

Ahimsa
Satya
Asteya
Brahmacharya
Aparigraha



Saucha
Santoshha
Tapas
Swadhyaya
Ishvara
Pranidhana

yamas and niyamas

– ancient yogic truths for the 21st century

With asana practice occupying most attention in a typical yoga class, it's easy to forget that yoga offers not just a path to physical health but also a framework for all-round life management. Yoga's ethical guidelines – the yamas and niyamas – suggest the values and behaviours likely to lead to a fulfilled, contented and productive life. Take your yoga a little deeper and explore how you can integrate these values into your everyday life. By Trish Brown.

The yamas and niyamas are rarely discussed in asana classes but they are keys to living a life of fullness, self-discovery and inner peace. They help us to achieve the ultimate state of balance and harmony, both within ourselves and with the world around us.

These principles are contained in the first two limbs of Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, known as the Eightfold Path. This ancient system of yogic instructions (sutras) can be applied to our yoga practice today and also to how we live our life in modern society. In fact, these values underpin the life of dedicated yogic aspirants and have done for thousands of years.

In his Yoga Sutras, Patanjali lists 10 important yamas and niyamas. However, the ancient treatise, the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, describes 24 in a remarkable dialogue between a warrior prince and his elite student. Patanjali's version focuses on how to ennoble yourself: how to refine your life to assist your development, and what to add to your life so you can experience greater wellbeing. The principles in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* also focus on encouraging you to make positive contributions to the world.

The yamas and niyamas are sometimes referred to as restraints and observances. Self-restraints (or controls)

help you to contain your energy to make you balanced and more focused by encouraging you to avoid problematic behaviours. Observances (directives) include practices to add to your life, to enhance your wellbeing and build up your energy.

Yamas (controls) are like the brakes on a car. They help us gain control over our lives and restore homeostasis to body and mind. Niyamas (directives) are like the accelerator, propelling us in the right direction.

Rather than just intellectualising the application of the yamas and niyamas, let's broaden our knowledge of them and take these universal values to a deeper and more personal level – and into our daily practice. Yoga becomes truly holistic when we take it 'off the mat' and embrace its principles in our day to day living. To get you started, here's a short explanation of each of the principles, along with a tip or two for how to cultivate each one in daily life.

YAMAS

1. Ahimsa: non-violence

Ahimsa refers to non-violence, which includes the non-killing, non-injuring and non-harming of others. True ahimsa is being aware of the energy you put out. This can mean anything from not polluting the earth to not punching

someone in the eye when they make you angry. It also applies to how we treat ourselves, for example, not beating ourselves up and thinking we're stupid when we make a mistake.

Physical violence is the grossest expression of humanity's baser instincts. But every thought, word or action that causes pain to another is really a form of violence. The aim is to have balanced ambition, which means not running over other people to get ahead and not harming or neglecting yourself either. Ask yourself a simple question: Do my actions, thoughts and intentions reflect peacefulness?

If you are unsure, think about where you spend your time. When we associate with people who live by high standards, they feed us with high thoughts and compassionate actions. When we associate with angry or violent people, or expose ourselves to the barrage of media violence, our minds can develop the habit of violence too. Cultivating good association and watching or reading things that nurture us can be essential if we want to create a peaceful life.

Cultivate consumer awareness. Question whether the products you choose are healthy or ethical and whether animals or humans have been hurt in the making of that product.

2. Satya: truthfulness

Truthfulness is about being real and seeing things the way they really are. The more truthful we are, the more we come to know ourselves. At the highest level of truth we can begin to recognise that much of our life is impermanent.

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However, on an everyday level we soon discover that truth is in the eye of the beholder. Most people see the world the way they would like it to be, rather than the way it is. In any conflict, the truth is usually somewhere between what both parties believe. Misinterpreting or taking the situation personally can lead to a distortion of the truth.

Being truthful requires constant vigilance, which at first is a great effort, but with practise becomes a natural way of living. Truthfulness requires us to be totally honest with ourselves, so that our thoughts, words and deeds are all in alignment. When they are, people sense the truth within us.

