

Both agree that if you are alive, you will face pain. They also agree that pain can be avoided. Where they differ is that Lord Buddha identifies cravings as the cause of pain, rather than ignorance. In the Buddhist model, when cravings cease, so does suffering. Sri Patanjali's emphasis is different. He identifies ignorance as the cause of suffering and viveka as the means to eliminate it. Of course, it is ignorance—the mistaking of the body-mind for the Self—that leads to cravings, and viveka needs a nonattached mind (a mind free from craving) in order to attain objectivity in discernment.

2.30. Yama consists of nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, continence, and nongreed.

What attitudes precede the actions of the enlightened? Ones that are born of selfless motivations, wisdom, and love, that seek the welfare of everyone involved. These same attitudes—listed here as the yamas—are virtues that strengthen and purify the mind.

The principles of yama might not satisfy someone fond of a dos and don'ts list. They are more properly understood as preparations for actions—attitudes that bring clarity, focus, and objectivity to bear on all situations.

If we allow these principles to guide, cajole, and correct us, we will gradually know them well enough to call them friends. We will be privy to their nature, intent, power, and significance—their spirit. The yamas can be truly understood only when we perceive the spirit behind the “letter of the law.”

Nonviolence (Ahimsa)

Nonviolence is supreme among all the yamas, never to be violated. It is to be applied to human beings, animals, and so-called inanimate objects.

Violence is a reaction to fear—a key symptom of the dominance that egoism and ignorance have over the mind. Violence is not defined by any particular destructive act but by the *desire* to see another harmed. That is why nonviolence includes refraining from harm in thought as well as in word and deed. To avoid doing harm while harboring hateful or spiteful thoughts does not satisfy the spirit of ahimsa. Consider the following example.

Imagine there is a rooftop sniper shooting at innocent citizens below. Negotiators are unsuccessful in their attempts to talk him

down, but he must be stopped because he is endangering lives. A police sharpshooter is called to the scene. He shoots the sniper in the leg and puts him out of commission. The question is: Did the sharpshooter violate the principle of ahimsa?

Our instinctive response might be “yes”; but from this account, we cannot know for certain. He did shoot the sniper, and ahimsa teaches us to refrain from harming others. But the yogic perspective is more interested in the motivation than the action. If the sharpshooter held hateful thoughts regarding the sniper, it was a violent act. But would our assessment differ if he had neutral thoughts, only thoughts of doing his duty? Or if his only motivation was to protect others? In these cases, the sharpshooter would be following ahimsa even while shooting the sniper. Meanwhile, onlookers not involved in any action but harboring hateful, destructive thoughts would have violated the spirit of ahimsa. This example demonstrates one reason why it is so very difficult to judge the actions of others; we are seldom privy to their intent or motivation.

In considering ahimsa (and the other yamas), does the end justify the means? The results of our acts have an impact on our lives and the lives of others, so they do count. But even when an action brings benefit to others, we lose, because any act based on violent intent sinks us deeper into ignorance. And since repetition makes habit, every violent act helps create and maintain a streak of violence in us. Anger-based violence may seem to be an instinctive motivator—it certainly is common enough—but it is unnecessary. To do what is right and good, to act in a way that fosters well-being and harmony, should be motivation enough. Yogis' actions should bring no harm to anybody, including themselves, and benefit to somebody.

Perfecting nonviolence requires patience, courage, strength, faith, and deep understanding. That is why simply practicing this one precept, even if no other spiritual exercises are practiced, is highly valued.

Truthfulness (Satya)

When examining truthfulness, we again need to consider subtle implications.

Truthful in all ways. Truthfulness should be observed in thought, word, and deed.

▲ We normally understand truthfulness to mean that our words should correlate to our actions and thoughts. This is a good foundation for understanding truthfulness, but it is not complete. First we need to test truth against nonviolence.

Truthfulness measured against nonviolence. Ahimsa is the first yama Sri Patanjali lists and so is the touchstone for determining behavior. Even truthful words, if they cause harm to another, should not be spoken. However, before giving up our course of action, we could consider if there is a more auspicious moment for doing what is needed, or a more appropriate approach. In any case, it is always advisable to do some soul-searching to determine if the desire to act is motivated by an interest in the welfare of others or by a need to vent our frustrations or punish someone with whom we have problems. Motives that are tainted by selfishness obstruct the experience of the Self by maintaining or strengthening the influence of ignorance over the mind.

How can we tell if we are doing harm or just causing temporary discomfort? First, we need to discriminate between the two. Discomfort indicates the struggle of the individual to adapt and adjust. To do harm is to destroy or inhibit proper functioning.

