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# Yogasutras of Patanjali

## Yama & Niyama

### A Yogic Perspective of Well Being

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#### 1st Limb: YAMA (2.30-2.34)

The *Pancha Yama* are codes of self-regulation or restraint, and are the first of the eight steps of Yoga. These codes of self-regulation or restraint become a great vow when they become universal and are not restricted by any consideration of the nature of the kind of living being to whom one is related, nor in any place, time or situation.

They provide a strong moral and ethical foundation for our personal and social life. They guide our attitudes concerning right and wrong in our lives and with ourselves, our family unit, and the entire social system. These changes in our attitude and behavior will go a long way in helping to prevent the very causes of stress in our life. The five *Yama* consist of

1. *Ahimsa* (non-violence)
2. *Satya* (truthfulness)
3. *Asteya* (non-stealing)
4. *Brahmacharya* (proper channeling of creative impulse)
5. *Aparigraha* (non – coveted-ness)

The *Yama* is the “DO NOT’s” in a *Yoga Sadhaka’s* life. Do not kill, do not be untruthful, do not steal, do not waste your god given creativity, and do not covet that which does not belong to you. These guide us to say a big “NO” to our lower self and the lower impulses of violence etc. When we apply these to our life we can have better personal and social relationships as social beings. They are the main qualities that the spiritual aspirant should have to communicate and interact with the outside world and the people in it. They are also self- restraints from performing actions of the weaker lower mind.

## 1. Ahimsa

*Ahimsa*, **non-violence**, not only means not causing harm or pain to any creature in thought, word, or action, but also not having even a hint of aggression within your being. Usually, our actions in themselves are violent, though our purposes are not at all so. When a mother slaps a child, she does so because she wants to teach the child a lesson. It is done out of love, not hatred. Therefore, it is the purpose that matters, and not the action.

It is equally sinful if we encourage others to be violent or if we are violent to ourselves. *Himsa* (violence) is not only physical violence but also includes manipulation, hurting someone's feelings, psychic influence, and so on. The most important thing is not to directly deny people, even if they get violent, i.e. not getting into fights, arguments, disputes, or quarrels. *Himsa* is not considered to be violence if it is to save your life, or if you kill one to save many. It is said that when you perfect *Ahimsa*, a sort of magnet will act around you, preventing anyone from doing you harm or being violent.

People will start to enjoy your presence and feel no discomfort as long as they are in your presence. In the Christian Bible, Christ says, "If one slaps thee on thy right cheek, turn to him thy left also." Christ, Krishna, Rama, Prophet Mohammed, Buddha, and all other saints, prophets, and messiahs were great followers of *Ahimsa* and Dharma. Great saints like St. Francis of Assisi and Ramana Maharishi, who could communicate with animals, were also great followers of *Ahimsa*. Aggression is a reaction to fear and, therefore if we overcome our fears, we can practice *Ahimsa*.

A good example is the story of the Sufi saint who called his disciples together and said, "I have five birds, one for each of you. Take them and kill them in separate places, but no one must see you doing it. When you bring them here, we'll have a feast." So they all came back sooner or later and gave explanations about where they killed their birds and how no one saw them. When the last disciple came, he said "I'm sorry Guruji, I failed you. I could not kill it. Wherever I went, I felt as though someone was watching me." He turned out to be the best disciple.

## 2. Satya

*Satya*, or **truth**, is the second Yama, and also a very important qualification. Let's take Galileo as an example of *Satya*. He was caught by the Inquisition twice for his discoveries, but, despite the danger, he went on with his writing, teaching, and research until he could no longer use his eyes and ears. He stuck to the truth of his discoveries till the end, because he knew they were true, and he wasn't even prosecuted. Swami Sivananda says, "God is truth, and He can be realized by observing truth in thought, word, and deed." According to him, the thirteen forms of truth are

1. truthfulness,
2. equality,
3. self-control,
4. absence of jealousy,
5. absence of envious emulation,
6. forgiveness,
7. modesty,
8. endurance,
9. charity,
10. thoughtfulness,
11. disinterested philanthropy (being too public-spirited or civic-minded),
12. self-possession,
13. unceasing and compassionate harmlessness.

