

# *A Simple Understanding of the Yamas & Niyamas:*

**How to move from Suffering to Joy**



commentary on the  
Yoga Sutras of Patanjali  
by  
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## **A Simple Understanding of the Yamas & Niyamas: How to move from Suffering to Joy**

These days, when we speak of Yoga, most people think of asana practice, that is to say, a practice of the postures of yoga. But the postures are only one part of the full system of yoga as outlined by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. And while doing yoga poses in our physical bodies is an integral part of practice, it is only one part of a complete system designed to ease suffering on physical, mental and spiritual levels.

The system is laid out in limbs that are both sequential and interconnected. We see a natural progression from one limb to the next---how as a system, there is a logic to implementing each limb in the order presented. But they are also interconnected, as each limb relies on and compliments all the other limbs.

Before the practice of yoga asana, or yoga postures, is introduced, Patanjali lays out ten basic life principles in two sets, called the Yamas and the Niyamas. The first five are things we can learn to restrain ourselves from when it comes to interactions with others and with the external world around us. The second five are attitudes or habits we can cultivate in ourselves. In the beginning, we may see these as rules we are attempting to follow, but over time we find each represent a simple truth discovered by yogis hundreds of years ago to help us move from suffering toward a more joyful life.

These ten practices are laid out sequentially, just as the eight limbs of yoga are. However, it is helpful to note we do not need to “master” one before we approach the next. Instead, we can take in the overview and begin at the point of entry that feels most accessible or most needed in relationship to our current abilities, life situation and predisposition.

Along with a brief explanation of the ten practices, I also make suggestions for how we can bring these teachings to our lives in a simple way. We are told that for practice to have a lasting benefit, it requires the elements of consistency and care. We are not told that we must master each step. Nor are we told to attempt them all at once. Each step stands alone as a practice--while they are certainly interconnected, the practice of one will often spark the practice of another, choosing *one area* to work with at a time is what I recommend. Small steps that can be understood and integrated are far more effective and sustainable than huge leaps forward that leave us overwhelmed and exhausted. Our aim is not the perfect execution of each step, nor is it to accomplish them all in record time. Our aim is to engage with this living body of teachings, and to understand the guidance as it applies to our everyday life. Through realization and integration, we learn to make choices that alleviate suffering, rather than creating it.

And as we relieve our own suffering, we relieve the suffering of the world. For we are indeed part of one connected system of energy--all living things and beings are part of what yogis refer to as one big pranic (life-force) field. When our energy shifts from suffering to understanding, it has an effect on the energetic field as a whole. We can think of this in the abstract sense of one shared energetic field that includes everything---or in a more direct way, simply think of the people, animals and living things we come into contact with every day, and how our suffering or our joy affects them. It can be that tangible---from a place of joy, we radiate love to those around us, and they receive it and pass it on. Our individual efforts to move from suffering to joy have a ripple effect in the world. With this perspective and motivation in mind, we turn our attention to the ten first practices outlined in yoga and ways we can begin to engage with them in our lives.

## **Yamas**

The first limb of Patanjali's Eight Limbed is the Yamas, a Sanskrit word meaning "restraints." In other words, the system begins by listing the things we should work to move away from if we want to ease our suffering. There are five restraints listed in the sutras. I will give you the Sanskrit name in case it interests you, it's basic definition, and then a simple suggestion for how to begin implementing these suggested restraints into our modern times. As you read, you may intuit an application of the principle that would be even more appropriate or approachable for you. In which case, the teachings are already beginning to speak to you in a direct and personal way.

### **Ahimsa, Non-Violence**

When we act from a place of violence, we cause suffering for ourselves and for others. The first step on the path of yoga is to learn to align ourselves with a more peaceful way of being, so we can experience more peace.

*One simple implementation of this is to notice when we are doing something that is against our inner wisdom, and to learn to see that as an act of violence toward ourselves. For instance, when we speak ill of others, we can feel in our bodies that it doesn't feel good. Maybe it is in our stomach, or throat, or just a leftover sense of negativity. Our body sensation tells us this is an act of violence. As we listen to and follow this inner guidance, we strengthen our capacity to hear our own wisdom. This gives us a deep and abiding sense of peace. Knowing we can trust our inner guidance when we take action because we are aligned with it relieves the need to seek advice from others, or to be overly influenced by external forces. Our inner guidance system begins to lead us to better and better choices.*

*You can do this by choosing ONE area in your life where you will start listening to your inner wisdom & let go of the habit of acting against your better judgment. Write it down somewhere you will see the reminder daily. Make a commitment to yourself to*

*act according to your wisdom rather than ignoring it. Check in formally once a week to see how this practice is coming along, and what you are learning about yourself in the process. You can do this check in as a journaling exercise, or if you choose to work with a friend on the process, you can check in with them once a week and share with each other how the practice is going and what you are learning.*

### **Satya, Truthfulness**

When we are able to live close to truth, we have less confusion about life, and fewer delusions about the world and ourselves. We can settle into the truth of things, and release fear as we accept the truth of our current situation, as well as the human condition.

