Yamas & Niyamas

Teacher Training

Yamas and Niyamas

What are the Yamas and Niyamas?

The Yamas and Niyamas are yoga's ten ethical guidelines and are the first two limbs of Yoga's eight-limbed path (Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga_Sutras_of_Patanjali

EIGHT LIMBS

1. Yama ~ Moral restraints (how to behave in society) - outer
2. Niyama ~ The personal disciplines (your private practices) - outer
3. Asana ~ Physical postures - outer
4. Pranayama ~ Controlling the breath - outer
5. Pratyahara ~ Sense withdrawal – outer
6. Dharana ~ Intense focus, concentration - inner
7. Dhyana ~ Meditation - inner
8. Samadhi ~ Bliss, Joy, Peace - inner

Where and when did the Yamas and Niyamas Originate?

Many attribute the text of the Yamas and Niyamas to Patañjali therefore dating it to 2nd century BCE. Others believe the Yamas and Niyamas are a collection of fragments and traditions of texts stemming from the second or third century, not necessarily written by Patañjali. Still others provide an even wider period of potential composition of between 100 BCE and 500 CE.

Beginning the Journey (Yamas)

Living ethically, according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, is the first step on the true path of yoga. By Judith Lasater http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/462

When our children were young, my husband and I would occasionally summon up the courage to take them out for dinner. Before entering the restaurant, one of us would remind them to "be good" or we would leave. This warning was only mildly successful, but then one day my husband reasoned out a more effective approach. On our next outing we stopped outside the restaurant and reminded them specifically to "stay in your chair, don't throw food, and don't yell. If you do any of these things, one of us will take you out of the restaurant at once." We had stumbled upon a very effective technique, and it worked like a charm.

Interestingly, Patanjali, the author of the Yoga Sutra written some two centuries after the life of Jesus, demonstrates a similar approach to the study of yoga. In the second chapter of his book he presents five specific ethical precepts called yamas, which give us basic guidelines for living a life of personal fulfillment that will also benefit society. He then makes clear the consequence of not following these teachings: It is simply that we will continue to suffer.

Arranged in four chapters, or padas, the Yoga Sutra elucidates the basic teachings of yoga in short verses called sutras. In the second chapter Patanjali presents the ashtanga, or eight-limbed system, for which he is so famous. While Westerners may be most familiar with the asana, the third limb (posture), the yamas are really the first step in a practice that addresses the whole fabric of our lives, not just physical health or solitary spiritual existence. The rest of the limbs are the niyamas, more personal precepts; pranayama, breathing exercises; pratyahara, conscious withdrawal of energy away from the senses; dharana, concentration; dhyana, meditation; and samadhi, self-actualization.

The Yoga Sutra is not presented in an attempt to control behavior based on moral imperatives. The sutras don't imply that we are "bad" or "good" based upon our behavior, but rather that if we choose certain behavior we get certain results. If you steal, for example, not only will you harm others, but you will suffer as well.

The first yama is perhaps the most famous one: ahimsa, usually translated as "nonviolence." This refers not only to physical violence, but also to the violence of words or thoughts. What we think about ourselves or others can be as powerful as any physical attempt to harm. To practice ahimsa is to be constantly vigilant, to observe ourselves in interaction with others and to notice our thoughts and intentions. Try practicing ahimsa by observing your thoughts when a smoker sits next to you. Your thoughts may be just as damaging to you as his cigarette is to him.

It is often said that if one can perfect the practice of ahimsa, one need learn no other practice of yoga, for all the other practices are subsumed in it. Whatever practices we do after the yamas must include ahimsa as well. Practicing breathing or postures without ahimsa, for example, negates the benefits these practices offer.

There is a famous story about ahimsa told in the Vedas, the vast collection of ancient philosophical teachings from India. A certain sadhu, or wandering monk, would make a yearly circuit of villages in order to teach. One day as he entered a village he saw a large and menacing snake who was terrorizing the people. The sadhu spoke to the snake and taught him about ahimsa. The following year when the sadhu made his visit to the village, he again saw the snake. How changed he was. This once magnificent creature was skinny and bruised. The sadhu asked the snake what had happened. He replied that he had taken the teaching of ahimsa to heart and had stopped terrorizing the village. But because he was no longer menacing, the children now threw rocks and taunted him, and he was afraid to leave his hiding place to hunt. The sadhu shook his head. "I did advise against violence," he said to the snake, "but I never told you not to hiss."