We know that there are times (such as when teachers discipline misbehaving students) when words can cause pain but the intent ultimately brings benefit. The opposite is also true. There are times when people use sweet words (as in con games) in order to deceive others. Their behavior may feel good at first but will cause harm later.

We may not experience the consequences of our actions until much later. If we do not know the nature of the tree, we need to wait until it bears fruit. In order to perfect truthfulness, yogis need patience to observe the ultimate outcome of acts, clarity to make the proper assessment of their outcome, and accurate recall not to forget the lessons of experience. Fortunately, patience, clarity, and good memory are also products of the Yoga practices.

▲ **A deeper look at truthfulness.** Yogis should strictly adhere to all the principles of yama (see sutra 2.31, in which the yamas are referred to as "Great Vows"). Yet consider this from the Thirukkural, a scripture of South India: "Even a falsehood is treated as truth if it brings no harm to anyone and some benefit to someone" (Kural 292). This quote might make us a little uncomfortable at first. It seems to allow the use of falsehoods

for the sake of expediency. In a seeming paradox, the same scripture praises the absence of falsehoods: "No prestige surpasses the absence of falsehood; all other virtues flow from it effortlessly" (Kural 296). Can we reconcile the two?

The ultimate intent behind following any virtue is to bring harmony to the individual and to his or her environment. Violence is the ultimate weapon of disharmony. It strengthens ignorance and divides people from each other and their environment. That is the reason why all virtues are tested against ahimsa. Therefore, if our words foster a new or deeper harmony (expressing as peace, joy, love, accord, cooperation) without harming anyone, they are words that not only uphold nonviolence but reflect the intent of all virtues. But as was said before, it is essential to discern if our words and actions are bringing harm or harmony.

Nonstealing (Asteya)

Most of us would never rob a bank or hold up a convenience store. For most people stealing is more subtle. It is often preceded by a sense of unfairness and lack and exists against a background of looking to externals for happiness.

Many people expend a great deal of time and energy focused on what others have. They can become jealous, restless, and unhappy, rationalizing that it is unfair for some to live in luxury while they dwell in modest apartments. They work hard and consider themselves to be decent people but feel that they have been cheated by life. So, taking matters in their own hands, they attempt to make matters more "equitable." They think it is okay to steal a little. Maybe it's on their income tax returns, or taking a modest amount of supplies from the office, padding their time sheet, or extending their break time every day. It is still stealing and it unfailingly sinks them deeper into ignorance.

One day, we will realize that God has attended to every minute detail and given us exactly what we need at each moment to grow. At that point, we will not feel lack but abundance. Lord Jesus taught, "I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10.10). He was not talking about having more things, but that most sought-after of possessions: complete satisfaction, utter fulfillment, the absence of want.

One of the most subtle forms of stealing comes when we steal ideas from others. Though this could take the form of outright plagiarism, it more often assumes the more benign character of improperly (often subtly) accepting credit for someone else's ideas to advance our career or status among our peers. The difficulty with this is not only that we may deprive others of the recognition they deserve, but that we perpetuate an unconscious expectation that receiving acknowledgments can treat a sagging self-image. We become attached to acknowledgment, thinking it will make us happy.

It's helpful to remember that to some degree, all of our ideas are stimulated by the teachers, authors, musicians, role models, and others who serve as inspirations in our lives. Both inwardly and outwardly, it is appropriate to give credit where credit is due. In the end, the ultimate credit should go to God, the giver not only of our sources of inspiration but of our intelligence, strength, and abilities as well.

Continence (Brahmacharya)

Spiritual pursuits make significant demands on time, attention, and energy. In Yoga, as in almost any other worthwhile endeavor, the only way to ensure success is to dedicate our resources to the goals we have set before us. That is why continence, the avoidance of non-productive expenditures of energy, has always held a central position in Yoga practice.

Each and every act and thought is an outflow of energy. Some thoughts and actions offer beneficial dividends, while others simply drain our resources. In the name of continence, we are asked to be wise investors.

A common rendering of brahmacharya, the word translated as continence, is celibacy, an interpretation that may be a little misleading. While brahmacharya includes sexual continence, it has a broader connotation. Translated literally, brahmacharya is "path to Brahman." Brahman means "greater than the greatest," and is often translated as Absolute Reality or God. For our purposes, it is the same reality as the Purusha. In practice, brahmacharya means to expend our energy on activities that are conducive to the attainment of Self-realization. Therefore it is misleading to limit it to celibacy. Too much (or too little) talking breaks this vow, as do extremes in eating, sleeping, working, and so on. This same principle is expounded in the Bhagavad Gita, 6.16 and 6.17:

It is impossible to practice Yoga effectively if you eat or sleep either too much or too little. But if you are moderate in eating, playing, sleeping, staying awake, and avoiding extremes in everything you do, you will see that these Yoga practices eliminate all your pain and suffering.

