

**DEFINITION, TECHNIQUE, MECHANISM, AND OUTCOME OF AHIṂSĀ AS
UNDERSTOOD FROM STUDY OF SELECT SANSKRIT COMMENTARIES ON
PATAÑJALI YOGASŪTRA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of "ahiṁsā" (non-violence) as presented in Patañjali Yogasūtra's, focusing on its definition, technique, mechanism, and outcome as interpreted by key traditional Sanskrit commentators. While Patañjali does not directly define ahiṁsā, the study examines interpretations from ancient commentaries such as Vyāsa's bhāṣya, Bhoja's Raja Martanda, Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha's Yoga Siddhānta Candrikā, Sadāshiva Brahmendra's Yoga Sudhākara, and Hariharānanda āraṇya's Bhāsvati. These sources offer valuable insights into the multidimensional nature of ahiṁsā, emphasizing its practice through actions, thoughts, and speech. Central to understanding its practice is the technique of pratipakṣa-bhāvana (cultivating opposing thoughts), which transforms harmful tendencies into positive states of mind. The study also delves into the mechanism of ahiṁsā pratiṣṭhā (establishment of non-violence), which leads to the cessation of harmful thoughts and the manifestation of spiritual powers. The outcome of a committed practice of ahiṁsā is the abandonment of enmity, even among natural adversaries, fostering harmony and peace in the yogi's environment. The paper concludes that ahiṁsā, when fully realized, is not only essential for personal spiritual growth but also for the cultivation of a peaceful and harmonious world.

Keywords: Ahiṁsā, non-violence, pratipakṣa-bhāvana, Enmity, Yama, Yogasūtra, commentaries

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly marked by violence, social discord, and environmental challenges, the need for a path rooted in peace, inclusivity, and compassion has never been greater. Non-violence offers a guiding framework for conflict resolution, fostering mutual respect, and nurturing sustainable relationships. While the concept of 'non-violence' is familiar, this paper seeks to delve into yogic aspects of ahiṁsā, drawing insights from ancient Sanskrit commentaries on the Yogasūtra.

Among the three principal techniques for attaining Samādhi outlined by Patañjali, the third is Aṣṭāṅga Yoga. The eight limbs of yoga delineated in Yoga Sūtra 2.29 are as follows:

yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhārādhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo'ṣṭāvaṅgāni

Yama (restraint), Niyama (observance), Āsana (posture), Prāṇāyāma (breath regulation), Pratyāhāra (withdrawal of the senses), Dhāraṇā (concentration), Dhyāna

(meditation), and Samādhi (absorption). These eight components form an integrated framework for spiritual progress. (Āraṇya, 2000, p. [207])

The first two limbs, Yama and Niyama, are further subdivided into five principles each. The Yamas consist of

ahimsāsatyasteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ 2.30

Ahiṃsā (non-violence), Satya (truth), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (continence), and Aparigraha (freedom from greed). (Āraṇya, 2000, p. [208])

The Niyamas include

śaucaśantoṣatapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ 2.32

Śauca (purity), Santoṣa (contentment), Tapas (discipline), Svādhyāya (self-study), and Īśvarapraṇidhāna (devotion to God). (Āraṇya, 2000, p. [213])

Importance of Yama and Niyama:

Sadāśiva Brahmendra, in his commentary Yoga Sudhākara, defines Yama as principles that restrain a yogi from engaging in prohibited actions such as violence (Himsa) and others: "*himsādibhyo niṣiddhakarmabhyo yoginām yamayanti nivartayantīti yamāḥ*". (Brahmendra 2008) Similarly, Niyama is described as a set of principles that prevent actions leading to bondage and guide the yogi toward liberation. "*janmahetūn kāmyadharmān nivartya mokṣahetau niṣkāme dharme niyamayanti prerayantīti niyamāḥ*". (Brahmendra 2008)

Ahiṃsā- its centrality and desideratum:

Among the Yamas, Ahiṃsā (non-violence) holds a preeminent position. Vyasa, commenting on Yoga Sūtra 2.30, highlights the centrality of Ahiṃsā by stating: "*uttare ca yamaniyamāstanmūlāstatsiddhiparatayaiva tatpratipādanāya pratipādyante / tadavadātārūpakaraṇāyevopādīyante*"

"All subsequent Yamas and Niyamas are rooted in and aim to support Ahiṃsā. They are recommended in the scriptures for the fulfillment of Ahiṃsā, and in turn, practicing them enhances the purity of Ahiṃsā." (Hariharananda, 2000) This reciprocal relationship underscores Ahiṃsā as the foundation upon which all other ethical disciplines rest.