Try talking less and listening more. Empowering others allows your own communication to become stronger, with greater integrity.

3. Asteya: non-stealing

Taking something that belongs to someone else sets us at odds with what we know is right. Deep down, we all know what actions are honest, but often our desires cloud that knowing. One of Patanjali's sutras states: 'After becoming established finally in the state of non-stealing, the yogi will attain all diamonds.' When we no longer covet things that belongs to others, we attain our own level of satisfaction.

Non-stealing does not merely mean abstaining from theft. Stealing, for example, isn't just about taking something from a store or robbing a bank. It also means honesty. For example, it can mean not fudging your timesheets at work to say you have

done more hours than you have, or not cheating on your taxes despite the temptation to short change the government!

In yogic philosophy the very desire to have more wealth than one needs is also seen as stealing. But there are

reasons why people steal even when they know it's not right. Desiring something that does not belong to us, for example someone's job or car, is an indication that we are not content with what we have, or more importantly, we are not content with who we think we are!

The nature of the ego is to grasp at everything around it. We call this the 'wanting mind'. It arises from the ego and is always creating preferences.

When you discover your mind telling you that you need something, ask yourself: Do I really need this? Do I want this for myself, or will it benefit anyone else?

When you find the mind grasping for something that is not yours, ask the question: Why aren't I content with the things I have?

4. Brahmacharya: intelligent self-control

Patanjali realised that it was crucial to lead a life of self-restraint, as conserving one's energies helps people to maintain health and balance in life. Brahmacharya in its strictest sense is often interpreted as celibacy. But it is much more than avoiding relationships or refraining from sexual relations. The higher aspect of brahmacharya means having intelligent contact with the world.

When we exercise control and live with wisdom, we have more energy and focus to reach our full potential. An appropriate translation for our western world today would be controlling our desires to enable us to be in the world but not of the world, to enjoy what we have but not to be bound by it.

Moderation in all things is the key to a healthy lifestyle. Uncontrolled desires lead to the abuse of the senses, which in turn can lead to addictions of all kinds – drugs, alcohol, overeating, pornography or relationships where there is sex without love. These addictions create suffering at every level and distract us from the truth we seek as yogis.

The next time you have a craving ask yourself: If I fulfil this desire will it help me or hinder me on my yogic path? You may be amazed at how yoga can transform the energy of a desire. For example, ask yourself: Is there is a yoga posture I can do before I give in to the temptation to have a chocolate?

5. Aparigraha: not wanting what others have

The yama of aparigraha urges us to resist the desire to pursue and hoard stuff. Hoarding or collecting arises from fear about the future. We're afraid that if we don't accumulate and protect what we consider good stuff, we may find we don't have what we want, when we want it. It's not surprising that many of us feel this way because this anxiety to get things now is encouraged by our society. Nearly every advertisement on television entices us to buy and consume more, even though most of the time we don't need these things. Do we really need the latest car, mobile phone or fashion wardrobe? Or can we make do and give part of our hard-earned dollars to some of the less fortunate in the world. Gandhi aptly said: 'There is enough in the world for everyone's need but not for their greed'.

Aparigraha doesn't just apply to having lots of things, but more generally refers to how we get attached to material objects. There is an old story about a wandering monk who went to see a wise king in an opulent palace. The king was quite keen to learn from the monk. The monk told the king that he would have to renounce all his possessions to achieve happiness and develop spiritually. The king, who already had no attachment to his kingdom, smiled and said: 'I agree with you. In fact, let's do it now'. The monk was quite surprised that the king was prepared to exchange all his finery for the robes of a simple monk. As they walked out of the palace together and

away from the city, the monk suddenly remembered that he had left behind his begging bowl. He panicked, insisting that they return straight away to the palace to retrieve his only possession. The king looked at the monk in amazement. ‘After all that I have given up today, can’t you even let go of your begging bowl?’ he said.

