, and Vijñānabhikṣu), and the comparative interface with Jain praxis will hopefully illuminate the *Mahāvrata* anew. The central thesis posited here is that the *Mahāvrata* serves a specific teleological function: the total eradication of *rajasic* and *tamasic* potentials in the *citta*, thereby acting as a mechanism for *citta-śuddhi* (purification of consciousness) essential for the burning of *saṃskāras* (subliminal impressions). Unlike the *Dharmaśāstric* models which permit contextual violence (e.g., ritual sacrifice or martial duty), Patañjali's *Mahāvrata* demands a categorical imperative that transcends time (*kāla*), place (*deśa*), class (*jāti*), and convention (*samaya*).

Textual and Philological Exegesis of Yoga Sūtra II.30

Sūtra II.30: *ahiṃsā-satya-asteya-brahmacarya-aparigrahāḥ yamāḥ*

Translation: Non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-possessiveness are the restraints.

Before dissecting the universalization of these vows in II.31, it is methodologically requisite to establish the precise semantic scope of the constituents as understood in the *Bhāṣya* tradition. Patañjali lists these five not merely as moral virtues but as psycho-behavioral controls designed to stem the outflow of mental energy into the external world.

Ahiṃsā (Non-Violence): The Root Matrix

Ahiṃsā is structurally the foundational *Yama* from which all others emerge and to which they are subservient. The tradition is unanimous that the subsequent Yamas (Satya, Asteya, etc.) function solely to preserve the integrity of *Ahiṃsā* in its pure form.

Etymological and Semantic Analysis:

Derived from the root $\sqrt{hiṃs}$ (to strike/injure) with the negative prefix a-, *Ahiṃsā* denotes the total absence of the intent to injure. However, the commentarial glosses reveal a far more complex internal dynamic than simple pacifism. Vyāsa defines it as *sarvathā sarvadā sarvabhūtānām anabhidrohaḥ*: abstinence from malice towards all beings in all ways and at all times. The inclusion of *sarvathā* (in all ways) and *sarvadā* (at all times) in the definition itself anticipates the universalization found in the subsequent sūtra.

Commentarial Divergence:

- **Vyāsa:** Emphasizes that the other Yamas are rooted in *Ahiṃsā* and are practiced only to perfect it (*tad-siddhaye eva upādīyante*). If a conflict arises between *Satya* (truth) and *Ahiṃsā*, *Ahiṃsā* prevails.
- **Vācaspati Miśra:** In the *Tattvavaiśārādī*, Vācaspati clarifies that *Ahiṃsā* is not merely the negation of physical killing but the removal of the *saṃskāra* of hostility. He argues that violence is a product of *kleshas* (afflictions) like *rāga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (aversion). Therefore, *Ahiṃsā* is the practice of neutralizing these affective drives.
- **Śaṅkara (Vivarana):** The *Vivarana* commentary reinforces that *Ahiṃsā* must be "pure" (*śuddha*). He introduces a rigorous standard: if one practices non-violence but retains a hidden mental agitation or desire for harm, the vow is broken. He links this directly to the concept/trope of *Brahman*, suggesting that the more one desires to undertake vows, the more one practices *Ahiṃsā* in its pure form by desisting from causes of violence born of carelessness (*pramāda*).

Satya : The Epistemological Ethic

Vyāsa defines *Satya* as speech and mind corresponding to the object (*artha*) as perceived or inferred. However, he introduces a crucial caveat: speech must be for the benefit of beings (*bhūta-hitam*).

The Ethical Conflict (Dharmasaṅkṛāṭa):

The commentaries engage with the classic dilemma: What if telling the truth leads to harm? Vyāsa is explicit: "If speech results in the ruin of creatures, it is not truth; it is a semblance of virtue (*puṇya-ābhāsa*) leading to terrible darkness." This statement subordinates the epistemological value of truth to the ontological value of life (*Ahiṃsā*).

- **Vācaspati's Gloss:** Vācaspati elucidates that "truth" devoid of compassion is a "counterfeit" (*pratirūpaka*). He warns that one who speaks such a "truth" falls into "terrible darkness," implying a karmic regression despite the technical accuracy of the speech.
- **Implications for Mahāvrata:** When elevated to a *Mahāvrata*, *Satya* requires a hyper-awareness of the consequences of speech. The yogi cannot hide behind "technical truth" to justify harm. This aligns with the Jain concept of *satyavrata* where truth is inextricably linked to non-injury.