*One simple implementation of this is to stop telling “white lies” and notice what happens. We convince ourselves we are telling them to save other’s feelings, but more often we tell them to protect ourselves, to try and hold a certain reality in place that we believe is necessary in order to be loved and accepted. When we stop working so hard to hold this in place, we are able to be in the reality of the situation. If we’ve made a mistake, we can admit it and ask for forgiveness. If it is given, we remain in relationship. If it isn’t, we at least know where we stand, and both parties are able to move forward from a place of more honesty and clarity. And as we establish honesty and clarity in our relationships, we can be ourselves, bringing an ease and relaxation to our lives.*

*Identify ONE area in your life where you could be more truthful---whether that is with yourself, or in a specific relationship, or even with a specific story you’ve been telling yourself about your past—and commit to be more clear, direct and honest. Develop for yourself a check in process once a week to see what you begin to notice---journaling, drawing, sitting silently and considering your progress or working with a partner who is also engaged with this same practice and sharing your experiences.*

### **Asteya – Non-stealing**

The practice of non-stealing can be approached from the perspective of being satisfied with what we have. Practicing gratitude for what we do have, rather than coveting what others have, can bring an end to a certain kind of suffering all too common in our modern age of consumerism. This kind of suffering is carefully cultivated, so we will seek its end through buying or accumulating more. Except the suffering outlives the momentary satisfaction of consuming, and in the end we are ourselves consumed.

*One simple implementation of Asteya is to practice gratitude daily. Take 5 minutes a day to list all of the things, people, relationships, opportunities, moments of beauty, personal traits, victories and challenges you are grateful for. Look at your list, and review each thing you listed, and how it feels as you read over it. Use this practice to*

*learn the feeling of gratitude in your body---it is the opposite of the energy that causes the desire to "steal" from another.*

### **Brahmacharya – Managing One’s Energy**

Learning to manage our energy, where it goes, what we spend it on, is important to our health and overall well-being. Certain people, activities, or thought patterns drain us, and if over time we continue to engage with them, we will find ourselves depleted. We won’t have the energy we would like to have for creative projects, for expansion, or perhaps even for the duties life requires of us.

*One simple implementation of Brahmacharya is to make time to be in nature at least once a day. When we spend time in the natural world, we replenish our energy system. And when we can plug into a source of energy like the natural world, we are less likely to seek energy from others. We also begin to recognize other sources of energy for us---this will be unique to each person, but could include things like music, creating art, spending time with friends, doing service work in the world, teaching, exercising. Attuning ourselves to feel what gives us energy helps us to make choices that bring us closer to those activities. We learn to include the activities, people and places that support our vitality.*

### **Aparigraha – Non-Grasping, Non-Possessiveness**

Learning to hold what we have lightly can prevent a whole world of woes. If we can understand and accept we do not ever truly possess anything or anyone, we can loosen our tight grip and the fear of loosing that comes with it. It isn’t always an easy practice, but embracing it replaces the fear of loosing with the wonder of having, and we are able to enjoy what IS rather than missing it for fear of what WILL BE.

*One simple implementation of Aparigraha is to identify one thing in your life you are excessively attached to. Write it down at the top of a piece of paper. Then, spend a few minutes and free-write (meaning you start moving your pen and write for at least five minutes without stopping to edit) how this attachment actually keeps you from enjoying this thing. Be super honest---no one else will read it but you. Then read back over what you’ve written. Draw a line to separate your paper.*

*Now write that same thing on this other part of your paper. Imagine your relationship to this thing if you weren’t holding on so tightly. How would you feel toward this if you saw it as a gift you’ve been trusted with? How would your relationship to this be different if you weren’t holding on so tightly? Would you be able to see it from a whole different light? Or even just able to see it for what it is? Spend the same amount of time free writing on this side of things.*

*Once you’ve finished both exercises, feel the two different experiences in your body. Notice how each of them feel. As you learn to feel excessive attachment versus full*

*appreciation in your body, you will be able to use this felt sense to navigate the practice of appreciation rather than attachment.*

## **Niyamas**

The second limb of Patanjali's Eight Limbed Path is Niyamas, or observances. These are the qualities we want to cultivate on the path toward liberation. There are five observances listed below, with both Sanskrit and English, as well a brief explanation and suggested practice.

### **Saucha - Purity or Cleanliness**

What we put into our bodies, our minds and our hearts matters. When we exercise choice over what goes in it has a direct effect on how we feel. This practice is about making good choices, knowing that our choices have an outcome.

*For one month, pay attention to what you are feeding your mind and emotional body through reading material, music and all other forms of media. What movies are you choosing, and how do they make you feel? What books? What radio stations or songs? At the end of the month, take some time to review what you learned, and what differences you notice based on your choices. This exercise could also be directed at what foods you eat, who you spend time with, and what sorts of physical environments you put yourself in. Best to choose one area to work with at a time, not just to prevent overwhelm, but also so you can feel each of these areas and how they effect you.*

### **Santosha - Contentment**

The best definition I've heard for santosha, or contentment, is to be satisfied with the content of the present moment. Another good definition is self-love and self-acceptance. Clearly this is a life-long practice, but one worthy of beginning.

