

Yama and Niyama

The traditional restraints and observances of Yoga

The Yamas and Niyamas are the basic practices of Yoga. Without these requisite practices, it is generally not possible to advance spiritually through the other practices of Yoga. The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali lays out the Aṣṭāṅga (eight-limbed) system of Yoga. This system for realization entails eight successive steps.

- 1) Yama – Restraints – These are practices to be avoided
- 2) Niyama – Observances – These are practices to be observed without restraint
- 3) Āsana – Postures – These are physical exercises practiced for the purpose of enabling the physical body to sit still without pain or distraction
- 4) Prāṇāyāma – Breathing Practices – These are breathing exercises practiced to enable the mind to focus without distraction
- 5) Pratyāhāra – Sensory Withdrawal – Practices to withdraw the senses from outer experience enable the Yogi to come to inner experiences
- 6) Dhāraṇā – Concentration – This is developing single pointed awareness focused on some object of contemplation
- 7) Dhyāna – Meditation – Meditation occurs as a natural result of the practice of contemplation – it is like an extended practice of contemplation
- 8) Samādhi – Union – Union occurs as a natural result of the practice of meditation – when the perception of observer and observed merge in awareness and the identity of individual self is lost.

Of these practices the first two practices of Yama and Niyama are widely neglected by Western practitioners of Yoga. Yet without these important steps it is not generally possible to attain any meaningful benefits from the other steps of Yoga. In order to begin the practice of Yoga, a person must practice Yama and Niyama. These fundamental practices help prepare the mind of a seeker for the revelations which will come from the deeper practices of Yoga like mantra recitation and meditation. Without these practices in place, the potential for progress through the higher practices of Yoga is little. The karmas of a person remain as vasanas (mental attachments around unprocessed sensory impressions) veiled in the subconscious. The higher practices of Yoga will reveal these attachments, fears, and insecurities. In order to have the right understanding and instinct to process and release these as they arise through practice, the Sages have given the practice of Yama and Niyama. If a person attempts Mantra or meditation practice without a decent grasp of yama and niyama, the potential for acting out of the mental

attachments as they arise from the subconscious and creating even more karma and suffering is great. Study of yama and niyama before the study of asana, pranayama, mantra, and meditation, is like the study of the letters of the alphabet before attempting to write words. They are a fundamental and essential building block which form the firm basis for the consistent and ongoing advancement in the expansion of spiritual awareness.

Yama (Restraints) This is not the repression of natural urges or mental impulses but the development of spiritual, detached awareness that allows the consciousness of the soul to transcend the bonds of attachment and to function unhindered by these things.

1) **Ahimsā (non-violence)** Not hurting others (or self) through thought, word, or deed. This means refraining from hurtful thoughts, words, and actions toward all other people and creatures we encounter. The point is to minimize the suffering of all beings. This includes avoiding eating meat, fowl, fish, eggs, gelatin, and other animal products which are produced by killing the animal. This means avoiding products which are made or supplied by killing, or injuring animals or people like leather, factory dairy products, or foreign products produced by slave-labor.

2) **Satya (truth)** Not lying, betraying promises, concealing information, or misrepresenting oneself or others. To truly practice satya, people must have the courage to examine themselves and the humility to present information openly and honestly.

3) **Asteya (non-stealing)** Not wrongfully seizing or claiming the property of others (this includes cheating for gain of money, or property as well as credit, award, praise, or recognition). This could include stealing music or movies by downloading them from pirated sources. Non-stealing should be practiced mentally as well by not coveting the others property. People should not seek name, credit, fame, or recognition which belongs rightfully to another. It is also important not to enter into debt, without practical short term plans to repay. Unpaid debt creates the same karmic due that stealing does.