Asteya (Non-Stealing): The Psychology of Desire

Steal (theft) is the unauthorized appropriation of things belonging to others. Asteya is the absence of this desire (*spṛhā*).

Psychological Dimension:

It is critical to note that Patañjali focuses on the mental state (*spṛhā*) rather than the legalistic act. Vācaspati Miśra notes that Asteya takes the form of desirelessness. If one refrains from stealing merely out of fear of punishment, it is not Asteya. The Mahāvrata requires that this absence of craving be maintained even in dire need or famine, overriding the āpad-dharma (dharma of emergency) found in Smṛti texts. The mind must remain equanimous regarding possession, viewing the appropriation of another's resources as a violation of the cosmic order (*ṛta*).

Brahmacarya (Continence): The Conservation of Energy

Restraint of the generative organ (*upastha-saṁyama*).

Scope and Teleology:

While often interpreted as celibacy, in the context of the Mahāvrata, it implies the total conservation of energy (*vīrya*) to be transmuted into Ojas for spiritual absorption.

- **Śaṅkara's Interpretation:** The *Vivaraṇa* explicitly connects *Brahmacarya* to the capacity

for cognitive focus. Sexual activity is seen as a dissipation of the energy required for *Dhāraṇā* (concentration). For the householder, *Brahmacarya* might mean fidelity, but for the *Yogi* aiming for *Kaivalya*, the text leans heavily toward the ascetic ideal where sexual impulse is entirely sublimated.

- **Modern vs. Classical:** Modern commentators like Georg Feuerstein and Edwin Bryant note the tension here between the "householder yogi" and the "ascetic yogi." However, Patañjali's text, by defining these as *Mahāvratā* in the next sutra, sets the bar at the ascetic level. There is no "partial *Brahmacarya*" in the *Great Vow*.

Aparigraha (Non-Possessiveness): The Rejection of Material Support

Abstinence from accepting gifts or accumulating resources, driven by the understanding of the defects (doṣa) involved in acquiring, preserving, and losing objects.

Teleological Function:

Aparigraha is essential for Janma-karmaṇā-sambodha (knowledge of the how and why of birth, YS II.39). By rejecting external support, the yogi is forced to rely solely on the Self. Acquisition requires maintenance; maintenance requires mental energy; mental energy directed toward objects prevents Samādhi. Therefore, Aparigraha is a strategy for cognitive efficiency.

Jain Parallel: This Yama is practically identical to the Jain vow of *Aparigraha*, which emphasizes limiting possessions to reduce attachment (*mūrchā*). The *Mahāvratā* implies a radical minimalism, often reducing possessions to the bare body or a few essentials, ensuring the *Citta* remains unburdened.

Philological Annotation of Yoga Sūtra II.31: The Structure of the Mahāvratā

The Commentarial Tradition: Distinct Voices

The interpretation of the *Mahāvratā* evolves through the layers of commentary, reflecting the tension between tradition and the Ascetic Ideal.

Commentator	Work	Century	Key Contribution on Mahāvratā
Vyāsa	<i>Yogabhāṣya</i>	5th CE	Defines the 4 limitations (Jāti, Deśa, Kāla, Samaya); introduces the Fisherman/Soldier examples.
Vācaspati Miśra	<i>Tattvavaiśārādī</i>	9th CE	Explicitly critiques Vedic sacrifice as a violation of Mahāvratā; defines Samaya as 'compact'.
Bhoja	<i>Rājamārtanḍa</i>	11th CE	Clarifies <i>Samaya</i> as specific requirements like those of a Brahmin; emphasizes universality.
Vijñānabhikṣu	<i>Yogavārttika</i>	16th CE	Attempts to harmonize with Dharmaśāstra; suggests exceptions

			for those not fully committed to Yoga (laypeople).
Śaṅkara	<i>Vivaraṇa</i>	8th CE	Emphasizes "pure" Ahimsa; critiques "counterfeit" virtue; strong anti-ritualistic stance.

Vyāsa: The Categorizer

Vyāsa's primary contribution is the categorization of the four limitations. His commentary serves to close the loopholes that a practitioner might use to justify moral lapses. By explicitly naming the fisherman and the soldier, Vyāsa addresses the economic and political realities of his time, asserting that Yoga is a path that transcends socio-economic roles. His refusal to grant an exception for Vedic sacrifice (*Samaya*) places the *Yoga* school closer to the *Śramaṇa* traditions (Buddhism/Jainism) on the specific issue of *Ahiṃsā* than to the *Mīmāṃsā* school.