*Identify one thing about yourself that you are not content with---some aspect of yourself that you feel is never enough. Make yourself a promise to accept that one thing about yourself in the same loving way you would accept a quirk in your child, or your lover, or your partner. Anytime the "not enough" or "dissatisfied" voice comes up internally, stop and change the internal conversation. For instance, if the "not enough" voice says, "I'll never be good enough at mountain biking," then a change to that internal conversation could sound like, "I really love riding my bike and being outside." Or if the voice says, "I'll never be thin enough," changing the conversation could sound like "I am so grateful for my healthy body and all the things it lets me do."*

*Stay the course for a month, and then take some time to reflect on how changing the conversation has changed your relationship with that thing, and with all the areas it effects.*

## **Tapas – Discipline, Perseverance**

Another word for tapas could be zeal---a fiery, dedicated energy that is cultivated and focused toward our desired outcome. It is interesting to note that discipline or zeal *follows* the practice of contentment. First, we learn to accept the content of the present moment, including ourselves as we are, and the people in our lives the way they are. By placing contentment before the fiery discipline of dedicated practice, our efforts are rooted in our heart-felt desires rather than our dissatisfaction. The fuel for our fire is pure, and thus the flame of discipline will burn hotter and brighter and will be aimed at something worthwhile, rather than based on the desire for temporary relief from a feeling of “not enough.”

*To cultivate tapas, the inner flame of discipline and perseverance, choose one simple practice and do it once a day for 30 days. This could be sitting in silence for five minutes, writing a gratitude list, getting outside in the natural world, or a daily reflection on any of the other practices suggested throughout this article. 30 days is long enough to create a new habit. Choose something reasonable and doable---set yourself up for a positive experience. If you miss a day, get right back on track. Tapas isn't about doing it perfectly---it is about consistency, dedication and perseverance, and sometimes getting back on track is the biggest act of perseverance we can take.*

## **Svadyaya – Self-Study, Self-Reflection**

This practice is about learning to reflect, as honestly and with as much clarity as we have at the time, on our actions, and their outcomes---on our motivations, and the results these motivations create. As we learn to study ourselves, we come into a more intimate and loving relationship with our many facets. And as we follow this path further, we will naturally move from self-love into a more universal love for others. As we come to know our own struggles, we realize that others struggle, just like we do. It may not look like the same struggle on the outside, but ultimately we all share the same basic human emotions and desires for happiness, love & acceptance.

*To establish a practice of Svadyaya, or Self-Reflection, it is easiest to start with the actions we take that don't turn out the way we expected. This is easier because these are usually the ones we have the most energy around---and difficult because our tendency can be to turn away from reflection, because the energy around them isn't always pleasant. Rather than trying to brush these feelings under the rug, or to hurry up and take another action to erase the one that didn't turn out as expected, take time to sit and reflect. Free-writing can be a way to get vague thoughts down on paper---for others, just some quiet time to reflect will be sufficient. In either practice, ask these questions:*

*What was the action I took?*

*Were there other actions I didn't take in this situation that might have led to a different outcome?*

*What were my motivations?*

*Were there any factors that were beyond my control?*

*If I had this to do again, how would I do it differently?*

*Is there anything else I need to do to resolve this and be able to move forward with a clean slate?*

## **Ishvara Pranidhana – Surrender to a Higher Power**

The practice of surrender---to acknowledge there is something greater at play in the world than our individual selves, to know that we are not the only force at work in the world and in our lives, to realize no action we take is alone, and so no outcome of any of our actions is ours alone to celebrate, or ours alone to bear.

Whether you call this higher power God, or Goddess, or the Universe, or the laws of physics and the web of life, taking time to remember there is more at play, and remembering our part in a greater whole leads to a sense of peace, and a chance to let go of the illusion that we are separate and alone.

*Here are a few suggestions for this practice. It is important to land on one that feels genuine to you, so use the list as a prompt, and if you don't find something in it that feels right to you, keep inquiring with yourself until you find the right one.*

*Prayer*

*Chanting*

*Singing Devotional Songs*

*"Not my will, but thine..."*

*Acknowledging the support you receive for all accomplishments*

*Surrendering the outcome of your actions*

*Practicing pranam, bowing physically to the earth*

*Acknowledging the web of life before you eat each meal*

## **Conclusion**

Now that we've taken a basic overview of the ten practices outlined as the first two limbs of yoga, Yamas & Niyamas, reflect on which of the ten stood out to you as either most approachable, or most needed in your current life situation. If we can see the path in front of us (most approachable) or we can recognize a place of challenge (most needed), we start with a level of awareness that will support us as we move forward.

And while it might be tempting to try and take on all ten practices at once, choosing one at a time not only sets us up for more chance of successful integration. It also gives us a chance to dive deep into each lesson, for they are deep and wide, and if we let our awareness grow through dedicated attention to each individual lesson, we begin to understand the scope and impact they can have on our lives.



I hope our shared time in this exploration has been valuable. It is the intent of the yoga sutras that they be studied together, and then applied in the way most valuable to each student's individual path. I hope you will find as much benefit from your engagement with this material as I have, and that your curiosity will continue to guide you to more clarity, wisdom and joy.