

"Practice the yamas and niyamas ... When you pick one petal from the garland of yamas and niyamas the entire garland will follow."

Swami Sri Kripalvanandaji

Yamas

Ahimsa - Non-Violence

The first yama is Ahimsa or non-violence. How do we practice non-violence? Towards insects perhaps...instead of killing them, taking them outside. Or towards ourselves when we treat ourselves kindly. How we might treat ourselves kindly?. Or do some yoga postures in a way so we are being kind to ourselves. Perhaps being a vegetarian as a way of practicing non-violence. Or bringing peace into others lives by treating them kindly in business.

I think my challenge with non-violence is to be non-violent with myself. I don't physically abuse myself, but I am usually kinder to others and don't treat myself lovingly.

In yoga, I am less violent with myself because I don't force my body into postures that hurt me. I lovingly direct my body to do the posture as best I can and in a way that I get benefit from it.

A yoga posture for Ahimsa might be Tadasana or Mountain Posture. This is a posture of alignment and the basis for all yoga postures.

Satya - Truth

The second yama is Satya which means truthfulness. How do you live truthfulness in your life? How does truthfulness show up in your life?

The yogis do not judge you as good or bad for being truthful or not. This is an individual thing. It is something that each of us has to learn in our own way and our own time. And for some, the fastest way to learn truthfulness is through untruths.

There are some things that I personally have with truthfulness. I am always concerned about hurting other people and I worry that my blunt truthfulness might be hurtful to someone I love. I sometimes fight with myself over that. What is the best way for me personally to live my life? Is truthfulness best if it hurts someone I care about? For me, I often say no.

The way I live truthfulness in my life is to be truthful to myself and to my heart. I need to do that first before I can open the truth to everyone else. So, that is how satya shows up for me at this time in my life. Just as with ahimsa, I need to be non-violent towards myself. With Satya, I need to be truthful with myself.

A yoga posture for Satya might be Virabhadrasana 1 or Warrior 1 Posture. This is a posture of standing forward and being forward in your truth.

Asteya - Non-Stealing

The next yama (observance) is that of Asteya which translates into non-stealing. This is not exactly the same as "Thou Shalt Not Steal". It also has aspects of "Thou shalt not covet" as well.

How does "non-stealing" appear in your life? What I find is if someone has something really nice in his or her life and that person is someone who I like, I can be happy for them and not covet what they have and not want to steal it for myself. I can be at peace with the fact that they have something desirable. BUT....if it's a person who I don't like, I find it very difficult to not want the good things that they have.

I think since we are fortunate to have most (if not all) of our physical needs met, stealing isn't a big issue. Stealing in the real sense isn't worth the punishment to me.

Anyway, my work with asteya is to not want what someone who I don't like seems to own.

A yoga posture for Asteya might be Natrajasana or the Dancer Posture. This is a posture of that looks lovely when it is done perfect by the book, but is often difficult to get to that place. So, when I see someone doing this posture, it takes asteya for me to not want what someone else has or can do.

Bramacharya - Moderation

The 4th of the yamas is Brahmacharya which usually translates to mean moderation and moderation in all things. The root of the word is actually Brahma which refers to creation.

When I was first introduced to the concept of Brahmacharya, it had to do with having sex and not being indiscriminate and promiscuous. But, that has since been expanded in my definition to include moderation in all things or allowing one activity overtake your whole life.

For me, I would like to allow it to come into my life in how I eat. I would also like to practice it with what I ask of myself and to try to moderate the demands I put on myself.

A yoga posture for Brahmacharya might be the Janu Shirshasana or head to knee posture. In this posture, you might go to a moderate expression of the posture instead of forcing the posture to have your head totally on your knee.

Aparagraha - Non-Possessiveness

The last of the yamas is Aparagraha which is translated as either Non-possesiveness or non-attachement.

To me, this is a heavy-duty one. To work towards non-attachment to things or people or situations is so difficult. Look at this society and how we cherish our possessions. And even if it isn't a physical possession, look how we want to hold dearly to people or ideas. Sometimes, we need to realize that there is a purpose to someone in our lives and when that purpose is done, it is a celebration. We would want to hold dearly to that person, but it really makes more sense to let that person go.

