



# YAMAS

*"Ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, aparighraha yamah"*

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras II-30**

Non-violence, truth, non-stealing, moderation and absence of greed are the five pillars of Yama.

**The Yamas** are the first limb of Patanjali's Yoga System. The Yoga Sutras set out an eight-fold path, or *Astanga Yoga*, that lead us to the goal of greater states of awareness, or clearer perception of ourselves and life. The 8 limbs are:

1. Yamas – External Ethics
2. Niyamas – Internal Ethics
3. Asana – Physical Postures
4. Pranayama – Breath Manipulation
5. Pratyahara – Sense Withdrawal
6. Dharana – Concentration
7. Dhyana – Meditation
8. Samadhi – Contemplation, Absorption

The Yamas are social ethics, how we behave in the outside world, how we interact with other beings. Yama translates as *restraint, control, regulation*. Each of the five Yamas can be seen as guidance for living an ethical life – the foundation of any journey towards spiritual liberation.

# AHIMSA

## NON-HARMING

*Ahimsa pratisthayam tat samnidhau vaira tyagah*

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras II-35**

“When non-violence in speech, thought and action is established, one’s aggressive nature is relinquished and others abandon hostility in one’s presence”.

**BKS Iyengar**

“In the presence of one firmly established in non-violence, all hostilities cease”.

**Swami Satchidananda**

Ahimsa is the first ethical practice set out in the Yamas, and is translated as non-violence or non-harming. Violence shows up in actions, words and thoughts. We can be equally harmful to ourselves with our thoughts as we can to others with our actions.

Peace radiates peace. Non-violence creates waves of non-violence. Harmonious vibrations are emitted by one established in ahimsa. Even animals exhibit tolerance and friendliness in their presence. Consideration and kindness are ahimsa in practice.

### **Self Enquiry**

- Where am I unkind to myself
- Where am I unkind to others
- Do I embrace Ahimsa in my Yoga?
- Can we create a planet, or a species of humans, that embraces non-violence in words and actions? How would that look?

# SATYA

## TRUTHFULNESS

*Satya pratishtayam kriyaphalasrayatvam*

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras II-36**

**Sat** = true essence or true nature, unchangeable

**Satya** = non-lying, truthfulness

"When truth (satya) becomes one of our firm roots (pratiṣṭayam), then there is perfect harmony (āśrayatvam) between how we act (kriyā) and the results (phala) of our actions." **Weekly Sutra**

"When the Sadhaka is firmly established in the practice of truth, his words become so potent that whatever he says comes to realisation". **BKS Iyengar**

Satya, or truthfulness can be a more profound practice than just the absence of lies or untruths. Cultivating an attitude of integrity and authenticity, requires an element of inner truthfulness, being true to ourselves. The mental stillness, silence and introspection that comes from our yoga practice, creates the space for authenticity – when we hear our thoughts, we can discriminate untruth from truth.

Dishonesty or lying is usually based on fear – fear of consequences (disapproval, withdrawal of love), fear of punishment. Satya and Ahimsa are closely connected. Speaking and acting truthfully sometimes necessitates the discrimination of behaving in a non-harming way.

*"Before you speak, ask yourself, is it kind, is it necessary, is it true."* **Sai Baba**

### **Self Enquiry**

- What is my true nature
- Where might I speak or act untruthfully
- Do my thoughts and words reflect my actions? (Do I say one thing and do another? Am I true to my word, reliable?)
- Do I embrace Satya in my Yoga practice?
- How does it feel to live in a post-truth era, when politics and society no longer hold truth, veracity, at its core?

# ASTEYA

## NON-STEALING

*Asteya pratisthayam sarva ratna upasthanam*

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras II-37**

"To one established in non-stealing, all wealth comes"

Swami Satchidananda

**Asteya** = non-stealing

Not stealing means not taking or receiving anything without agreement or giving something in exchange. "Asteya arises out of the understanding that all misappropriation is an expression of a feeling of lack, which usually comes from the belief that our happiness is contingent on external circumstances and material possessions"<sup>1</sup>.

There are many aspects to this ethic: honesty, trust, generosity, discernment.

