



# Yamas

(Universal Morality)



The *yamas* are broken down into five “wise characteristics.” Rather than a list of dos and don’ts, they tell us that our fundamental nature is compassionate, generous, honest and peaceful. They are the moral virtues which, if attended to, purify human nature and contribute to health and happiness of society.

## **1. Ahimsa – Compassion for all living things**

The word ahimsa literally mean not to injure or show cruelty to any creature or any person in any way whatsoever. Ahimsa is, however, more than just lack of violence as adapted in yoga. It means kindness, friendliness, and thoughtful consideration of other people and things. It also has to do with our duties and responsibilities too. Ahimsa implies that in every situation we should adopt a considerate attitude and do no harm.

## **2. Satya – Commitment to truthfulness**

Satya means "to speak the truth," yet it is not always desirable to speak the truth on all occasions, for it could harm someone unnecessarily. We have to consider what we say, how we say it, and in what way it could affect others. If speaking the truth has negative consequences for another, then it is better to say nothing. Satya should never come into conflict with our efforts to behave with ahimsa. This precept is based on the understanding that honest communication and action form the bedrock of any healthy relationship, community, or government, and that deliberate deception, exaggerations, and mistruths harm others.

## **3. Asteya - Non-stealing**

Steya means "to steal"; asteya is the opposite-to take nothing that does not belong to us. This also means that if we are in a situation where someone entrusts something to us or confides in us, we do not take advantage of him or her. Non-stealing includes not only taking what belongs to another without permission, but also using something for a different purpose to that intended, or beyond the time permitted by its owner. The practice of asteya implies not taking anything that has not been freely given. This includes fostering a consciousness of how we ask for others’ time for inconsiderate behavior demanding another’s attention when not freely given is, in effect, stealing.

## **4. Brahmacharya - Sense control**

Brahmacharya is used mostly in the sense of abstinence, particularly in relationship to sexual activity. Brahmacharya suggests that we should form relationships that foster our understanding of the highest truths. Brahmacharya does not necessarily imply celibacy. Rather, it means responsible behavior with respect to our goal of moving toward the truth. Practicing brahmacharya means that we use our sexual energy to regenerate our connection to our spiritual self. It also means that we don’t use this energy in any way that might harm others.

## **5. Aparigraha - Neutralizing the desire to acquire and hoard wealth**

Aparigraha means to take only what is necessary, and not to take advantage of a situation or act greedy. We should only take what we have earned; if we take more, we are exploiting someone else. The yogi feels that the collection or hoarding of things implies a lack of faith in God and in himself to provide for his future. Aparigraha also implies letting go of our attachments to things and an understanding that impermanence and change are the only constants.

The Yoga Sutra describes what happens when these five behaviors outlined above become part of a person's daily life. Thus, the yamas are the moral virtues which, if attended to, purify human nature and contribute to health and happiness of society.



# Niyama

(Personal Observances)



Niyama means "rules" or "laws." These are the rules prescribed for personal observance. Like the yamas, the five niyamas are not exercises or actions to be simply studied. They represent far more than an attitude. Compared with the yamas, the niyamas are more intimate and personal. They refer to the attitude we adopt toward ourselves as we create a code for living soulfully.

## **1. Saucha - Purity**

The first niyama is saucha, meaning purity and cleanliness. Saucha has both an inner and an outer aspect. Outer cleanliness simply means keeping ourselves clean. Inner cleanliness has as much to do with the healthy, free functioning of our bodily organs as with the clarity of our mind. Practicing asanas or pranayama are essential means for attending to this inner saucha. Asanas tones the entire body and removes toxins while pranayama cleanses our lungs, oxygenates our blood and purifies our nerves. "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."

## **2. Santosa - Contentment**

Another niyama is santosa, modesty and the feeling of being content with what we have. To be at peace within and content with one's lifestyle finding contentment even while experiencing life's difficulties for life becomes a process of growth through all kinds of circumstances. We should accept that there is a purpose for everything - yoga calls it karma – and we cultivate contentment 'to accept what happens'. It means being happy with what we have rather than being unhappy about what we don't have.

## **3. Tapas – Disciplined use of our energy**

Tapas refers to the activity of keeping the body fit or to confront and handle the inner urges without outer show. Literally it means to heat the body and, by so doing, to cleanse it. Behind the notion of tapas lies the idea we can direct our energy to enthusiastically engage life and achieve our ultimate goal of creating union with the Divine. Tapas helps us burn up all the desires that stand in our way of this goal. Another form of tapas is paying attention to what we eat. Attention to body posture, attention to eating habits, attention to breathing patterns - these are all tapas.

## **4. Svadhyaya – Self study**

The fourth niyama is svadhyaya. Sva means "self" adhyaya means "inquiry" or "examination." Any activity that cultivates self-reflective consciousness can be considered svadhyaya. It means to intentionally find self-awareness in all our activities and efforts, even to the point of welcoming and accepting our limitations. It teaches us to be centered and non-reactive to the dualities, to burn out unwanted and self-destructive tendencies.

## **5. Isvarapranidhana - Celebration of the spiritual**

Isvarapranidhana means "to lay all your actions at the feet of God." It is the contemplation on God (Isvara) in order to become attuned to god and god's will. It is the recognition that the spiritual suffuses everything and through our attention and care we can attune ourselves with our role as part of the Creator. The practice requires that we set aside some time each day to recognize that there is some omnipresent force larger than ourselves that is guiding and directing the course of our lives.