The point of this story is that attachment is not related to the size or quantity of our possessions. Something small can bind us just as much as a whole kingdom.

Make a list, daily, of the people who you will give a small gift to. Consider giving more of your time and energy to good works.

NIYAMAS

1. Saucha: purity

Saucha is purity on all levels, in body and mind. This also means purity in intention, thought and expression. Good habits, like bathing, purify the body externally, and asana (posture work) and pranayama (breath work) cleanse and purify the body internally.

More important than the physical cleansing, however, is the cleansing of the mind. This is the cleansing of negative thoughts that no longer serve you, including those emotions that we wrangle with, such as anger, hatred, greed, delusion, pride and lust. Imagine how centred and calm you would be if you didn’t get upset when someone cut you off in traffic or stole your parking space!

One of the most direct routes to developing saucha is by practising forms of yoga that go beyond the physical body, such as bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion), jnana yoga (yoga of self-knowledge) and karma yoga (yoga of action).

Keep your house clean and tidy so you live in a space that does not feel cluttered and dirty, enhancing feelings of orderliness and wellbeing.

Consider going on a yogic diet so that you have the energy and strength to best give of yourself to the world and to reach your full potential.

2. Santosha: contentment

Santosha is the fulfilment and contentment that has to be cultivated to free the mind. If you are not content it is hard to concentrate in any aspect of your

[Postures for the Yamas and Niyamas]

These practices come from the Dru Yoga tradition www.druexperience.com

[yamas]

Ahimsa

Seat of Compassion – opens the heart to feelings of compassion for both self and others

Satyam

Practice Vishuddhi Dharanam, as it strengthens the chakra centre of communication

Asteya

Stand in nature and practise the flowing Dru Tree Pose to experience the fullness and oneness of your true nature.

Brahmacharya

Practice of Brahmacharyasana – the Celibate’s Pose to help you to contain your energies

Aparigraha

Parsvottanasana (Charity posture) has the power to open your heart centre (Anahata Chakra) and engenders the qualities of generosity, compassion and selflessness

[niyamas]

Saucha

Natarajasana allows a natural flow out of the body of unwanted thoughts, emotions and energies

Santosha

Savangasana, the tranquillity posture alleviates symptoms of emotional turmoil and mental stress

Tapas

Vrksasana – For time immemorial this has been the posture used as a strengthening for tapas by saints and sages

Swadhyaya

Meditate on a still point in the heart or the ajna centre as these are the two classic gateways to inner knowledge

Ishvara pranidhana

Try learning a yoga sequence like EBR3* ‘Awakening the Heart’ that helps you create a positive relationship with your own highest inner strength and light

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life, never mind your yoga practice. If you constantly want more of something – whether it is excitement or even spiritual experiences – then you are not content with where you are now.

When a person is hungry for something they tend to focus on what they don’t have instead of what they do. But when you reach the stage where you feel you do not lack anything then you can know true tranquillity and peace of mind.

The challenge yoga sets you is to cultivate a personality that does not crave things or people, and does not waver even in tempting circumstances.

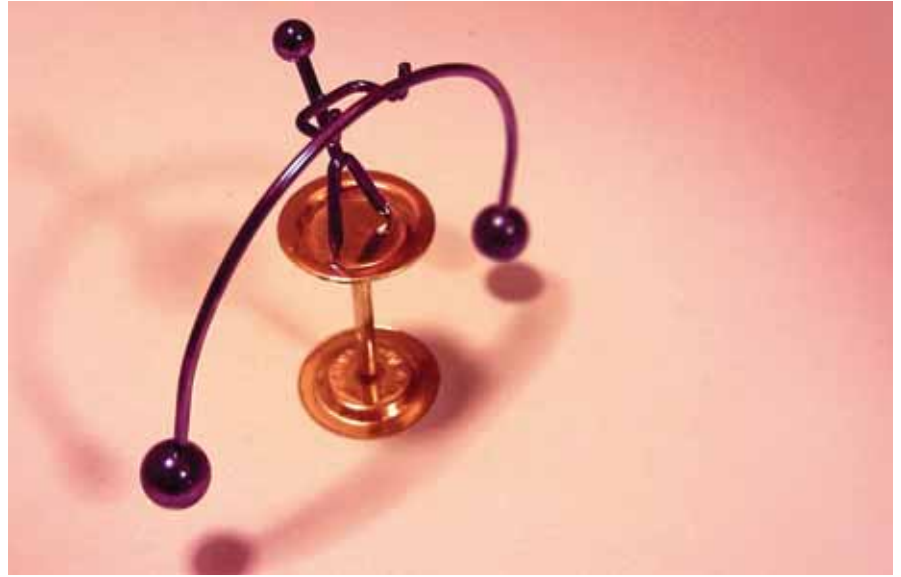
Every morning begin your day by being grateful for three things in your life, so that you see your cup as half full rather than half empty.