I think this is real clear when we see children grow up. And also when we lose someone we love, perhaps not through death, but because they are ready to move on.

This is a real hard principle. I guess the good thing about aparagraha is when we let go of something or someone or some idea, we have space in our lives (or our crowded house) for others to come in and bring new experiences or ideas. We outgrow clothes or get tired of them and give them away. And then we have space in our closet or drawer for something new. We let go of some idea of how life has to be and then we can see other possibilities.

Aparagraha may be difficult, but it may also be the only way to new joys and knowledge and understandings and loves and other lessons.

I hope this isn't too preachy, but when I think of non-attachment, I get a sense of joy and excitement of what might be next.

Another thing to remember is there is a certain time for non-attachment. We don't want to detach from something or someone or some idea until we have reached the conclusion. We don't throw something away when it still serves us or when we still have need for it. We don't detach from people when we still have reasons to be together. This is a personal thing. I don't believe you can let go of something until you are ready to. You have to feel peaceful

with it. You have to feel your decision is right. And you can't listen to an outside force telling you what you SHOULD do when you know the answer in your heart.

So, although I see great value in aparagraha, I also see value in possessions and attachments. There needs to be a balance here and it is a personal balance.

A yoga posture for Aparagraha might be the Ardha Mandalasana or half circle posture. From this posture, you can let go of your attachments through your outstretched arm.

Niyamas

Saucha - Purity

The first of the 5 niyamas is Saucha or purity. This might manifest in your life in lots of ways.

You might be working on purifying your body. Some people fast to do this or just eat certain foods.

You might be purifying your relationships. Maybe meditating on what is pure and whole for you. Maybe letting go of some toxic people in your life to make room for something more pure.

You might be purifying the air that you are breathing. Perhaps bodies of people with breathing problems or allergies are learning the lesson of purity by reacting to impure substances in a way that makes life difficult.

And what about those "impure thoughts"?

Does the niyama of Saucha/Purity speak to you? Is this a lesson that is calling to you to work on? Or is purity not a big deal to you. Ivory soap made a lot of money out of 99 and 44/100ths percent pure, but they never said pure what?

A yoga posture to try to facilitate saucha is the seated Ardha Matsyendrasana or the half spinal twist. This posture is like squeezing out a washcloth, releasing the old, and then making space for the new to enter our body.

Santosh - Contentment

The second niyama is called Santosh or Contentment. This one made a big impact on me. When I feel content, things just don't bother me. I feel peaceful when I am content.

In class the other day, someone said for them contentment feels like being full and not needing any more. And to someone else, they said that contentment was like being empty and not needing anything. Just the simplicity of it. So, contentment to me means being empty and being full at the same time.

How does contentment show up in your life? Is it taking a walk in nature. Is it resting in the sun? Is it petting your cat or dog? Is it eating a good meal, but not getting that full and bloated feeling? Is it holding hands with someone you love? Is it sitting here and reading a message that resonates within you?

One of the keys, I think, to Santosh, is to live in this moment. To be present. Not to focus on what you should have done or what you expect to do. Just be in the now.

Contentment isn't an easy place to find. Especially in this modern world. People are always pushing the latest and greatest new thing, trying to make us discontent with what we have. TV commercials are one of the greatest offenders to our feeling content. Maybe they are our tests?

Then again, maybe it is good to not be content and to seek something greater in life. How will we grow and learn if we just settle for contentment?

A yoga posture to try here is Virasana or the Hero posture. This is one that I find difficult. So, if I can sit in Virasana and find contentment, maybe I will understand that contentment is not always an easy place. And, can I be content, if I don't do Virasana in the picture-perfect way? Can I be content if my body prevents me from getting where I think I want to be?

So where are you with this idea of contentment?

Tapas - Austerity

Tapas is austerity or discipline. Often we think about discipline as what we should or shouldn't do for some desired outcome. For instance, if you want to quit smoking, you discipline yourself to not take a cigarette. If you want to lose weight, you discipline yourself to eat better. If you find you are tired in the morning, you might discipline yourself to go to sleep earlier. There are lots of examples where you set up rules to follow when you want a desired outcome and thereby discipline your behavior.

