

Yoga Ethics...The Yamas & Niyamas

The 5 Yamas:

The name of the first limb of the eightfold path, Patanjali used 'yama' to describe a restraint that we willingly and joyfully place on ourselves to focus our efforts. The Yamas are five considerations for living skillfully. They are social contracts, they are not specific rules, but invitations for you to generate your own ways of being.

They are as follows:

Non-Violence

Truthfulness

Non-Stealing

Continance

Non-Greed

Ahimsa, Non-Violence

The first of the five yama's translates A = Not to Hisma = Cause pain (from The Yoga Sutras of Pantajali) This yama is about personal code for how we treat others and ourselves. Everything in our lives from speech, to thoughts, to diet, to driving habits. When we examine our daily behaviors how do we stop our nature of hurting others and start practicing Ahimsa?

I read this excerpt from *centeredyoga.com* and thought they explained it beautifully: *Patanjali leaves us with the most excellent solution: Pratipaksha Bhavanam. When a hurtful thought is arising, apply the opposite thought. Jesus taught this also when he said "Turn the other cheek." When you catch yourself thinking, saying or doing hurtful things -- apply the opposite: care, attention, and love.*



If someone cuts you off while driving, let them go in peace; if someone hurts you in love or business don't wish them bad or problems, let them be and wish them on their way. The more you do it the more it becomes natural for you because whatever you put your attention on grows. The negative pattern shrinks. Every day there is an opportunity to exercise Ahimsa. The fact there is an opportunity with a capacity to hurt and you choose to overcome it is the true practice of Yama and naturally Yoga."

Buddha, St. Francis, and Mahatma Gandhi were all great examples of living Ahimsa. This is where our base practice of "Be The Change" comes from. When we look at our world and decide we want to change it, we much first practice being the change we want to see. When we practice non-violence, compassion, and love in our own lives, it spreads to the lives of others, bringing yoga from the mat into the world.

"In the presence of one firmly established in non-violence, all hostilities cease"

- The Yoga Sutras of Pantajali II.35

Satya, Truthfulness

This yama gives us the opportunity to live our lives as an open book. There is a freedom that comes with truth and honesty. We attract what we put out in life, if we are open and honest then we will attract the same. If someone tries to gossip and lie about us, there are no secrets. When we shine light and are truthful about our shadow areas, the shadow no longer controls us.

Being honest in our lives also implies integrity and translates to our actions and even our writings. We are in a society of social media and texting. Are we honest and truthful with our writings, what we post, how we represent our lives?

Also how we speak the truth should be governed by Ahimsa. Consider how your honesty might effect others. Humility will be the ground base that leads one to embody and express satya in word, thought and action. It is our aim in life to pursue satya - integrity, honesty and truth.

**“So, first follow truth,
and then truth will follow you.”
- The Yoga Sutra of Pantajali II.36**



Asteya, Non-Stealing

This in many regards is self explanatory. Don't steal. But it also has roots that lie in many other behaviors.

**“Desire or want is
the root cause for stealing.”
~Swami Sivananda**

Asteya also includes the concept of being grateful and content with everything that comes to us by honest means. Being grateful to nature for every breath we take, for the food we eat, making honest exchanges for the properties we have. When we live in a spirit of gratitude for everything we have, we no longer desire other peoples things. The more we have a freedom to our mind the more things will naturally flow to us.

The idea of hoarding is another aspect to asteya. You are keeping more than what you need for yourself instead of sharing or giving things away that you no longer need. Hoarding applies to many things such as food (eating too much), money, and possessions. Of course you should provide for yourself and family members, but then you should evaluate what has unnecessary attachment and can be given to someone that may benefit from it more. Too much food? Share with your neighbors. Old clothes? Donate. Extra time? Volunteer. Giving leads to receiving.

**“If you are established in non-stealing,
all wealth will come to you.”
~ Swami Sivananda**

Brahmacharya, Non-Excess

I find this yama to be the most complex. At first sight it seems to mean chastity or celibacy, then once you read further into it you see it is about moderation and using that energy to your advantage. It is about the abstinence of excess. This yama takes a look into our indulgences. We live in a world of excess, over eating, too much TV, too much sex with random partners, too many devices. When we look at why we over indulge we see where we are lacking. Maybe we feel sad, insecure, disconnected and we fill that loneliness with stuff.



When we aren't being mindful in our lives we give into excessiveness until we realize it's too late. Instead if we shift our focus to Spirit and our own Divine nature we begin to see the sacredness in things around us, including ourselves and start filling our lives with meaningful connections, therefore overflowing in a much different way. Here is an excerpt from The Yama's & Niyamas that brings it together beautifully:

“Brahmacharya invites us to live with God, not excess....Can you honor all as sacred? Can you honor yourself as sacred? If we stop and pause for a moment, we know that it is the simple things that stir our soul and bless us with happiness. The wind in the trees, the colors of the sky, the touch of a loved one, the delight of a child, a shared moment with a friend, can fill us to overflowing. This overflowing is expansive and humbling, much different than the satiation of excess.”

