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Yoga Philosophy – The Yamas

Yoga is an eight-limbed (ashtanga) path designed to provide union of body and mind so that both body and mind may be transcended. The purpose of the yamas is to cleanse the astral channels and collect the life-force (prana) in order to make it available for the individual's enhanced well-being. All the yamas are practiced through thought, action and speech. They work together to provide the maximum benefit.



The yamas are:

Ahimsa - non-harming. While it is accepted in our culture that physically harming another person is unacceptable, we often indulge in verbal abuse of others and mental abuse of ourselves through gossip and self-deprecating thoughts. Yogis believe that thoughts are matter, and therefore have the ability to do harm. Ahimsa extends to non-harming of all living beings, and is the primary yama. While doing asana we practice not harming ourselves by being truthful about our limitations (satya) and accepting where we are in our practice. We do not become attached to the admiration of others (brahmacharya) and we limit our desire to have the skill or flexibility that other students might have (asteya) and temper our craving to be more skilled than we already are (aparigraha).

Satya - truthfulness. Satya means being truthful to ourselves and others in word, thought and action. In asana practice, this implies taking the necessary actions, such as using props or making adjustments to a pose to make sure that the practice is beneficial. This also means admitting when there is difficulty in a pose in order to get the appropriate assistance, and in order to not cause injury. In life this implies an honest self-assessment and presentation of self to the world. We take steps toward this ideal through honesty in our practice.

Asteya - non-stealing. The principle of asteya means not taking anything that is not freely given, or earned. Additionally, it means not stealing the ideas or accomplishments of others by not giving credit where credit is due. By not stealing another person's dignity through verbal abuse or harsh criticism, we avoid causing harm.

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Brahmacharya - non-sensuality. Brahmacharya is often translated as celibacy or chastity. While celibacy might be an attractive choice to some people, many texts translate "brahmacharya" more generally as non-attachment to objects of the senses. This longing after that which provides sensory fulfillment (such as food, sex, or possessions) causes an attachment which dissipates prana and ultimately leads to greed.

Aparigraha – non-greed. Attachment to objects of the senses leads to a desire to possess these objects. As more objects are attained, the seeker finds he is not fulfilled and concludes that more objects are needed for fulfillment. Thus begins the cycle of greed. Greed in our practice can be contrary to ahimsa. If we are greedy about attaining mastery of a pose, we may become untruthful (satya) about our actual ability and then push ourselves to the point of injury.

In yoga we always practice being where we are. Each time we come to the mat we assess ourselves truthfully, and practice with an open heart of compassion and acceptance. By practicing the yamas, we begin to unite mind and body; thought, speech and action. We continue that practice both on the mat and in our daily lives.

Goswami Kriyananda. *The Spiritual Science of Kriya Yoga* The Temple of Kriya Yoga, Chicago, 2002

Brown, Christina. *The Book of Yoga*. Paragon Publishing, Bath, UK, 2002

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