"The need to steal essentially arises because of a lack of faith in ourselves to be able to create what we need by ourselves. The moment we feel a sense of 'lack' in life – desire, want and greed arises. We begin to look for something to fill that 'empty' sensation, and often feel as though everyone else has what we want." *Ekhart Yoga*

The practice of asteya asks us to be careful not to take anything that has not been freely given. This can be material possessions, time, attention, energy. Not stealing demands a certain level of self-sufficiency so that we do not take more than we need.

"If we are completely free from stealing and greed, contented with what we have, and if we keep our minds serene, all wealth comes to us".<sup>2</sup>

### Self Enquiry

- Do I unwittingly take another's time or energy?
- Can I engage in the practice of gratitude to be thankful for all that I have?
- Is our giving and receiving in balance? Are you more of a giver than a receiver?

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Farhi 'Yoga Mind Body & Spirit'

<sup>2</sup> Swami Satchidananda 'Yoga Sutras of Patanjali'

# BRAHMACHARYA

## MODERATION

*Brahmacharya pratisthayam viryalabhah*

**Patanjali Yoga Sutras II-38**

**Brahmacharya** = moderation, continence, chastity

Pratisthayam = be established

Virya = energy, vigour

Labhah = obtained, gained

Charya = moving

Brahma = Supreme, Divine, God

To one who is firmly established in moderation, vitality and vigour flow to them

Brahmacharya is often mis-translated as celibacy. I would suggest it is more the quest for self control.

*"Moderation creates a harmonious relationship among the different forms of energy that animate the body: emotional, sensual, sexual, physical, and the more subtle energy of thought"*

Bernard Bouchanaud: **The Essence of Yoga** page 122

Yoga aims for us to channel all energy into our higher realms. The practice and perfection of self-awareness necessitates a certain amount of self control. When one is focused on connecting with our higher nature, our higher self, the desire for sexual union decreases as we move into states of energetic and emotional union with all of life.

This is the journey of Kundalini shakti as she rises out of Mooladhara Chakra (our Root energy centre and the seat of our sexual desires) upwards to find union with Sahasrara (our Crown energy centre and connection with the divine source).

I would also argue that Brahmacharya is not solely about sexual self control. Anything that we attach an unhealthy amount of energy to, will eventually deplete us energetically and limit our journey towards enlightenment. Being forceful and fierce in any sphere of activity, physical, emotional, mental or spiritual, will use up vital energy, Shakti, and create a stagnation in the free flow of that energy.

## **Self Enquiry**

- What are my energy levels like?
- Do I use up too much energy in my attachments and desires?
- Do I practice self control without attachment, without vigour, thus creating balance?
- If Man (species) were committed to Brahmacharya, how might that look? Less war? Less power struggles?

# APARIGRAHA

## NON-GRASPING

Aparigraha sthairye janmakathamta samdodhah

**Patanjali Sutras II-39**

*One who perfects non-grasping, gains deep understanding of the meaning of life.*

Non-grasping, hoarding or not coveting can come in many shapes - material possessions, attention, knowledge, and even spiritual fulfilment. When we crave anything, it leads to attachment, which leads to suffering. The mind becomes preoccupied with attaining goods, wealth, relationships, wisdom, which reduces our ability to see life clearly.

*"It is the preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly" Henry David Thoreau*

When the mind no longer worries about acquiring and then keeping goods, it frees up capacity to understand life on a deeper level. Modern living is intricately bound up with our desire to have more, to be more, to know more. This is stressful in and of itself. Peace of mind can come from non-attachment, releasing us from the Fear of Missing Out which is relentlessly forced upon us by the advertising industry and social media.

Grasping and hoarding can also be experienced as a mental trait - the inability to let go of patterns of behaviour and ways of being that do not serve us anymore.

*"Resistance to change, and tenaciously holding onto things, causes great suffering and prevents us from growing". Donna Farhi*

Where the ego holds onto the notion of 'mine' and 'I', it reaffirms the erroneous belief that we are all separate. Once the ego is diminished, our mind becomes spacious and we develop deeper insight into life.

## Self Enquiry

- Do I crave material possessions
- Do I have all that I need
- Do my possessions make me happy
- Is my identity related to what I have, what I own
- If the human species decided to embrace aparigraha and not crave possessions, how would that look from an equitable and ecological perspective