Under certain circumstances, telling a (white) lie to produce immense good is regarded as truth.

**Vak siddhi** (*vak* means speech, and *siddhi* is a special power a Yogi receives through practicing *Sadhana* and *Tapasya*) can be mastered by observing truth always and at all times. The *vak siddhi* gives one the power to accomplish things by mere thought. A lie is not only a lie if you speak incorrect or dishonest words. If you acted foolishly and afterward blinded yourself with the belief that you did the right thing, it is also considered to be a lie, even though it all happened in your mind. It's the same if you exaggerate, or brag, to boost your ego. *Satya* is not merely abstinence from telling lies, but also the ability to see the truth, to be aware of the truth behind everything.

If you tell people what they should or should not do and then do whatever pleases you, you are a hypocrite. You say one thing and do another, thereby not being true even to yourself. Why should one lie? One lies to escape the consequences of the actions of oneself or one's associate. This is a manifestation of the petty mind. Therefore, *Satya* also helps in overcoming the petty mind.

### 3. Asteya

*Asteya*, the third *Yama*, is commonly known as **honesty** (in the sense of ‘abstinence from theft’). To be able to follow *asteya*, we must be satisfied with what we have, our personal belongings, our way of thinking, what we do, where we are, who we are, etc. In other words, we must not be greedy and should try to be contented. We steal things because we desire them. To be able or to be strong enough to resist the temptation to steal the object that one desires, one’s mind must be strong.

Hence, through mastering *asteya*, one purifies the mind of desires and *vrittis*. *Asteya* makes the **mind pure**, like a mirror in which your divine mind is reflected. The very thought of gain through theft should not arise in the mind, because the constant desire for objects not belonging to oneself is actual theft. We steal things because we desire them, so it does not necessarily mean that we steal physical objects. Some people steal the ideas of others. That is the worst form of theft. Try to keep your desires moderate.

### 4. Brahmacharya

*Brahmacharya* is usually depicted in books, discourses, scriptures, etc. as **celibacy**. But *Brahma* means the ‘**divine consciousness**’ and *charya*, in this case, means ‘**living**’ or ‘one who is established in’. Therefore, *Brahmacharya* means ‘being established in divine consciousness, or ‘being established in the higher (form of the) mind’. Scientists have proved that only ten percent of the average human brain is active and freely accessed during daily activities. Spiritually evolved people said long ago that the human mind has an enormous capacity. Unfortunately, a large part of the ten percent is driven by instincts and indulges in sensual and petty activities.

The four basic instinctive drives are

1. *Ahara* (food)
2. *Nidra* (sleep)
3. *Bhaya* (fear)
4. *Maithuna* (sexuality)

These are dominant in our minds for the simple reason of survival. Since survival is not such a big problem in today’s society as it was in ancient times, a sort of vacuum is created. Food is over-available, fear becomes an obstacle in daily life, the world is overpopulated, and so on. Most people fill this vacuum by amplifying the fulfillment of these desires for sensual pleasure. *Brahmacharya* deals with filling this vacuum with spirituality.

To most people, following *Brahmacharya* would mean the suppression of desires. *Brahmacharya* should not be suppression, and suppression is not the remedy for

overcoming the lower mind or controlling any of its instinctive drives. Unless one is established in the higher mind, suppression is of no avail. One may be able to stop oneself from satisfying any of these instincts, but one cannot suppress the mind from dwelling upon them continually. That is not *Brahmacharya*, being established in the higher mind, and the higher mind does not waste time by dwelling on such matters.

There is a story about two monks on a pilgrimage in (supposedly) strict *Brahmacharya*. When they come across a lady unable to cross a large puddle, the senior monk carries her across to safety. Shocked, the younger monk eventually remonstrates with the senior monk, who replies, “You are still carrying her in your head while I left her by the banks of the puddle!” The younger monk is a perfect example of the opposite of *Brahmacharya*.

