

**Yama and Niyama**  
**Guides for the Yoga Traveler**  
**By Reverend Jaganath Carrera**

How should a yogi act when faced with challenges, injustice, greed, and the many other darker sides of life – those aspects of life that cause us pain and suffering? Is there a way to respond to what we experience as negative events that will help bring harmony to us and to the situation itself?

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In the classic text of Yoga, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, eight limbs of Yoga practice are presented. The first two are called *yama* and *niyama*. There are five precepts in each category.

The yamas and niyamas are the moral and ethical precepts that every student of Yoga is called on to follow. They are listed first among the eight because they form the foundation of all Yoga practice and for living the Yoga life.

Below are brief descriptions of the yamas and niyamas. If you'd like to explore them further, consult any translation and commentary of the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.

**The Yamas**

The yamas are precepts that all people, regardless of age, circumstance, place, or caste – whether they are practitioners of Yoga or not - should adhere to. They help bring us into harmony with Nature and the world.

**Harmlessness:** to refrain from causing harm to anyone or anything in thought, word, or deed.

**Truthfulness:** to have our words and actions in accordance with facts and with our beliefs.

**Nonstealing:** to never take anything (including credit) for anything we did not earn ourselves.

**Contenance:** Usually associated with celibacy or moderation in sexual activity, it is more correctly understood to mean avoiding spending time and energy on any activity that does not contribute to spiritual growth or the service of others. That energy is instead applied to Yoga study and practice and in selfless service.

**Nongreed:** to turn away from the longing for possessions or acknowledgement. It is based on the clear and deep observation that they do not lead to lasting peace or happiness. They are, by nature, fleeting.

**The Niyamas**

The niyamas are the essential precepts that every student of Yoga. Anyone interested in living and growing in spiritual maturity should follow.

**Purity:** Purity includes anything, physical or mental, that disturbs our natural state of happiness or peace.

**Contentment:** to always live in the present moment. It is a product of recognizing that every event in our lives comes with a much-needed lesson as well as the grace to unlock that lesson.

**Accepting Pain as a help for purification:** Pain comes to everyone at some points in their lives. This niyama represents a small, radical shift in our response to suffering: it ceases to be a condition that is only negative and dreaded. Instead, we come to perceive suffering as part of a process that points out our limitations. It is these limitations that obscure the experience of our True Nature, which is beyond all suffering. Physically, limitations are experienced as pain or disease. Mentally, limitations are experienced as disturbing emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, and greed. The root of mental suffering is selfish attachments, those experiences and objects we feel that we absolutely need to be happy.

**Study:** includes classic texts of sacred wisdom, study of the ways of Nature, and introspection.

**Surrender to God (self-surrender):** to put God (or whatever name or form you understand the Highest Truth to be) first. In practical terms, it means proper alignment with the Universal Will. This niyama can also be understood the willing dedication of time, energy, and abilities in service to God or humanity.

The benefits of gaining mastery in any of the yamas and niyamas are profound. Each and every one is a powerhouse for transformation. Because they are interconnected, they support each other. Take hold of any one and the rest will follow.

The yamas and niyamas are gateways to Self-realization. The mind gains focus, strength, and clarity. Ingrained negative habits fall away; the intellect grows in its capacity to discern, the creativity to solve problems and overcome challenges emerges, and harmony – both within and among those around you - increases.

Few students of Yoga realize the full power and efficacy of these guidelines because they are not understood properly. Our tendency is to reduce the yamas and niyamas to a list of do's and don'ts, a rigid compilation of rules. Because of this, we never discover what these principles can do for us. More like trustworthy guides than rigid taskmasters that hold the threat of punishment over our heads, these principles point out the most productive way to move through life.

To use the yamas and niyamas properly, we need to let go of our craving for intellectual certainty. Sometimes what we call certainty is actually thinking and acting in a way that does not take into account the uniqueness of every event, person, and time. We try to force a situation to fit our belief system. Life's quandaries are not often black and white. There are many variables. An action that works today will be useless, or even harmful, tomorrow. We need our thinking to be inclusive of all factors, clear of biases, and squarely in the moment.

The yamas and niyamas are clear lights of revelation – glimpses into the vision of life that the great sages and saints of all faith traditions shared. These insights gift us with the ability to properly assess a situation and act in such a way that maximum benefit is derived, without harming anyone.

When faced with interpersonal strife, why not shine the light of harmlessness on the situation? How might that transform the tense relationship with your co-worker? You might see the problem, them, and yourself in an entirely new way, a way that opens the way for solutions. Take another example. Imagine that you are envious of your well-off sister's beautiful home. Over time, the envy gives rise to resentment and faultfinding. You find it impossible to ignore or suppress these feelings. Look at the situation using the lens of nongreed. How would the compassionate, balanced eyes of the Buddha view this situation? Imagine that there was no envy in your heart. How would that change your perception of your sister? Is she really the antagonist, or might it be you, too? Think of the freedom and mental lightness that you'll experience when the attitude of nongreed releases the love that is in your heart. You will find solutions, reconciliation, and you'll be happier. Everyone wins.

The most important aspect of these practices the answer this question: how do you see yourself in the light of the yamas and niyamas? How do you perceive yourself when illumined by pure compassion and a strong, resilient, and agile state of mind? Are you growing to be the kind of person you most admire? Are you living the Yoga life?

These eternal principles will help lift you out of the mindset of *everyone for himself, life is a rat race, and it's a dog-eat-dog world*. Pick one yama or niyama a week and put it into practice. Put notes on your refrigerator, near your phone, computer, and TV to remind you which principle you are focusing on that week. Apply the appropriate principle to all situations. Read about them in sacred texts, and find inspiration in the stories of great beings who exemplified them. When you finish the tenth week, start again. Gradually, you will learn to experience life and your Self as the great yogis do. Every event in your life will be brimming with meaning and the potential for growth and service. You will know that everything that happens is for the good. The Eternal Self, your True Nature will shine forth. Unshakable peace and joy will be yours.