Protecting ourselves and others does not violate ahimsa. Practicing ahimsa means we take responsibility for our own harmful behavior and attempt to stop the harm caused by others. Being neutral is not the point. Practicing true ahimsa springs from the clear intention to act with clarity and love.

Patanjali lists satya, or truth, as the next yama. But telling the truth may not be as easy as it sounds. Researchers have found that eyewitnesses to an event are notoriously unreliable. The more adamant the witnesses are, the more inaccurate they tend to be. Even trained scientists, whose job it is to be completely objective, disagree on what they see and on the interpretation of their results.

So what does telling the truth mean? To me it means that I speak with the intention of being truthful, given that what I call the "truth" is filtered through my own experience and beliefs about the world. But when I speak with that intention, I have a better chance of not harming others.

Another aspect of satya has to do with inner truth or integrity, a deeper and more internal practice. Honesty is what we do when others are around and might judge our actions or words, but to have integrity is to act in an honest manner when others are not around and will never know about our actions.

In Sanskrit, sat means the eternal, unchanging truth beyond all knowing; ya is the activating suffix which means "do it." So satya means "actively expressing and being in harmony with the ultimate truth." In this state we cannot lie or act untruthful, because we are unified with pure truth itself.

The third yama is asteya, nonstealing. While commonly understood as not taking what is not ours, it can also mean not taking more than we need. We fail to practice asteya when we take credit that is not ours or take more food than we can eat. We fail also when we steal from ourselves—by neglecting a talent, or by letting a lack of commitment keep us from practicing yoga. In order to steal, one has to be mired in avidya, or ignorance about the nature of reality, a term introduced by Patanjali in his second chapter. Avidya is the opposite of yoga, which connects us with all that is.

The next yama is brahmacharya, one of the most difficult for Westerners to understand. The classical translation is "celibacy," but Brahma is the name of a deity, char means "to walk," and ya means "actively," so brahmacharya means "walking with God."

For some people, sexual love holds no great attraction. Others sacrifice this part of life to live as a monk or nun and thus consecrate their sexuality to God. Brahmacharya does not just mean giving up sex; it also means to transmute the energy of sex into something else, principally, devotion to God.

But for the average person who has taken up the study of yoga, brahmacharya might mean simply to remain faithful within a monogamous relationship. Dr. Usharbudh Arya, author of an extensive translation of the Yoga Sutra, once gave this simple explanation of brahmacharya: When you are having sex, have sex; when you're not,

don't. Remain in the present and focus on what is happening right now without obsession.

Another approach is to use sexual energy, like all life energies, in accord with the practice of ahimsa. This means that we respect ourselves and our partner when we are in a sexual relationship and do not use others or have sex mindlessly. Remembering the divinity of self and other, we can allow sexuality to be part of the wider practice of yoga.

The final yama in Patanjali's list is aparigraha, or nongreed. This is a very difficult one to practice, surrounded as we are with advertisements that attempt to whip up our desire for more. In some ways our society's economic system is based on greed.

When my husband was in law school we lived a simple life; we wore jeans, drove an old Volvo, and rarely had money for such luxuries as new clothes, fancy dinners, or vacations. After he graduated and started working, things changed. One day he invited me downtown for lunch, and I met him in a richly appointed hotel lobby. As I waited for him to arrive, I couldn't help noticing the beautiful people who passed by in their elegant clothes, glancing at their expensive watches. I was filled with a strange and powerful longing. When I explained my feelings to my husband, his response was simple: "That's greed."

But greed is not just confined to material goods. We may hunger after enlightenment, difficult asanas, spiritual powers, or perfect bliss. One way to sidestep the trap of greed is to follow the advice of the sages: Be happy with what you have. This spirit of true renunciation will diminish the power of aparigraha.

In verse 30 of Chapter 2 of the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali calls the yamas "the great vow," to be practiced at all times. This is a difficult assignment, but if we follow this vow, the power released in our lives and the lives of others will be stunning. One way to do this is to choose one yama to focus on for a length of time. Then reflect upon how this practice has affected your life. Don't worry if you forget to practice your yama, or even if you can't follow through in each situation. Your effort and awareness will be the victory.