Vācaspati Miśra: The Anti-Ritualist

Vācaspati Miśra acts as a bridge between the text and the orthodox tradition but takes a surprisingly radical stance on *Samaya*. His critique of Vedic sacrifice is pivotal. He argues that while Vedic sacrifice may lead to heaven (*Svarga*), it involves *Hiṃsā* and thus generates *karmāśaya* (karmic residue) that binds the soul. Since the goal of Yoga is *Mokṣa* (liberation), not *Svarga*, the Yogi must reject even the "good" violence of the Vedas. This distinction between *Dharma* (merit) and *Yoga* (liberation) is crucial for understanding the *Mahāvratā*.

Vijñānabhikṣu: The Harmonizer

Writing much later, Vijñānabhikṣu tries to soften the blow for the non-ascetic. He suggests that for "yogis not committed to their yogic goals" (i.e., laypeople), these vows can be modified according to their position in life. However, he concedes that for the *ārurukṣu* (one attempting to ascend to Yoga), the *Mahāvratā* is absolute. He reinforces that *Samaya* refers to the transgressions permitted by the warriors'-code and Vedic ritual, both of which must be discarded by the true aspirant.

Comparative Philosophy: Jainism and the Mahāvratā

The term *Mahāvratā* is technically specific to Jainism, suggesting a strong syncretic relationship or a shared *Śramaṇic* heritage between Patañjali's Yoga and Jaina ethics.

The Five Vows: A Shared Nomenclature

Both traditions list the exact same five vows: *Ahiṃsā*, *Satya*, *Asteya*, *Brahmacarya*, *Aparigraha*. This concordance is unique; Buddhism, for instance, lists *Right Speech*, *Right Action*, etc., and the *Pañca Śīla* includes abstention from intoxicants, which is not explicitly in Patañjali's list of five (though implied in *Sauca*).

Mahāvratā vs. Aṇuvratā (The Jain Distinction)

Jainism bifurcates the practice of vows based on the practitioner's status, a distinction Patañjali implicitly acknowledges by defining the *Mahāvratā* so strictly.

- **Mahāvratā (Major Vows):** Observed by ascetics (*Munis/Sādhus*). These are absolute, identical to Patañjali's description in II.31—total abstinence from violence in thought, word, and deed, irrespective of context.
- **Aṇuvratā (Minor/Atomic Vows):** Observed by householders (*Śrāvakas*). These are limited

by the very factors Patañjali lists: *Jāti, Deśa, Kāla*. A lay Jain may practice *Ahiṃsā* but acts in self-defense or eats plants (which involves minimal *himsa*), unlike the ascetic who takes extreme precautions.

Patañjali's Synthesis

Patañjali does not offer an *Aṇuvrata* option in the *Yoga Sūtras* for the serious practitioner. By defining the Yamas immediately followed by the definition of *Mahāvrata* in II.31, Patañjali implies that *Yoga* (in the strict sense of *Samādhi*) is an ascetic discipline.

- Scholars like Christopher Chapple and Edwin Bryant argue that Patañjali appropriates the Jain terminology of *Mahāvrata* to signal that the ethical bar for the Yogi is identical to that of the Jain ascetic. The Yogi cannot be a "householder" in the mental sense; even if living in society, their mental adherence to *Ahiṃsā* must be absolute, mirroring the Jain monk's constraints.
- *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 7.1 lists the vows similarly. However, Jainism adds specific *Bhāvanās* (contemplations) for each vow to strengthen them. Patañjali suggests *Pratipakṣa-bhāvanam* (cultivating the opposite) in II.33, which functions similarly to the Jain method of counteracting negative tendencies.

Teleological Analysis: Why the Mahāvrata is Required for Samādhi

Why does Patañjali insist on such a rigorous, "unconditioned" ethical standard? The answer lies in the mechanics of the *Citta* (mind) and the doctrine of *Karma-Āśaya* (karmic deposit).

The Problem of Conditional Morality and Samskaras

If a yogi practices *Ahiṃsā* only partially (e.g., "I will not kill humans, but I will kill animals for food"), the *samskāras* (subliminal impressions) of violence remain in the *citta*.

- **Mechanism:** When the soldier kills on the battlefield, even if justified by *Dharma*, the act generates a violent mental modification (*vṛtti*). This *vṛtti* leaves a latent impression (*vāsanā*) of violence.
- **Consequence:** In deep meditation (*Dhyāna*), these latent *vāsanās* can bubble up, creating agitation (*vikṣepa*). A mind containing the seed of violence cannot achieve the "clear jewel" state (*Abhijāta-maṇi*) required for *Samāpatti* (absorption). The *Mahāvratā* ensures that no new *rajasic* or *tamasic* seeds are planted.