Aparigraha, Non-greed (Also Non-possessiveness)

This yama is the epitome of a simplistic lifestyle. Not being greedy or hoarding our possessions, not identifying or associating ourselves solely through our THINGS. Living simply and allowing ourselves to use only what we need and not in excess benefits everyone. It leaves resources for many more generations, it allows us to express ourselves through our lives and actions and not through the clothes we wear or the cars we drive. When we live to hoard and collect things, then our possessions start to possess us. We start living for what we can obtain. When we let go of the need to have the bigger better things we can live more freely and peacefully.

“Aparigraha also implies that we should focus on what cannot be lost - our spiritual journey, our finding our inner true self, and on what we give to others and the world.”

~Instantgoodkarma.org



The 5 Niyamas

The second limb of the 8 limbs of yoga are the 5 Niyamas, the contracts with ourselves, helping us maintain a positive environment in which to grow. Their practice harnesses the energy generated from the cultivation of the earlier yamas.

They are as follows:

Purity, Contentment

Self-discipline

Self-study

Surrender

Saucha, cleanliness or purity

Saucha is defined as purity internally and externally. Cleansing our bodies, speech and thought so we can be pure of mind, words, and action. We must be mindful of the things we do to keep our bodies pure and clean from inside to outside. The foods we eat, how much water we drink, and the movements we do. Cleaning our minds of negative thoughts, possessions, anger, greed, comparison, etc. So we may be an open receiver and have our bodies function fully.

Quote from Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. "As a temple or a church is kept clean each day, the inner body, the temple of the soul, should be bathed with a copious supply of blood through asanas and pranayama. They cleanse the body physically, physiologically and intellectually. The body, having its own intelligence, develops its potential to change its behavioral patterns. It helps the sadhaka to detach herself from sensual desires, and guides her towards the holder of the body, the soul. Thus, saucha makes the body a fit instrument for the pursuit of spiritual knowledge."



Quote from Light On Yoga: "But more important than the physical cleansing of the body is the cleansing of the mind of its disturbing emotions like hatred, passion, anger, lust, greed, delusion and pride... This internal cleansing gives radiance and joy. It brings benevolence and banishes mental pain, dejection, sorrow and despair."

Santosha, Contentment

Contentment is the ability to be happy in any circumstance, the happy or the difficult. When we can be content with all our circumstances then we can truly grow. Finding the joy in a challenge, seeing the lesson and being grateful for it is very real growth. You stop viewing yourself as a victim of circumstance and empower yourself to sail any sea. **"Contentment means just to be as we are without going to outside things for happiness" (YSP)**

Santosha requires our willingness to enjoy exactly what each day brings, to be happy with whatever we have, whether that is a lot or a little. In being content with ALL our circumstances we can be truly free and experience real joy. We want for nothing in that moment and therefore attract more great things into our lives.

"By contentment, supreme joy is gained"
~ YSP II.42

Tapas, Self-Discipline

The word “tapas” comes from the Sanskrit verb “tap” which means “to burn.” Tapas refers to strength of character in pursuit of yoga’s ultimate goal of the union of Self and Brahman (God). The word “Tapas” translate as a spiritual purification or fiery discipline that burns away impediments that keep us from achieving our highest potential of Self. However we should not confuse discipline with difficulty. Not every difficult situation is bad and not every difficulty is good. But if we can be disciplined in our mind and body to accept all circumstances and not react negatively to a situation or confrontation then we have conquered the ego and mastered our mind, therefore aligning us with Spirit. When we welcome the challenges and pain knowing that it will burn away the impediments then we discipline ourselves to handle anything with a smile and ease.

“Mental strength comes by tapasya, accepting pain. Then the pain is no longer pain but is joy, because we have realized the benefit of it”

~ Sri Swami Satchidananda (YSP)

Svadyaya, Self Study

Sva means “self” and adhyaya means “investigation, inquiry, or education. This is the practice of self-study or inquiry which can have a few meanings. The first and seemingly obvious meaning is to practice studying ourselves. Through asana to become better acquainted with our bodies, movements, thoughts and breath, therefore regular practice becomes study. Also to look within and really know ourselves, stripping away our programming and the things we are led to believe about ourselves. Find who we are truly and deeply. Meditation is a wonderful tool of self study, quieting the mind and the ego to hear the voice of our higher self, our true selves.

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali he describes svadyaya as: “By the study of spiritual books comes communion with one’s chosen deity” This actually combines the meditation practice of japa (repetition of mantra) with the other meaning of self study, reading sacred texts such as The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali or The Bhagavad Gita.

“Exclusive contemplation of the Self, the Heart, is inclusive of everything else.”

~ A. Ramana

Isvarapranidhana, Surrender

Here Sri Swami describes surrendering to God not only in our attachments, cares, or worries but also in service to others. He explains that when we want to give something to God, the world itself is God, therefore service to others is service to God. While reading more about this Niyama I felt it really reflected mindfulness. Being mindful in the path, the journey, making every moment a sacred or meditative moment. Finding joy in all things, being dedicated fully brings unending peace and also an elevated state of meditation or samadhi.

“By total surrender to God, samadhi (spiritual state of consciousness) is attained” ~YSP II.45