Patañjali mentions Ahiṃsā in two sūtras: Yoga Sūtra 2.30 identifies it as one of the Yamas, while Yoga Sūtra 2.35 elaborates on its outcome.

ahimsāpratiṣṭhāyām tatsannidhā vairatyāgaḥ 2.35

Perfect adherence to Ahiṃsā fosters an environment of non-hostility. (Hariharananda, 2000). However, despite its importance, Patañjali does not provide a precise definition or detailed process for practicing Ahiṃsā.

Prominent translations of ahiṃsā based on commentaries:

The following are translations of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra's that incorporate insights from Sanskrit commentaries. While numerous such works exist, this study focusses on prominent ones to examine their interpretations of Ahiṃsā.

Author	Interpretation
James Haughton Wood (Woods, 1914)	Abstaining from Injury
Baṅgālī Bābā (Baba, 1990)	Harmlessness
Rāma Prasāda (Prasada, 1995)	Abstainence from injury
Swāmī Ved Bhāratī (Ved Bharati, 2001)	Non-violence
T.S. Rukmaṇī (Vijñānabhikṣu, 2001)	Abstaining from Injury
Edwin Bryant (Bryant, 2009)	Non-violence

Table 1.

We see that the terms used to define ahimsā by the authors are "abstaining from injury," "harmlessness," and "non-violence". While these interpretations convey aspects of Ahimsā, they appear incomplete, as they leave open critical questions such as: "Abstaining from injuring whom?" and "Not harming under what circumstances?"

Importance of ancient traditional commentaries:

The ancient traditional commentaries offer deeper clarity on such questions. Vyāsa's commentary on the Yoga Sūtras provides a comprehensive definition: "*tatrāhimsā sarvathā sarvadā sarvabhūtānāmanabhidrohah*" — to abstain from injuring any being, at any time, and in any manner. (Jha, 1907)

This explanation gives a holistic understanding of Ahimsā and highlights its universal and perpetual nature. The reliance on traditional commentaries such as Vyāsa's demonstrates their indispensable role in comprehensively understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the Yoga Sūtras. They provide nuanced interpretations that contextualize the practices and principles, addressing ambiguities that may arise in translations.

2. METHODOLOGY

Scope of the paper:

In light of Patañjali's omission of a direct definition of Ahimsā and the varied terminologies employed in existing translations, this study seeks to elucidate the comprehensive nature of Ahimsā. The paper focuses on its definition, technique, mechanism, and outcomes, as articulated in traditional Sanskrit commentaries. By engaging deeply with ancient commentaries and their interpretations, this study aims to provide a more complete understanding of Ahimsā as a key element of Yogāṅga (the limbs of yoga).

Commentaries Considered:

This study examines five traditional commentaries on the Yoga Sūtras to analyze their interpretations of ahimsā. The selected commentaries span various historical periods and include Vyāsa Bhāṣya (4th-5th century CE), Rāja Mārtaṇḍa by Bhoja (11th century CE), Yoga Siddhānta Cāndrikā by Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (17th century CE), Yoga Sudhākara by Sadāśiva Brahmendra (18th century CE), and Bhāṣyatī by Hariharānanda (20th century CE).

Each commentary is meticulously studied to uncover its interpretation of Ahimsā, including its philosophical essence, practical techniques, and potential outcomes.

The findings will be critically analyzed, and relevant models or frameworks suggested within the commentaries will be extracted. The results will be discussed in depth.

Commentators views on Ahimsā:

The term Ahimsā is referenced twice in the Yoga Sūtras, specifically in 2.30 and 2.35, as outlined in the introduction. The table below presents translations of the commentaries on these sūtras by the commentators included in this study.

