



May 2011 Contemplation Theme

Asteya: Non-Stealing

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Great riches present themselves freely to the one who is firmly established in *asteya*, non-stealing. If this is not a description of your economic situation, you have to look at your own proclivity for appropriating things that don't belong to you. It's a rigorous standard, described by the ancient sage Patanjali in verse 2.37 of the [Yoga Sutras](#).

To understand why, consider this: if you're not firmly established in non-stealing and all riches were presented to you, what would you do with your windfall? Several books describe people's lives falling apart when huge amounts of money were added to their less-than-perfect lifestyles. Amazingly, several lottery winners dedicated themselves to philanthropy and still ended up with serious personal problems, including the loss of their money and their relationships. You might think that money was the root of their problems, but their decisions created their problems just as has happened with you many times. Thus the real question is this, how do you make decisions that actually work? You'll have to practice non-stealing, the third of yoga's *yamas* (lifestyle practices).

You probably don't have a lot of trouble obeying the law or the Eighth Commandment; few yogis make their living by taking other people's possessions and turning them into money. However, I have known a few professional thieves who found their way to my Guru. Your thieving ways are probably more subtle than theirs were; perhaps these behaviors are completely unconscious.

A large company for which I worked asked everyone to be careful to not throw away paper clips. When some papers needed to be tossed out, they asked us to remove the paper clips so they could be reused. They saved hundreds of dollars in office supplies. They also asked us to stop taking pens and to stop making photocopies for personal use. They saved thousands of dollars! These actions are socially acceptable but they are stealing nonetheless.

Some companies are now looking at how much internet time their employees are using for personal emails and other online activities. The company's computer network and internet costs are a small figure compared to the cost of lost productivity — all of which is stealing, from yoga's perspective. Yet none of this is against the law. Probably everyone who stocks their own home office from their employer's supplies doesn't even think of it as stealing. Yoga holds you to a higher standard than society does.

Yoga recommends non-stealing for two reasons: (1) to calm and quiet your mind, and (2) to protect you from karma.

Why do you want to steal, even the petty thievery I've begun to describe? Consider what is going on in your mind, so much that you feel you cannot buy your own pens and paper or pay for your own photocopies. I doubt it's a serious financial crisis. Perhaps you feel you don't have time to make the trip to the office supplies store, though every supermarket sells these items. Perhaps you justify your behavior by saying you do some work from home: you check your emails, print out memos and make lists, which is a reason to have pens and printer paper from the office. However you probably use some work time to check personal email and make personal phone calls. Your employer always picks up the tab, whether it is for their benefit or yours. This is stealing, unless you have permission to take the office supplies, make the photocopies and do personal tasks on company time. Simply ask!

We're still exploring how non-stealing calms and quiets your mind. The problem is what is going on in someone's mind when they eat a few pieces of candy or nuts from the bulk bins. It's a problem, not only for the market that sees their inventory disappearing, but even more so for the individual. The thought-patterns that drive you to taking something without paying for it, what are they? Your mind says, "I don't have enough. I need more. I've got to have that thing, and I've got to have it now. I cannot get it for myself. I don't have enough; I'm not good enough; I'm not enough." Yoga has a name for this thought-pattern: *asmitaa*, which is usually translated as ego. It's a poor translation because *asmitaa* is naming the exact opposite of what you think "ego" is about. *Asmitaa* drives your mind to make you feel small and inadequate. *Asmitaa* churns your mind on all levels, conscious, subconscious and unconscious, and erupts into stealing, even when you don't realize that's what you are doing.

When Master Yoga was holding daily yoga classes in San Diego, we set up a free lending library based on the honor system. I donated 250 books and a yoga student donated 200 more, so we began with 450 volumes. Within 3 months, we had only 250 volumes remaining, about 50% had disappeared. We made announcements and asked people to return the books; about 40 came back.

We began a system to check out the books and videos so we would know who had them. Six months later, we asked one yogi to return the 18 videos she had checked out. She claimed that she did not have them and, even if she did, she wouldn't be able to find them in her library of several hundred videos. She also refused to reimburse us for the cost of the missing videos. We bought new ones.

When Master Yoga's PA facility burned down several years ago, that library went up in smoke. It has been interesting to watch our current collection grow again, many books with the old numbering label still taped to the spine, as various yogis mail and bring back books they had taken home with them. We are still getting books that were "borrowed" three or four years ago. This isn't borrowing. If it was, the due date would have been weeks, not months or years.

I was driving through a packed parking lot on a cold windy day and saw a car backing out of a space near the front. I positioned my car to leave room for the car that was departing. It backed out in front of me, blocking my access to the space. Another driver came from the other direction, whipped around the corner and quickly into the parking place, even before the departing car could drive away. How many parking places have you stolen?

I hear some of you saying, but maybe the other driver didn't see you. I drive a bright orange van – taller than anything else in the parking lot. He couldn't have missed me. This is stealing. So is taking another driver's space on the highway by cutting them off in traffic. It's not only dangerous to weave in and out of traffic, trying to go faster than all the cars in front of you – it's stealing. The congested off-ramp offers so many opportunities; cutting into line anywhere is stealing, whether it is at a busy traffic signal, the movie theater, grocery store, ATM or the security line at the airport.

Yet you have to be careful not to go overboard. I was teaching a weekly yoga class and had to deal with a struggle between two yoga students. One had arrived early and positioned her blanket stacks near me, in a place that another student usually occupied. The other student arrived and verbally attacked the first one, "You took my spot." They got quite noisy before I intervened and explained that no one owns any spot on the floor, and no one owns any of the blankets.

Many types of stealing, while illegal, are accepted and even promoted by society. Cheating on your taxes by under-reporting income or exaggerating your deductions is also called stealing. Copying recorded music to share is also stealing. Several internet companies pioneered the distribution of musicians' efforts without paying them, which made it seem ok, but it was still stealing. The courts eventually agreed with the musicians and recording companies, shutting down the free distribution networks. The internet companies paid fines in the millions of dollars, but they were small compared to the multi-millions they made from giving away people's artistic creations without permission and without pay. I still know many yogis and yoga teachers who copy and give away music from CDs they have purchased. I think it's wonderful that they want to share some music that is meaningful to them; they should buy another copy and give it away. What a sweet gift, both to the person you are sharing with as well as to the musician you are supporting.

Examples of stealing abound, including taking credit for something you haven't done, taking privileges that you haven't earned, posting other people's words on your website without giving credit and without getting permission, a customer asking for a discounted rate when they can pay full value, a business person overcharging their customers, an employee who wants a higher rate of pay than their job entails, or taking the toll road without paying. Even declaring bankruptcy is a form of stealing – which brings us to the next point: karma. When you steal something, karma is assured. It will balance things out for you, in this lifetime or the next.

Let's return to the yardstick for your mastery of asteya:

Asteya-pratishthaayaam sarva-ratnopasthaanam. — Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.37

Great riches present themselves freely when you are firmly established in asteya.

This is not merely about great riches, but also about how those riches come to you. They present themselves freely. Most yogis are well-established financially. You may associate yoga with poverty, but the poor have little interest in a path of Self-discovery. Those who earn or inherit significant assets quickly discover that money is not the answer; many go looking for that "something more" that yoga specializes in. Thus, asteya is not about assets, earnings or inheritance. It's about how you make your decisions, even when they involve money. Do more yoga.

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