3. Tapas: self-discipline

The art of tapas, sometimes translated as austerity or letting go, is fundamentally about ‘sticking at it’. Tapas calls on you to direct your effort towards achieving a particular goal and not being put off by discomfort or difficulties. For thousands of years, yogis in India have meditated in the cold caves of the Himalayas and performed acts such as standing on one leg for months and focused on God in their pursuit of the goal of enlightenment. Tapas builds great strength and internal reserves and usually involves purification of the senses in some way. It involves leading a lifestyle that supports your spiritual goals.

Today we can engage in tapas by adhering to the discipline of a daily yoga

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practice so that we set ourselves up in the best possible way to meet the challenges of the day. Or tapas could be following a healthy diet, or even committing to chanting mantra daily.

Commit yourself to a daily practice of yoga and meditation. Adopting one thing in your day can transform your life.

If your health permits, consider taking up fasting for one meal a week or one day a month.

4. Swadhyaya: self-enquiry

Swadhyaya is about directing your life to the study of the Self. There is the (small s) self, which is the ego that usually directs our daily activities. There is also the (big S) Self, which is the higher consciousness that you can discover through self-enquiry. Another aspect of self-enquiry is studying the ancient spiritual texts: the Yoga Sutras, Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Bible or Koran.

Meditating on the religious texts can deepen your knowledge and understanding of them. In fact, in some traditions students are encouraged to do broad spiritual study so that they become familiar with the huge variety of spiritual paths available. Being spiritually eclectic enables you to understand the self from different perspectives.

The knowledge gained through self-study and enquiry gives you the keys to leading a fulfilled and productive life.

Read something from one of the ancient spiritual texts every day.

Practise self-inquiry. Regularly ask yourself: Who am I? What is my purpose? The answer to these questions will be unique for each person.

5. Ishvara pranidhana: dedication to the highest

For a seeker of truth, the highest act is surrendering one's individual will to the divine will. This means being motivated to act in a selfless way day by day.

To do this means allowing the highest possible source to direct us in that goal. When we surrender at this level the 'I' and 'mine' dissolve so that the individual soul knows only unity.

Of course there are many ways to do this, but the yoga of bhakti is seen as one of the most direct forms of practice to cultivate this niyama.

Make an effort every day to connect to whatever aspect of the divine you are drawn to. This could be through prayer, contemplation or simply by lighting a flame.

Dedicate something within your day to serving humanity, for example, pick up some litter so that your neighbourhood is cleaner.

If you feel overwhelmed by the ethical challenge of the yamas and niyamas, why not simply choose one or two to work with initially? As your behaviour becomes more aligned with these powerful yogic values and you experience the benefits of a more balanced and harmonious way of living, you will have the confidence to expand your efforts.

Take some encouragement from the fact that Mahatma Gandhi focused on just two yamas with vigilance and achieved such a powerful personal transformation that he has left a legacy of hope across the entire world. He transformed himself into one of the greatest spiritual leaders by applying the principles of truthfulness (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa), and as a result he created huge social change, inspiring a whole nation, if not the entire world. You could do the same!

References

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