Commentator	Commentators View
Vyāsa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmlessness, or ahimsā, means never wishing harm or ill will to any living being under any circumstances. The practices of yamas (restraints) and niyamas (observances) are all rooted in ahimsā. They are included as part of achieving it and are practiced solely to deepen and purify one's commitment to this principle of non-harm. • On the establishment of harmlessness abandonment of enmity comes to all beings in his vicinity. (Jha, 1907)
Hariharānanda āraṇya (HA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarvathā, meaning "by all means"—through actions, thoughts, and as part of Yoga—refers to abstaining completely from causing harm to any living being, including plants and animals, even in one's thoughts. Ahimsā (non-violence) is the foundation of remaining yamāḥ (restraints) and niyamāḥ (observances) which are rooted in and practiced to support and perfect the principle of ahimsā. Tatsiddhiparataya indicates that the purpose of practicing the yamāḥ and niyamāḥ is to achieve complete success in ahimsā. These practices help make one's commitment to ahimsā flawless and fully realized. It is said that whatever vows a Brāhmaṇa (a person who has realized Brahman or the ultimate reality) undertakes, they help them refrain from harming others, even unintentionally, due to emotions like anger, greed, or confusion. By following these vows, the Brāhmaṇa refines their practice of ahimsā, purifying it further. Every vow and practice serves, in its own way, to strengthen and purify one's adherence to non-violence. • Ahimsā (non-violence) and similar virtues can be considered fully established when opposing harmful thoughts lose their power and stop generating similar negative thoughts. When ahimsā is firmly rooted—meaning the tendency to harm

	others is entirely eliminated from the mind—thoughts of violence naturally disappear, even from the minds of those who come near the yogi. This occurs because the yogi's positive and peaceful state of mind exerts a calming, benevolent influence on others. The eradication of harmful tendencies is like roasting seeds, rendering them incapable of sprouting again. (Āraṇya, 2000)
Bhoja	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The activity which leads to death (prāṇa viyoga) is called himsā, which is a cause of all miseries. Not doing such an activity is called ahimsā. • In the vicinity of the person who practises harmlessness, beings which are natural enemies like snake and mongoose shed their enmity, also violent entities become non-violent (Jha, 2022)
Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (NT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those actions which cause grief to beings is himsā, which is the cause of all miseries; absence of such action is ahimsā. Such harmlessness should be followed everywhere at every time. • Pratiṣṭhā (firmness) is attained in ahimsā by the practice of pratipakṣa bhāvana. Those beings who have natural enmity with each other forget their nature around the person who follows harmlessness. (Karnātaka, 2000)
Sadāshiva Brahmendra(SB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not causing any harm by word, action nor by thought all the time to anyone is called Ahimsā. • As Ahimsā becomes strong in the yogi who follows harmlessness, in his presence the living beings who have natural enmity cow and tiger, leave their enmity. In regard, Yoga Vāsiṣṭha says, "The soft and harsh beings attain a mental peace and trust as in the presence of the mother in the person who has the nature of ahimsā." (Brahmendra, 2008)

Table 2.

3. ANALYSIS

From the above commentaries (Table 2), we can derive these four important points on Ahimsā.

1. Definition of Ahimsā.
2. Technique of Ahimsā.
3. Mechanism of Ahimsā.
4. Outcome of Ahimsā.

I. Definition of Ahimsā:

Vyāsa defines ahimsā encompassing three key aspects:

- Sarvathā – Practicing non-violence by all means, including physical actions, mental intentions, and verbal expressions.
- Sarvadā – Adhering to non-violence at all times, without exceptions.
- Sarvabhūtānām – Extending non-violence to all beings, including plants, animals, and humans.

Bhoja offers an interpretation that ahimsā is ‘abstaining from killing’.

Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (NT) defines it as refraining from any action that ‘causes grief or suffering’.

Sadāśiva Brahmendra (SB) describes ahimsā as the consistent practice of ‘harmlessness through one’s body, speech, and mind, directed at all beings at all times’.

Discussion:

From the definitions of Ahimsā provided by the four commentators, several key insights can be drawn:

- **Comprehensive Scope:** All four commentators emphasize that Ahimsā is a holistic practice that spans physical actions, mental intentions, and verbal expressions. Vyasa’s definition of Ahimsā through Sarvatha highlights that non-violence must be practiced through all means—physical, mental, and verbal—underscoring its all-encompassing nature.
- **Universality:** Vyasa’s concept of Sarvabhūtānām extends non-violence to all beings—humans, animals, and even plants. This aligns with the universal ethical vision that Ahimsā should be applied to all forms of life, recognizing their inherent value.
- **Consistency and Timelessness:** Vyasa’s notion of Sarvada stresses the need to practice non-violence at all times and in all situations, emphasizing consistency. SB also describes Ahimsā as a continuous practice through body, speech, and mind, highlighting that it must be a permanent and consistent part of one’s conduct, without exception.
- **Refraining from Physical Harm:** Bhoja defines Ahimsā to the abstention from killing, which speaks to the core physical aspect of non-violence.
- **Mental and Emotional Dimensions:** NT’s definition focuses on refraining from actions that cause grief or suffering. This emphasizes the psychological aspect of Ahimsā, which involves cultivating compassion and avoiding emotional harm, such as causing pain or distress.

