

Yamas and Niyamas – the Ethics of Yoga



The Yamas and the Niyamas are the first of the eight limbs of yoga — coming before asana, before pranayama, before meditation and before enlightenment. They provide the foundations for a deeper understanding of the practice of yoga.

The word "Yama" is a Sanskrit term for "moral discipline". The Yamas describe how we should relate to the world. They are sometimes described as yoga's restraints, or "don'ts". The word "Niyama" means "positive duties" or "observances" and focus more on our self. Together, the Yamas and Niyamas outline yoga's guidelines for healthy living and progressing towards a spiritual state of enlightenment.

There are five Yamas and five Niyamas, as outlined below.

Yamas

Ahimsa – meaning: non-violence; non-harming.

- We practice Ahimsa through kindness in our thoughts, words and actions.
- It applies to other people, animals, the environment, and to ourselves.
- Ahimsa requires accepting events as they are with an open and loving heart.
- The key to Ahimsa is complete compassion towards all living things, including ourselves.

On the mat: Practice Ahimsa by looking after yourself. Do not stretch so far as to cause yourself injury. Rest in Child's pose if you are tired. Treat yourself and others with compassion and kindness.

Satya – meaning: truthfulness; living with integrity.

- Being true to yourself and others, in what you think, say and do, creates respect, honour and integrity.
- Honest communication provides the foundation for any healthy relationship.



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- As Ahimsa comes first, we must be careful to avoid speaking a truth if it will hurt someone else.

On the mat: Practice Satya by finding your own truth in your asana and pranayama. The rate of your breath, how far you stretch and the asanas you perform will be different to what other people do. Practice techniques that are right for you, at a rate that is right for you.

Asteya – meaning: non-stealing; not taking what is not yours to take or what is not freely given.

- Asteya applies to ideas and words as well as objects.
- It also applies to intangibles such as not demanding the attention of others, not draining people’s emotions and not taking other people’s time or energy.
- Don’t take more than you need – doing so deprives someone else from that resource. We are harming the planet by taking more than we need – by being a consumer society.
- Stealing arises from a feeling of not having enough. Practice Asteya by recognising that we already have all that we need.
- Don’t look to others to make us happy.

On the mat: Don’t compare yourself with others. Practice generosity – if the studio is crowded, share space generously; if there is a shortage of equipment, be frugal with what you use.

Brahmacharya – meaning: controlling our sexual urges; controlling our vital energy.

- Traditionally, Brahmacharya has been interpreted as meaning chastity or celibacy.
- Modern interpretations are broader, as demonstrated by the definition provided by Jacoby Ballard: ‘Brahmacharya translates as “walking in the way of Brahma”. For monastics, Brahmacharya involves chastity. For all practitioners, it involves complete observation, responsibility, and care with regards to where one puts their energy in general, including sexual energy.’
- The essence of Brahmacharya is the control of our impulses towards excess or addictions.
- Brahmacharya encourages us not to waste energy on superficial things.

On the mat: Practice Brahmacharya through how you control the flow of prana. Use the Bhandas in your practice, particularly Mula Bhandha.

Aparigraha – meaning: non-greed; non-clinging; letting go of what we don’t need.

- Practice Aparigraha by not being attached to material things or ideas.
- This includes not holding onto resentment. Be forgiving.
- The message of Aparigraha is not to hold onto what doesn’t serve us.
- This requires learning how to control our desires.
- An important outcome of Aparigraha is that we don’t fill our lives with “stuff” (including worries). Instead, we find happiness with what we have.

On the mat: Practice Aparigraha by leaving your ego at the door. Don’t hold your breath. Be open to new teachings (observe Bruce Lee’s “empty cup” maxim).



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Niyamas

Saucha – meaning: purity in body, food, thoughts and intellect.

- Saucha is cleanliness of body, mind, spirit and surroundings. It means making healthy choices.
- Saucha is not religious or moral purity, as that is value laden and much harm has been done in the name of “moral purity”.
- Cleanliness includes food that is not affected by preservatives, additives or pesticides, and drink that does not contain harmful substances.
- We develop clean minds by avoiding negative thoughts towards ourselves or others. We learn to be mindful of our feelings, words and actions.