## 5. Aparigraha

*Aparigraha*, the fifth and last of the *Yamas*, is non-possessiveness (also known as abstinence from greed). It is complete freedom from greed or covetousness. You should not try to possess more than you minimally need. As Swami Satyananda Saraswati mentions in *Four Chapters on Freedom*: “This keeps the mind unoccupied and also he (the aspirant) does not have to worry about anything because there is nothing (no possessions) there to be protected.” When we become non-possessive, or non-attached, we become impartial and in that way, the conditioned love, affection, compassion, and so on become unconditional, and not merely restricted to family, friends, relations, etc. The memories and habits of possessing objects must be first washed away from the mind, and only then can you start life anew. The mind also becomes pure by following *Aparigraha*.

### CHAPTER REFLECTION: YAMA

What is Pancha Yama?

Observe one Yama for 7 days, apply throughout the week and write your personal experience on it. In total, 5 weeks are needed for this practice.

Can each Yama be experienced in a yoga class?

## 2nd Limb: NIYAMA (2.30-2.34)

The *Niyamas* are self-disciplinary qualities that are entirely devoted to helping the aspirant on their spiritual journey. They are also fixed rules one should follow to do the practices of meditation (*Dhyana*) and to reach liberation (*Samadhi*). The five *niyamas* consist of

1. *Saucha* (cleanliness)
2. *Santhosha* (contentment)
3. *Tapas* (leading a disciplined life of austerity)
4. *Swadhyaya* (introspectional self-analysis)
5. *Ishwar pranidhana* (developing a sense of gratitude to the divine self)

They guide us with “DO’s” - do be clean, do be contented, do be disciplined, do self-study (introspection), and do be thankful to the divine for all of his blessings. They help us to say a big “YES” to our higher self and our higher impulses. A person with such qualities is a God-send to humanity. Even when we are unable to live the *Yama* and *niyama* completely, even the attempt by us to do so will bear fruit and make each one of us a better person and help us to be of value to those around us and a valuable person to live within our family and society. These are values that need to be introduced to the youth to make them aware and conscious of these wonderful concepts of daily living which are qualities to be imbibed with joy and not learned with fear or compulsion.

### 1. Saucha

*Saucha*, cleanliness, is the first *Niyama*. Not only **external cleanliness**, like having a shower, brushing your teeth, etc. but the purity of actions, **purity of mind from evil** and distracting, unnecessary thoughts, and bad, haunting memories. Cleanliness of the environment and oneself is necessary for hygienic reasons, but the state of the environment also affects your mind. If it is clean and tidy, you will become more centered and will be able to concentrate properly, but if it is an unhygienic, messy, or untidy environment, your mind may become disorganized. That is why it is better to tidy up your room in the morning. Such things seem trivial, but they help to keep the mind free of clutter and make it sharp and clear. In other words, practicing *Saucha* on the physical plane also affects the mind on the Pranic and mental levels.

### 2. Santhosha

*Santhosha*, contentment or **satisfaction**, is the second *Niyama*. *Santhosha* is being content with one’s actions and with what one has, what one is, where one is, and with what one has done or what one is doing. It also means to be content about where one is, whether it is concerning time or space. We should not daydream about the future nor should our minds linger in the past. Be content with where you are, or you will never be happy or feel true satisfaction. Also, *Santhosha* is being content with what one is. If you do not like

being what you are, you won't find any happiness in life either. You have to be content with what you do if you have done your best.

A beggar is a king if he is contented with what he has, while a king is like a beggar if he still desires more riches to add to his treasure troves and vaults by imposing more taxes on the poor. If you are dissatisfied, it causes psychic infirmity and many other complexes. In the Yoga Vashishtha, Sage Vashishtha, who was one of Rama's teachers, says that Vichara (reflection), *Shanti* (peacefulness), *Satsang* (being in the company of truth, in any form), *Santhosha* (contentment) are the four sentinels at the gate of *Moksha* (salvation, or being completely freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth). He says that if you have mastered *Santhosha*, the other three will let you pass automatically.