Cultivate Your Connections (Niyamas)

Bring yoga's lessons off the mat and meditation cushion and into your relationships. By Judith Lasater; Yoga Journal http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/455

Centuries ago a legendary Indian sage, scholar, grammarian, and yogi named Patanjali wrote his seminal Yoga Sutra to clarify and preserve the ancient oral teachings of yoga. His book describes the workings of the human mind and prescribes a path for achieving a life free from suffering.

Perhaps because Patanjali's Sutra focuses on attaining the personal freedom that comes with self-awareness, we sometimes forget that his teachings have deep relevance for

those of us struggling with the mystery of human relationships. Learning to live with others begins with learning to live with ourselves, and the Yoga Sutra provides many tools for both of these tasks.

The connection between Patanjali's teachings and improving our relationships may not be apparent at first glance. The concept of relinquishing the ego is the thread that weaves the two together. When we act and react from our individual ego, without the benefit of proper perspective and compassion, we are certainly not practicing yoga—and we are also potentially harming those around us. Patanjali's Sutra gives us tools for improving our relationships by stripping away the illusions that shield us from connection with our true Self, with others, and with life itself.

Among the most valuable of these tools are the niyamas, the second "limb" of Patanjali's eight-limbed yoga system. In Sanskrit, "niyama" means "observance," and these practices extend the ethical guidelines provided in the first limb, the yamas. While "yama" is usually translated as "restraint," and the yamas outline actions and attitudes we ought to avoid, the niyamas describe actions and attitudes that we should cultivate to overcome the illusion of separation and the suffering it causes. The five niyamas are: purity (saucha); contentment (santosa); austerity (tapas); self-study (svadhyaya); and devotion to the Lord (isvara pranidhana).

Saucha (Purity)

When I first began studying the Yoga Sutra, I balked at this first niyama because it sounded so judgmental. The newly formed yoga groups I associated with tended to interpret the teachings of Patanjali in very rigid ways. Some foods, thoughts, activities, and people were impure—and my task was simply to avoid them.

To me, this concept of purity implied that the world was a profane place that threatened to contaminate me unless I followed a strict set of moral rules. No one told me that the intentions in my heart mattered; no one suggested that rather than rules, saucha represents a commonsense, practical insight: If you embrace impurity in thought, word, or deed, you will eventually suffer.

As time went by, saucha began to take on another dimension for me. Rather than seeing it as a measure of my action or of its outcome, I now see saucha as a reminder to constantly examine the intention behind my actions. I have been inspired by the philosopher and author Viktor Frankl, who said he found meaning in his life when he helped others find meaning in their lives.

To me, his words capture the essence of saucha: the intention to act from compassion rather than selfishness. When I treat others with compassion, I am practicing saucha, and at those times my relationships are as pure and connected as they can ever be.

Santosa (Contentment)

By including contentment as an active practice rather than a reaction to events around us, Patanjali points out that peace of mind can never finally rely on external circumstances, which are always changing in ways beyond our control. Santosa requires our willingness to enjoy exactly what each day brings, to be happy with whatever we have, whether that is a lot or a little. This second niyama uncovers the hollowness of achievement and acquisition; while material wealth and success aren't evil, they can never in themselves provide contentment.

We can easily practice santosa in the beautiful moments and joyous experiences of our lives. But Patanjali asks us to be equally willing to embrace the difficult moments. Only when we can be content in the midst of difficulty can we be truly free. Only when we can remain open in the midst of pain do we understand what true openness is. In our relationships, when we accept those around us as they truly are, not as we want them to be, we are practicing santosa.

Tapas (Austerity)

Tapas is one of the most powerful concepts in the Yoga Sutra. The word "tapas" comes from the Sanskrit verb "tap" which means "to burn." The traditional interpretation of tapas is "fiery discipline," the fiercely focused, constant, intense commitment necessary to burn off the impediments that keep us from being in the true state of yoga (union with the universe).

Unfortunately, many people mistakenly equate discipline in yoga practice with difficulty. They see another student striving to perfect the most difficult poses and assume she must be more disciplined and therefore more spiritually advanced.

But difficulty does not in itself make a practice transformational. It's true that good things are sometimes difficult, but not all difficult things are automatically good. In fact, difficulty can create its own impediments. The ego is drawn to battle with difficulty: Mastering a challenging yoga pose, for example, can bring pride and an egoistic attachment to being an "advanced" yoga student.