On the mat: Asana and Pranayama help purify the body. Meditation helps purify the mind. Think about why you practice, what is your motivation and what are you trying to achieve.

Santosha – meaning: contentment.

- Santosha is not passive contentment. It is not sitting around doing nothing. It is not an acceptance of something you are not happy with because you couldn't get better. Rather, it is active contentment. It means finding a real enthusiasm and joy in life.
- The key to Santosha is practising mindfulness – applying conscious attention to each moment without judgment.
- Santosha does not require the suppression of sadness or negative emotions. Rather, we allow negative emotions to pass through us. We don't cling to them (we apply Aparigraha).
- Santosha means being happy with what we have, where we are and who we are. This requires the application of Asteya and Aparigraha – controlling our desires, not wanting more than we need, letting go of what doesn't serve us; and then applying Saucha – being true to yourself. When the preceding yamas and niyamas are working for us, Santosha naturally follows.
- When we practice Santosha we fall in love with life.

On the mat: Practice acceptance of yourself – acceptance of what your body can achieve and that your practice is good enough. Be true to yourself (Satya) and pure in your motivation (Saucha) and find the yoga you truly love.

Tapas – meaning: commitment; austerity; discipline; your drive.

- Tapas is the effort to do what you need to do even when you don't feel like it, e.g. making the effort to come to a yoga class after a hard day at work.
- Traditional translations describe Tapas as igniting our inner fire (Agni) to burn away our impurities. This includes “burning away” negative thought patterns.
- Tapas does not mean pushing yourself harder than you should. The drive of Tapas is tempered by the kindness of Ahimsa.
- Swami Satchidananda said that tapas is self-discipline, not self-torture.
- Tapas is also balanced by Santosha: while we drive towards our goal with Tapas, we still enjoy each moment of the journey through Santosha.

On the mat: Give your best in all you do, without overdoing it – give 100%, no more and no less. Find the courage to try a pose you might find difficult or not enjoy doing. Practice regularly.



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Svadyaya – meaning: study of self.

- Svadyaya is self-development as you explore your spiritual path – your Sadhana.
- Svadyaya may be applied through reading and studying yoga and other spiritual texts, attending Satsang or other discussions of yoga/spiritual philosophy, meditation and other modes of self-inquiry.
- It leads to finding a deeper meaning for what you are doing and discovering the true you.
- This journey can be confronting, so it is important to be compassionate towards yourself as you discover more about yourself (Ahimsa first)

On the mat: Explore the mechanics of each asana as they relate to your body. Explore how each asana affects different parts of your body. Observe your breath. Observe your mind. Observe your feelings. Meditate.

Isvara Pranidhana – meaning: surrender yourself (the ego) to the divine.

- The “divine” can mean different things to different people. For some, it means God; for others, universal consciousness; for me, the meaning of life is love, so it means all thoughts and actions should come from love.
- Surrendering the ego requires great humility.
- Practice giving unconditional love – to others and to yourself.
- To quote JFK, do not ask what the world can do for you, but what you can do for the world.

On the mat: Let go of the ego – have no concern for how you might look to others. Find true joy in the achievements of others, without any thoughts as to your own achievements. Develop a meditative state of bliss in your practice – achieving union of body, mind and spirit. In meditation, connect with your sense of the divine.

“The Yamas and Niyamas would not be needed if we—the entire human race—did not already have the propensity to violate them. Paradoxically, the Yamas and Niyamas would not be possible to uphold if our true essence were not love, if love were not our aim and our home. To practice them we must find the maturity to tolerate the duality of our nature, while allowing the possibility of victory over our darkness. Love is not a thought, it is an action. And each loving action that we take infuses us with more energy for loving action in the future.”

(Rolf Gates and Katrina Kenison *Meditations on the Mat*)



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