Although Bhoja and NT emphasize different aspects of Ahimsā—Bhoja focusing on abstaining from physical harm and NT highlighting the avoidance of mental and emotional suffering—it is evident that both perspectives align with Vyasa’s broader explanation. This demonstrates how all four commentators collectively complement one another, addressing distinct yet interconnected dimensions of non-violence.

In summary, these four definitions illustrate that Ahimsā is not only a practice of external behavior but also an internal discipline. It calls for mindfulness and non-violence in one’s actions, speech, thoughts and requires a consistent, universal, and compassionate approach to all living beings.

II. Technique of Ahimsā:

The analysis above clarifies the definition of Ahimsā, but it is evident from everyday life that fully adhering to Ahimsā is challenging. People inevitably experience violent thoughts and may engage in harmful actions, whether intentionally or unintentionally, through speech, behavior, or even at the mental level. This highlights the need for a practical technique to effectively practice Ahimsā.

Yoga Sutras mention a key technique to be considered while practicing all the yamas and niyamas: Mahāvratā (the great vow). In Sutra 2.31, Patanjali states:

"jātideśakālasamayānavacchinnāḥ sārvaḥaṁ mahāvratam"

"When not conditioned by class, place, time, or concept of duty, they are universal and constitute the great vow." (Rukmani, 2001)

In this sutra, Patanjali emphasizes that the yamas and niyamas, including Ahimsā, must be practiced universally, without exceptions based on caste, place, or time. This highlights the importance of practicing these principles consistently. However, this sutra does not explicitly offer a practical method for practicing them.

The yoga sutras also provide some insights into another technique for practicing yama and niyama. In the two sutras where Ahimsā is mentioned, Sutra 2.30 provides the definition, while Sutra 2.35 discusses the outcome of establishing Ahimsā, stating:

"When abstention from injury is established, there is absence of enmity in his presence." (Rukmani, 2001)

This indicates that establishing Ahimsā involves more than just practicing non-violence; it requires achieving a state known as Ahimsā Pratiṣṭhā (establishment in Ahimsā). Although Sutra 2.35 describes the result of such a state, it does not directly address the method for attaining it.

Now from the table 2, we see that amongst the commentators, only Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (NT) provides guidance on how to achieve Ahimsā Pratiṣṭhā. NT explains:

"uktapratipakṣabhāvanenāhimsāsthairye sati tatsannidhau ahimsām bhāvayataḥ samīpe vairatyāgaḥ" (Karnatak, 2000)

"By practicing pratipakṣabhāvana, Ahimsā is firmly established. When Ahimsā is established, those in its presence abandon hostility."

Thus, the technique for establishing Ahimsā is pratipakṣabhāvana—the practice of cultivating opposing thoughts to counteract negative or harmful tendencies. To understand pratipakṣabhāvana more deeply, we refer to the following sutra:

Vitarkabādhane pratipakṣabhāvanam (2.33)

This sutra introduces the technique of pratipakṣabhāvana, which involves countering harmful thoughts with positive or opposite thoughts, helping the practitioner overcome negative tendencies and firmly establish Ahimsā. This is thoroughly discussed below.

Discussion:

Vyāsa's commentary on Sutra 2.33 explains that to counteract negative thoughts related to the yamas and niyamas, one must cultivate opposing, positive thoughts. When harmful thoughts, such as "I will kill the wrongdoer" or "I will lie," arise in the yogi's mind—

thoughts that could lead to destructive actions—these should be countered by developing their opposites. The yogi should remind themselves:

"I have taken refuge in the practice of yoga, having vowed to protect all living beings. If I, who have renounced harmful thoughts, were to revert to them, I would behave as poorly as a dog."

The yogi should further reflect:

"Just as a dog licks its own vomit, so is the person who returns to what they have once renounced." (Hariharananda, 2000)

From Vyāsa's commentary, it is clear that when harmful thoughts (vitarkas) like violence (hiṃsā), falsehood (asatya), stealing (steaya), sexual misconduct (abrahma-cārya), or greed (parigraha) arise, the yogi should practice pratipakṣa bhāvana. This involves focusing on and visualizing the opposite, virtuous thoughts, as described above. This technique helps the yogi become firmly established in ahimsā or any other yama or niyama. While pratipakṣa bhāvana applies to all yamas and niyamas, it is significant that commentators often use ahimsā as an example to explain this method.