A better way to understand tapas is to think of it as consistency in striving toward your goals: getting on the yoga mat every day, sitting on the meditation cushion every day—or forgiving your mate or your child for the 10,000th time. If you think of tapas in this vein, it becomes a more subtle but more constant practice, a practice concerned with the quality of life and relationships rather than focused on whether you can grit your teeth through another few seconds in a difficult asana.

Svadhyaya (Study of the Self)

In a way, the fourth niyama could be considered a hologram, a microcosm containing the whole of yoga. One day this winter in a beginner class a first-time student asked, "By the way, what is yoga?" A thousand thoughts flooded my mind; how could I answer

truthfully and succinctly? Fortunately, an answer came spontaneously from my heart: "Yoga is the study of the Self."

This is the literal translation of "svadhyaya," whose meaning is derived from "sva," or Self (soul, atman, or higher self); "dhy," related to the word "dhyana" which means meditation; and "ya," a suffix that invokes an active quality. Taken as a whole, svadhyaya means "actively meditating on or studying the nature of the Self."

I like to think of this niyama as "remembering to be aware of the true nature of the Self." Svadhyaya is a deep acknowledgment of the oneness of the Self with all that is. When we practice svadhyaya, we begin to dissolve the illusory separation we often feel from our deeper self, from those around us, and from our world.

I remember studying biology in college and being struck by a "new" concept the professors were just beginning to teach: ecology, the idea that all living things were interrelated. For spiritual teachers of all cultures and all eras, this is no new concept. They have always taught an ecology of the spirit, insisting that each of us is connected to each other and to the whole.

In yogic practice, svadhyaya has most traditionally been concerned with the study of yoga scriptures. But in truth any practice that reminds us of our interconnection is svadhyaya. For you, svadhyaya could be studying Patanjali's Sutra, reading this article, practicing asanas, or singing from your heart.

Isvara Pranidhana (Surrendering to God)

Patanjali defines "isvara" as "Lord," and the word "pranidhana" conveys the sense of "throwing down" or "giving up." Thus, isvara pranidhana can be translated as "giving up or surrendering the fruits of all our actions to God."

Many people are confused by this niyama, in part because yoga is seldom presented as a theistic philosophy (even though Patanjali states in the 23rd verse of the Yoga Sutra that devotion to the Lord is one of the main avenues to enlightenment).

In fact, some yoga traditions have interpreted isvara pranidhana as requiring devotion to a particular deity or representation of God, while others have taken "isvara" to refer to a more abstract concept of the divine (much as Twelve Step programs allow participants to define "Higher Power" in their own way).

In either case, the essence of isvara pranidhana is acting as best we can, and then relinquishing all attachment to the outcome of our actions. Only by releasing our fears and hopes for the future can we really be in union with the present moment.

Paradoxically, this surrender requires tremendous strength. To surrender the fruits of our actions to God requires that we give up our egotistical illusion that we know best, and instead accept that the way life unfolds may be part of a pattern too complex to

understand. This surrender, however, is anything but passive inactivity. Isvara pranidhana requires not just that we surrender, but also that we act.

Patanjali's teachings demand much of us. He asks us to walk into the unknown, but he does not abandon us. Instead, he offers practices like the niyamas to guide us back home to ourselves—a journey that transforms us and all with whom we come in contact.

Journal ~ What does each Yama and Niyama mean to you?

Yamas ~ Social Disciplines

Ahimsa – Non-Violence

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Satya - Truthfulness

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Asteya – Non-Stealing

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Brahmacharya – Chastity or Continence

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Aparigraha – Non-Hoarding

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Niyamas ~ Individual Disciplines

Sauca – Purity and Cleanliness

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Santosa – Contentment

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Tapas – Dedication to Practice

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Svadhyaya – Self-Study

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Ishvara pranidhana – Surrendering to the Devine

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More Reading:

- Teaching the Yamas in Asana Class By Aadil Palkhivala
  http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/984

- Teaching the Niyamas in Asana Class By Aadil Palkhivala
  http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/976

- Beginning the Journey Living ethically, according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, is the first step on the true path of yoga. By Judith Lasater
  http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/462

- Cultivate Your Connections Bring classical yoga's lessons off the mat and meditation cushion and into your relationships. By Judith Lasater
  http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/455