Here is another way to look at that kind of discipline. Discipline is remembering what we want and acting accordingly. If what I want is a healthier body, then when I am offered food or drink that would be unhealthy, I would think "Is this what I want?". I remember what I want is that healthy body and then I no longer want that piece of chocolate. If I have decided that my body would be served by that piece of chocolate right now, I may take it.

If what you really want is a new computer and you need money for that, then Tapas reminds you to save the money that you might have squandered on something that isn't necessary, because you really want that new computer. So, remembering what you want is discipline.

When this question was put to me "What is it that you really want"? My answer was I want to love myself and release myself from negative thoughts and self judgement. This is what I want. So, my way of practicing TAPAS or discipline is when I begin to have a negative thought or when I start judging that I am not as good as I think I should be, I remember what I want. I want to release myself from this thought pattern. So remembering what I want is being kind to myself.

Discipline doesn't always have to be something harsh. It doesn't have to be something that you follow because you think you ought to act in a certain way. It is how you care for yourself. What is it that you really want? Remember it.

A yoga posture to try for Tapas is Adho Mukha Shvasana or downward facing dog. This is also called the tent posture. When doing this posture, I really focus on my body and remembering to press my hips up and my legs back. It is an active posture in that it takes strength to hold this posture.

How does Tapas show up in your life?

Swadhyaya - Study

The next Niyama is Swadhaya which means study or self study. One focus of this niyama is learning from our own lives. We are our own teachers. Lessons abound for us. There is a reason that we are here in this life now and part of that is to learn.

Since I no longer attend formal schooling, to me swadhyaya is mostly learning the lessons and studying on my own from my experiences. But, there are other ways to study. And we are at the time when people who attend school are returning to school so they see "study" as something more formal.

How does Swadhyaya show up for you in your life? What are you studying? How do you study? Who is your teacher? Is study a part of your everyday life? How do you know when you have learned it all and can move on towards a new lesson to learn?

Do you feel a pull in a certain direction to learn and study? Is study important to you (it doesn't have to be)?

I honor the teacher within me. I am my best teacher. I am my best student. Life is my classroom. But I learn from so many aspects of life. I learn from the hurts and the successes (more from the hurts and failures, though). And I learn from formal study, too. I learn a lot about me and my life from yoga and from the path that I have chosen. Still, I have so much to learn. Swadhyaya lasts a lifetime ... or all lifetimes.

A yoga posture to try for Swadhyaya is Urdhva Mukha Shvasana or upward facing dog. This, combined with downward dog, makes the "yogi push-ups".

Tell us ... share with us ... Swadhyaya

Ishvar Pranidhana - Surrender

The final niyama is Ishvar Pradidhana which means surrender. How does surrender show up in your life? In yoga postures, the posture of yoga mudra when your head is below your heart is a symbol of surrender.

Life gives us lots of opportunity to learn about and practice surrender. Usually, it occurs later in life when we learn about this lesson :). Surrender to the universe or to the Divinity (if that fits your beliefs) and ask for guidance. Believing in the goodness of nature and the divinity in all things is an act of surrender. Believing that we have done all that we can and then trusting that things will work out is definitely surrender.

I think when we sit in meditation we are practicing surrender.

What does surrender mean to you? Can you see it as something desirable or does it appear as a weakness? Do you see surrender as love for yourself and love of the divine aspects of the Universe (or Universal oneness)?

A final yoga experience to try for Ishvar Pranidhana, the surrender Niyama, is free flow. Listen to your body. Surrender to the needs of your body. Relax into life and surrender to your own inner knowing. Or sit in silence and allow all these thoughts to integrate in your mind.

So, to develop a deeper spiritual understanding of yourself, perhaps you might choose just one of the [yamas](#) or niyamas. Choose one that is important to you. Choose one that "calls" to you. And try to incorporate it in your life. And, as Bapuji says, doing one will lead you to an understanding of all.

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