III. Mechanism of Ahimsā:

Now that we understand that through the practice of pratipakṣa bhāvana, ahimsā evolves into ahimsā sthairyā, a natural question arises about the transformation process. It is similar to taking medicine for a fever to reduce it, but what exactly happens inside the body because of the medicine? From the commentaries, we find the following insights:

Vyāsa, in his introductory commentary on Sutra 2.35, discusses this process. Hariharānanda's Bhāṣvatī, a sub-commentary on Vyāsa's work, also touches on this topic. However, Bhoja and other commentators do not mention the mechanism.

Vyāsa states:

*"pratipakṣabhāvanāddhetorheyā vitarkā yadā'sya syuraprasavadharmāṇastadā
tatkr̥tamaiśvaryam yoginaḥ siddhisūcakam bhavati / tadyathā – "2.35*

The evil ideas should be abandoned by means of developing the contrary thoughts. When they become unproductive for him, the power caused thereby becomes sign of success for the yogi. (Hariharananda, 2000)

Several key terms in this commentary require attention:

- **Pratipakṣabhāvana:** This concept has already been discussed in the techniques section.
- **Aprasava dharma:** Ahimsā pratishta leads to the cessation of harmful thoughts (vitarkas such as himsa), rendering them unproductive.
- **Aiśvaryā:** Supernatural powers or abilities manifest as a byproduct of this practice.
- **Ahimsā Pratiṣṭhā:** Firm establishment in non-violence inferred by the manifestation of supernatural powers.
- **Siddhi:** The siddhi here should not be misunderstood as a power, as the word aishwarya explains that. The word siddhi here is nothing but success in ahimsā. Hence ahimsa pratishta and siddhi are one and the same.

Discussion:

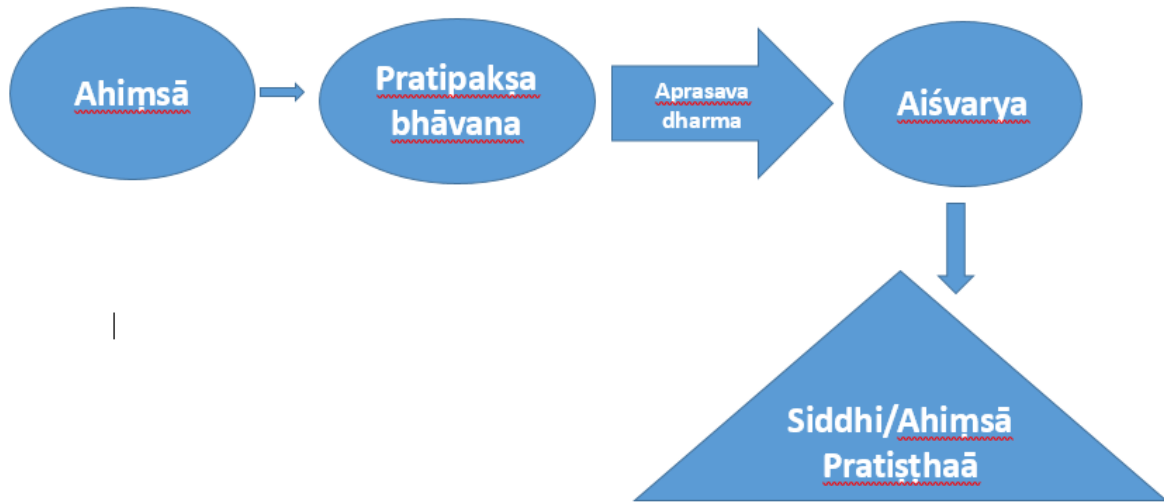


Fig 1

Vyāsa provides a detailed explanation of this process. When ahimsā is practiced consistently, along with pratipakṣabhāvana, it renders negative thoughts (vitarkas), such as hiṃsā, asatya, and others, ineffective or powerless. This state is referred to as aprasava dharma, which means that these harmful tendencies no longer arise. With the absence of these negative thoughts, certain powers begin to manifest. In the case of ahimsā, this power is known as vairatyāga (the abandonment of hostility), which will be further discussed in the next section. The manifestation of this power signals that ahimsā has been firmly established, meaning that the yogi has reached siddhi (perfection) in ahimsā. It is important to note, however, that the true outcome of this process is not merely the appearance of vairatyāga, but the attainment of ahimsā siddhi—a complete and unwavering establishment in the principle of non-violence.