Citta-Śuddhi (Purification of Consciousness)

The *Mahāvratā* functions as a sieve for the subconscious. By deciding *once and for all* that "I shall not injure, lie, steal, hoard, or waste energy under *any* circumstance," the yogi closes off entire avenues of mental fluctuation.

- **Decision Fatigue:** Conditional morality requires constant judgment ("Is this situation X or Y?"). Unconditional morality removes the need for deliberation. The *Vṛttis* associated with moral calculation subside.
- **Karmic Insulation:** By adhering to the *Mahāvratā*, the yogi stops the influx of new *Kliṣṭa* (afflicted) karma. This is analogous to the Jain concept of *Samvara* (stopping the influx). Only when the lake of the mind is free from the ripples of moral conflict can the bottom (the Self) be seen.

From Vow to Nature: The Siddhis

Initially, the *Mahāvrata* is a discipline (*Tapas*). Eventually, it becomes the natural state of the Yogi. When established in *Ahiṃsā*, the text states that "in the presence of the yogi, all hostilities cease" (II.35). This power (*Siddhi*) is only possible if the *Ahiṃsā* is universal (*Mahāvrata*). A soldier who practices conditional non-violence would never develop the aura that pacifies tigers or enemies, because their field of consciousness still contains the potential for violence. The *Mahāvrata* transforms the yogi into a mobile *Sanctuary* (*Abhayadāna*).

Sociological and Historical Context of the "Soldier" and "Fisherman"

The examples used by Vyāsa; the fisherman and the soldier, are not random; they represent the two poles of violence in ancient Indian society: economic necessity and political duty.

The Fisherman (*Matsyika*): Violence of Livelihood

The fisherman represents *Hiṃsā* driven by livelihood (*Vṛtti*). By using this example, Vyāsa addresses the working class and the notion of "unavoidable" violence. Patañjali's system implies that for high Yoga, one must abandon livelihoods dependent on injury. This aligns with the concept of 'Right Livelihood' in Buddhism. The fisherman is bound by constraints of livelihood; he kills because he has no other means to earn a living. The *Mahāvrata* demands breaking the chains of job-determinism to achieve spiritual liberation.

The Violence of Duty

The soldier represents *Hiṃsā* driven by *Dharma* (duty). This is the more intellectually challenging category. The *Mahābhārata* (specifically the *Gītā*) goes to great lengths to justify the soldier's violence as a path to 'mukti' if done without attachment. Patañjala Yoga, however, seems to take a harder line.

If a warrior wants to become a *Yogi* in the Patañjali sense, can he remain a soldier? The *Mahāvratā* suggests no. If violence is prohibited "in all circumstances" (*samaya-anavacchinna*), then the battlefield offers no exemption. This places Patañjala Yoga in the renunciate (*Nivṛtti*) stream, divergent from the socio-political integration (*Pravṛtti*) of the epic tradition. The Yogi must lay down the sword to take up the vow. This tension suggests that while the *Gītā* integrates Yoga into society, the *Yoga Sūtras* (at least in this section) retain the radical renunciation of the *Śramaṇa* period.

Conclusion: The Categorical Imperative of Yoga

The *Mahāvratas* of *Yoga Sūtra* II.30-31 represent the "categorical imperative" of the Yogic tradition. Patañjali, supported by the extensive commentaries of Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miśra, constructs an ethical framework that allows for no loopholes. The transition from conditional restraints (limited by ethnicity, place, time, and duty) to the unconditional "Great Vow" is not merely a moral escalation; it is a structural requirement for the technology of Yoga.

These sūtras define the boundary between the *Dharmic* life (governed by social complexity and ritual) and the *Yogic* life (governed by universal abstraction). The *Mahāvratā* strips the practitioner of social identity (*Jāti*), geographical attachment (*Deśa*), temporal anxiety (*Kāla*), and ritual obligation (*Samaya*). In doing so, it prepares the *Citta* for the final isolation of *Kaivalya*, creating a consciousness that is as frictionless and universal as the Vow itself. The *Mahāvratā* is thus revealed not as a moral dogma, but as a psycho-dynamic seal, ensuring that the energy generated by *Prāṇāyāma* and *Dhyāna* is contained within a vessel free from the cracks of compromise.

Those wishing to explore the Yoga Sutras further can see <https://www.esamskriti.com/e/Yoga/Texts/Bibliography-for-those-beginning-Research-into-the-Yoga-Sutras-1.aspx>

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