### 3. Tapas

The third *Niyama* is *Tapasya* (or *tapas*), **austerity** or moderation – depending upon one's capacity. The main purpose of attaining *Tapasya* is to be able to meditate properly. It creates a controlled mind which will not accept any interference from the body, like "I'm thirsty!" or "I want food!" or "that hurts!" etc. It also hardens the body, so that these desires aren't too frequent. It strengthens the organs and makes them healthy in order not to experience painful distractions during meditation. Thus it leads to *Pratyahara* or abstraction of the senses.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is mentioned that there are three types of austerities:

- The austerity of the physical body,
- The austerity of communication and speech (Mouna)
- The austerity of the mind.

*Tapa* includes control over one's thoughts to avoid unnecessary talking. As a sculptor chip away all the unnecessary bits of rock to make a beautiful sculpture, so the hardships through which the body goes strengthen the mind and chip away all the unnecessary bits, leaving only the true essence of your real self. By practicing *Tapasya*, the body becomes immune to extensive heat, cold, and even poisons and other hardships. According to Swami Satyananda Saraswati in *Four Chapters on Freedom*, there are **five types of tapas**:

1. Exposure to the sun to harden the skin
2. Exposure to fire makes one's body slim and brown
3. Doing *Pranayama* to heat the body
4. Accumulating the fire of concentration at one point
5. The fire of fasting

These are the five fires that **remove the toxins** to make the body fit for meditation.



## 4. Swadhyaya

*Swadhyaya* is the fourth *Niyama*, which I have defined as **the study of the self** in the introduction. It is usually defined as the ‘study of ancient spiritual scriptures’, but one can read the scriptures and not understand or apply a single thing from them in our daily life. *Swa* means ‘self’ here; therefore, *Swadhyaya* is the study of the self or self-analysis. One must be the *Drashta*, the witness, the observer. The higher type of knowledge is experience, while the lower form is learning directly from books and the even lower form is learning from books but not understanding a thing that one is reading. It is recorded in the *Essene Gospel of Peace* that Jesus said, “Seek not the law in your scriptures, for the law is life, whereas the scripture is dead.”

Through *Swadhyaya* we can improve ourselves and guide ourselves on the right path to some extent without the help of the guru. If you can see your life and observe it like a book, as in the yogic practice of *Antar Mouna*, we can observe *Swadhyaya* one can observe and modify one’s reactions, one can moderate one’s negativity and improve one’s way of perceiving things through observing the self.

From another point of view, chanting the name of God in the form of the *Gayatri mantra*, the Om mantra, a prayer, etc., or even your initiation *mantra* helps to focus the mind, which helps in *Swadhyaya*. When one chants a mantra from the heart, one does not necessarily need to understand what one is chanting to experience spiritual upliftment.

## 5. Ishwara Pranidhana

*Ishwara Pranidhana*, or **complete self-surrender to God**, is the last and one of the hardest *Niyama*. One gets to a stage on the spiritual journey when the Guru steps back and when one cannot proceed without help and one becomes desperate. Such is the human mind that one can develop complete faith in God only when a desperate situation arises, where none but God (by God which can be Ishwara, Allah, Yahweh, or any other) only can help, whether you believe in God or not. People understand God in many different ways. Some do not even believe in the concept of God. Yet everyone who seeks spiritual guidance and evolution reaches this stage if they are sincere in their quest. As God is different from many people, we reach this stage through different means and situations. It is the time when one completely lets go of all ego and surrenders to destiny

There is a story about a dedicated monk deep in meditation in his cave. Suddenly there was a freak flood and the town nearby was filled with gushing water. Some good-natured people paddled laboriously on their little raft to try and save the monk. But when they reached his cave, the monk said, “Do not worry. I am a pious man who has been serving God all his life. God will not desert me now. Never fear, He will come and save me with