IV. Outcome of Ahimsā:

Sutra 2.35 discusses the outcome of ahimsā, stating that through the establishment of non-violence, enmity is abandoned in the yogi's presence. From the table 2, the following are the insights from the commentaries:

- Vyasa explains that enmity towards all beings is abandoned in the presence of the yogi who has firmly established ahimsā.
- Bhoja highlights two important points: the first is that natural enemies abandon their hostility, and the second is the transformation of violent beings into non-violent ones through the yogi's practice of ahimsā.
- Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (NT) elaborates by suggesting that even creatures with natural enmity, such as snakes and mongooses, or cows and tigers, shed their hostility when near a yogi who practices ahimsā through pratipakṣabhāvana.
- Sadāśiva Brahmendra (SB) supports NT's view, stating that naturally hostile creatures drop their enmity in the presence of a yogi practicing ahimsā.

Discussion:

The comparison between the perspectives of NT (Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha), SB (Sadāśiva Brahmendra), Bhoja, and Vyasa reveals different layers of understanding about the transformative power of ahimsā (non-violence) and its impact on living beings. We can classify them into three:

1. NT and SB's Focus on Naturally Antagonistic Creatures
2. Bhoja's Extended Interpretation
3. Vyasa's Holistic Perspective

NT and SB share a common perspective, stating that naturally antagonistic creatures—such as snakes and mongooses, or cows and tigers—abandon their innate hostility in the presence of a yogi established in ahimsā. Bhoja builds on this idea by adding that even inherently violent beings undergo a transformation and become non-violent.

Vyasa, on the other hand, adopts a broader approach. By using the term sarvapraninaam (all living beings), he encompasses every creature within the transformative power of ahimsā, presenting a holistic (samashti) view of its effects. In contrast, the other commentators focus on specific examples, offering an individualized (vyashti) explanation of the same principle.

This distinction highlights how Vyasa emphasizes the universal scope of ahimsā, while the other commentators illustrate its application through particular instances. Both perspectives together provide a comprehensive understanding of the profound and far-reaching impact of ahimsā.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the concept of ahimsā as presented in Vyasa's teachings and elaborated upon by various commentators offers a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of non-violence. Vyasa's definition encompasses non-violence in all aspects—physical, mental, and verbal—towards all beings, without exceptions. While commentators like Bhoja and NT offer specific interpretations of ahimsā, they all align with Vyasa's broader vision, each emphasizing different dimensions of the same principle.

The technique and mechanism of practicing ahimsā, pratipaksha bhavana, involves counteracting harmful thoughts by consciously cultivating their opposite, as outlined by Vyasa and further clarified by the commentaries. This practice leads to the cessation of harmful tendencies and the emergence of supernatural powers (aishwarya), which serves as a hint that the yogi has become firmly established in non-violence (ahimsā pratishta). The abandonment of enmity and the transformation of violent beings into non-violent ones occurs in the presence of a yogi who has attained ahimsā pratishta.

Thus, Vyasa's teachings and the commentaries reveal a structured process where the consistent practice of ahimsā, through the technique of pratipaksha bhavana, leads not only to personal spiritual growth but also to a harmonious and peaceful environment around the practitioner. Each commentator provides a nuanced perspective on how this transformation occurs, but all converge on the essential truth that ahimsā, when fully established, purifies the mind, body, and spirit, leading to the ultimate success in yoga.

Furthermore, if only Vyasa's commentary had been considered, many insights regarding the practice of ahimsā would have remained undiscovered. It is only by including the perspectives of the four other commentators that we have been able to uncover such rich and diverse interpretations. It is worth noting that there are around 20 commentaries available on the Yoga Sutras. A future study that considers all of these commentaries could offer even deeper insights into the principles and practice of ahimsā.

Moreover, the study of these varied commentaries opens the door to the development of a psychometric tool that could assess the success of an individual in practicing ahimsā. By using the four-step model of definition, technique, mechanism, and outcome, such a tool could provide a concrete way to measure the progress of practitioners in embodying non-violence. This could serve as a valuable resource for both spiritual practitioners and scholars seeking to understand and track the advancement of ahimsā in their lives.

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