4) **Brahmacarya (Divine Conduct)** Controlling passions and instinctive reactions to events. Traditional interpretation of Brahmacharya has been limited to "celibacy." From the meaning of the root words brahma meaning "God" and charya meaning "action or conduct," it is clear that the concept of brahmacharya goes far beyond restraining the sexual urges. More or less it is the practice of conducting oneself as the Lord does by always considering and acting for the good of all others. It is not an act of repression but of transmutation of the mental intentions and physical anatomy. The mind of the brahmachari is occupied with love, Divine sight, and the physical form is occupied by the work of selfless service. For monastics the practice of brahmacharya equates to abstinence. For house-holders (those who work in the world to support a family), the ideal of brahmacharya translates to commitment and monogamy in relationships. Commitment in relationships is very helpful for those doing spiritual practice as it ensures a person is facing and addressing troubles within that the relationship brings to a person's awareness. The most ideal model for this is marriage, in which lifetime commitment is formally and publicly avowed with the blessing of the Devas (Gods). For Westerners who have moved away from the practice of

monogamy and lifetime commitment, it is advised to refrain from sexual relations with anyone that a person does not intend to marry and to pause and take time to reflect upon and discuss a partnership in depth before commencing any relationship. Once a relationship is started, it is wise to do everything possible to preserve that relationship, never considering separation or divorce unless it is necessary for the safety of one or both partners (as in the case of persistent physical or verbal abuse). Consciousness of Western people has begun to devalue commitment and the sacred institution of marriage and people have begun to believe falsely that they must have many partners to be happy. We encourage young people to avoid this habit which has caused the older generations much needless pain and suffering and to marry early if possible. This practice will support the peace, happiness, success and spirituality of society.

5) Kṣamā (Patience) This means overcoming the irritability and intolerance that causes impatience with people and situations.

6) Dhṛti (Steadiness) Overcoming changeability, and lack of dedication and constancy. It is important to face fears and overcome indecisiveness, hesitation, and avoidance. It is also important to honor all commitments and to commit only to obligations which can be realistically fulfilled.

7) Dayā (Compassion) Conquering insensitivity and all violent or neglectful patterns that follow. This practice is extremely important. Compassion arises toward all things when the seeker learns to truly love himself. Without the quality of compassion it is not possible to practice any of the other yamas and niyamas. When compassion toward all things is strong within the devotee, the other yamas and niyamas occur easily as a result. Compassion is practiced by learning to see the divine within all creatures and patiently and lovingly serving all.

8) Ārjava (Honesty, Straightforwardness) Representing oneself and all situations openly and honestly by avoiding deception in all forms. To practice straightforwardness, a person must learn to love and respect himself enough to present his actions, feelings, thoughts, and personality to all without fear of judgment or criticism. It is a necessary part of the practice of ārjava to avoid entering into any debt which cannot be quickly repaid. This is done by paying all fees and dues (like taxes) honestly and promptly to the best of one's financial capacity. It is important for a person to understand his financial capacity and not enter into deals or contracts that commit him beyond his financial means. Many people routinely enter into financial agreements which they do not know how they will repay. Debt is considered a normal part of many modern societies, but when understood in this way it is equal to theft.

9) Mitāhāra (Moderate Appetite) Not eating too much or too little. Avoiding overeating and excessive fasting or dieting. This practice includes avoiding unwholesome foods in general and those which aggravate a person's Ayurvedic vikṛiti (constitutional imbalance). The advice of an Ayurvedic physician may be helpful for people to learn to recognize the signs of proper digestion and to learn to recognize which foods are healthful for their individual condition. People must know when they are experiencing a true appetite and eat when they are hungry. Food drugs like

alcohol, caffeine, and narcotic drugs should be avoided. "Junk food" with chemical additives and preservatives should be avoided as should highly-refined sugars and grains as well as frozen and preserved foods. A sattvik diet of pure, natural, fresh, local and organic foods should be favored. This includes also avoiding overindulging in sensory indulgences of all sorts.

10) Śauca (Purity) Avoiding impurity in body, mind, and speech. The mind and speech should be kept on spiritual and uplifting thoughts. This can be done by avoiding asangha (bad associations) and violent and explicit TV, movies, music, books, and other entertainment. The body should be kept engaged in spiritual deeds and associated with satsangha (positive associations). Physical cleanliness maintained by regular bathing and grooming is important. Mental purity is maintained by avoiding low vibrational thoughts, speech, and action. The remnants of negative thought patterns should never be repressed, lest they multiply in the subconscious mind and wreak havoc as they invariably boil-over in time. Instead, the Yogi develops purity and deals with the remnant impressions of darkness upon the mind by occupying the mind with positive, uplifting impressions and by bathing the consciousness with the purifying practice of mantra recitation.