His own hands.” A few minutes later a yacht with five men arrived. They attempted to rescue the monk but received the same reply. Finally, a rescue helicopter arrived and hovered outside the cave, but the monk sent them away. The water rose, flooded the monk’s abode and he drowned. When he reached heaven he said to God, “I’ve been worshipping you all my life, and yet you didn’t come and save me when I needed you the most!” And God replied “Well, I don’t know what you expected. First I sent you a raft, then a yacht, then a first-class helicopter, and you only said silly things like ‘God will save me with His own hands.’ The raft, yacht, and helicopter were my hands.”

It all seems to be a mental process; however, the physical outcome is that when one surrenders to and realizes Ishwara, one never remains the same because one cannot realize God if one has even the smallest hint of the human ego.

The Yama and Niyama are all in a way interrelated, so they don’t allow you to skip any of them if you are sincere in your desire to master them. Also, the Pancha Yama and Pancha Niyama are not meant only for Yogis and Sannyasins, but for everyone to practice. According to Yoga, the influence of the mind over the body is much more than that of the body over the mind. For this reason, Yoga has laid great emphasis on the cultivation of correct psychological attitudes through Yama-Niyama. They bring about the tranquilization of the mind necessary for getting the maximum benefit possible through various Yoga practices.

When these codes of self-regulation or restraint (yamas) and observances or practices of self-training (niyamas) are inhibited from being practiced due to perverse, unwholesome, troublesome, or deviant thoughts, principles in the opposite direction, or contrary thought should be cultivated. Actions arising out of such negative thoughts are performed directly by oneself, caused to be done through others, or approved of when done by others. All of these may be preceded by, or performed through anger, greed or delusion, and can be mild, moderate or intense in nature. To remind oneself that these negative thoughts and actions are the causes of unending misery and ignorance is the contrary thought, or principle in the opposite direction that was recommended in the previous sutra.

### CHAPTER REFLECTION: NIYAMA

What is Pancha Niyama?

How to relate Niyama in personal development?

Observe one Niyama for 7 days, apply throughout the week and write your personal experience on it. In total, 5 weeks are needed for this practice.

Can each Niyama be experienced in a yoga class?

## **Benefits from *Yamas & Niyamas* (2.35-2.45):**

As a Yogi becomes firmly grounded in non-injury (*ahimsa*), other people who come near will naturally lose any feelings of hostility. As truthfulness (*satya*) is achieved, the fruits of actions naturally result according to the will of the Yogi. When non-stealing (*asteya*) is established, all jewels or treasures present themselves or are available to the Yogi. When walking in the awareness of the highest reality (*brahmacharya*) is firmly established, then a great strength, capacity, or vitality (*virya*) is acquired. When one is steadfast in non-possessiveness or non-grasping with the senses (*aparigraha*), there arises knowledge of the why and wherefore of past and future incarnations.

Through cleanliness and purity of body and mind (*saucha*), one develops an attitude of distancing, or disinterest towards one's own body, and becomes disinclined towards contacting the bodies of others. Also through cleanliness and purity of body and mind (*saucha*) comes a purification of the subtle mental essence (*sattva*), pleasantness, goodness, and gladness of feeling, a one-pointedness with intentness, the conquest or mastery over the senses, and a fitness, qualification, or capability for self-realization. From an attitude of contentment (*santosha*), unexcelled happiness, mental comfort, joy, and satisfaction are obtained. Through asceticism or training of the senses (*tapas*), there comes a destruction of mental impurities and an ensuing mastery or perfection over the body and the mental organs of senses and actions (*indriyas*). From self-study and reflection on sacred words (*svadhyaya*), one attains contact, communion, or concert with that underlying natural reality or force. From an attitude of letting go of one's source (*ishvarapranidhana*), the state of perfected concentration (*samadhi*) is attained.

# Patanjali Yoga Sutras Yamas and Niyamas