Niyama (observances) These observances should be practiced without restraint. Their practice helps a person to develop the qualities needed to progress in the practice of Yoga. The practice of the each Niyama helps a person to overcome the negative habits represented by each of the respective Yamas. That is to say the practice of remorse will help a person in their practice of non-violence; the practice of contentment will help in the practice of truth etc.

1) Hrī (Remorse) This means being modest, grateful, and to show remorse for wrongdoing. People must be humble to admit their faults and courageous to apologize and make amends whenever possible.

2) Santoṣa (Contentment) This is the practice of maintaining an attitude of satisfaction. It is the maintenance of inner joy, serenity, and emotional steadiness throughout the painful and pleasurable experiences that life may offer.

3) Dāna (Giving) This means tithing money to God or Guru and giving generously wherever there is need without any thought of reward or acknowledgement.

4) Āstikya (Faith) Strong, unwavering belief in God, the Shastras (scriptures), the Guru, and the path to liberation. This practice involves maintaining faith in difficult situations even when there is no understanding of the course of events and working to recognize and overcome doubts whenever they arise.

5) Īśvara Pūjana (Worship of God) The regular practice of Puja (Worship of one's chosen form of God) and dhyana (meditation on God) to develop bhakti (devotion), shraddha (faith) and Jnaana (Direct perception of God). This practice includes the other devotional practices of bhakti yoga like singing devotional hymns, visiting Sacred Temples, attending satsangs, cleaning the Temple, performing service for the Guru, cooking or preparing offerings for Temple

pujas.

6) Siddhānta Śravaṇa (Hearing the Scriptures) Listening with open heart to the teachings of the scriptures and the teachings of the Guru. If one truly hears the teachings of the Guru, they will also recall and practice these in their day to day life. This could also include listening to the sacred hymns of the Scriptures while seeking to open to the shakti (energy) they bestow. This practice helps to fill the aura of a person with Divine grace which unfolds in time as knowledge and inspiration in life.

7) Mati (Cognition, Mindfulness) Developing spiritual will and awareness by seeking the grace of the Guru's guidance and through self-examination. A person must be humble to admit their shortcomings and brave to uncover the latent patterns of the subconscious mind through consistent efforts in meditation and spiritual practice. Once recognized, the negative mental impressions are counter-balanced through the practice of positive (opposing) actions and affirmations.

8) Vrata (Vows) Taking and fulfilling religious vows and observances. This could include: daily meditation, japa, or puja, visiting the Temple or Guru at least once a week, performing pilgrimage to a Holy site at least once a year, and observing the sacred festival days. Other self imposed vows may be undertaken with the Guru's guidance and blessing, for example fasting once a month on Pradosham day.

9) Japa (Recitation) Practicing mantras and chanting sacred hymns from the Vedas or Shastras daily. This practice restructures the mind and consciousness by bathing awareness in the shakti (energy) of the mantra. Each mantra is like a name of the Lord. The practice of Japa helps one to remain ever-mindful of the Lord. Mantras is a potent mystical affirmation and it is a prayer invoking Divine grace. The ultimate goal of japa, which must be come to gradually, is ajapa (effortless and constant mental connection to the higher energies embodied by the sacred sound of mantra).

10) Tapas (Spiritual Austerities) Performing saadhana (spiritual practice), sacrifice, and penance. A temporary vow of silence is a very powerful austerity that is safe and effective, as is the practice of prostrating 108 times before the deity in a Temple (health permitting). Intense austerities like fasting or mortification may be useful with the Gurus express guidance and blessing. Spiritual austerities ignite the fire of awareness and kundalini (the power of spiritual awareness); they burn away past karmas, and they help the yogi to develop an inner steadiness in the face of intense external conditions