How did celibacy come to be almost a synonym for brahmacharya? Ancient yogis studied various categories of activities and realized that of all of them, the sex act uses the most energy. Yogic tradition states that it takes sixty morsels of food to make one drop of blood and sixty drops of blood to make one drop of semen. This underscores how concentrated and powerful sexual energy is and the importance of using it properly. In women, the sex act also involves expenditure of energy, but not as much as in men. For them, childbirth is the great spender of vital energy. This does not imply that women should refrain from having children; we should simply understand the processes at work.

So, is celibacy required of Yoga students? This question was asked of Sri Swami Satchidananda at a talk given at Rutgers University in 1974 to an audience of 350, mostly college students.

After he spoke, there was time for questions and answers. A young woman posed the first question. She stood up rather nervously and asked: "Is it really necessary for a person who wants to practice Yoga to be celibate?"

The question immediately caught the attention of the young crowd. They became still.

Sri Swamiji looked very indrawn. He leaned back, his head tilting downward in a gesture that suggested contemplation. After a few moments, he leaned forward, looked up and said....

"Well..." and again leaned back.

The crowd became even more still and attentive. You could feel the anticipation building. Sri Swamiji leaned forward again.

"I would say..." Once again he leaned back into his seat and paused.

You could hear the creaking of seats as a large number of those in attendance leaned forward in anticipation.

"In matters of sex..."

It was almost too much. He looked downward and rested against the back of his seat. After a few moments he looked up, leaned forward, and said...

"Be efficient."

A standing ovation spontaneously erupted. His dramatic pauses had allowed their attention to focus and their doubts and anxieties over this subject to surface. His answer was at once intriguing and liberating. After the crowd quieted he explained what "efficient" meant. He made an analogy to enjoying a meal.

If you really want to enjoy a meal, how would you do it? One thing is that you don't want to spoil your appetite by snacking; it will inhibit healthy hunger, and good digestion will be compromised as well.

Another point: no one goes to much trouble when eating alone. You enjoy food better with someone you really love and care for, someone you have a committed partnership with. And what would you prepare? Not just anything, but something special. You shop for the best ingredients to prepare their favorite dishes. With all care you prepare the meal. And when it comes time to eat, you put out your best tablecloth and dinnerware. Maybe have some flowers and candles on the table, too. Then when you sit to eat, you eat until you are satisfied. Enjoying a meal like this gives the maximum enjoyment, and you also don't get hungry soon afterward because you are satisfied.

God has put the sexual hunger in us just like the hunger for food. Sex is not forbidden to yogis unless they have taken monastic vows, as swamis (monks) have done. For the rest, the householders, it is fine. But it should be done with a yogic approach. There should be meaning to the relationship, a committed partner with whom love, caring, and a common life vision is shared. There is no energy lost or spiritual gain wasted in such a loving union. In this context,

the sex act is not just for satisfying the flesh, but is an expression of the love that is within.

We should also take care not to overindulge. Moderation not only prevents us from wasting our energy but is necessary for the healthy enjoyment of sex. If we examine this point, we will recognize from our own life experiences that anything we have overdone loses most of its appeal and leaves us feeling drained and unsatisfied. It is no different with the sex act.

Sexual activity should be treated with the respect and care that it deserves. We are dealing with very powerful and refined energies, the wasting of which can impede our growth, the overuse of which can harm us, but whose conservation brings immense spiritual benefit.

When sexual energy is intelligently conserved (not repressed), it is naturally transmuted to a more refined energy called *ojas*. Ojas is a potent healing energy that helps overcome physical disorders and strengthens the subtle and gross nervous systems. It bestows physical stamina and lucidity to the entire thought process and is therefore a great aid to concentration, making sustained, deep meditation possible.

When conserved, ojas becomes even more refined and is referred to as *tejas* (splendor; brilliance), a subtle form of prana. It is ojas and especially tejas that distinguish the teaching of great spiritual masters from ordinary teachers. Spiritual teaching is different from any other form of instruction in that it is not the mere imparting of ideas or even methods of analysis but the transmission of this most subtle and precious vital energy from teacher to student. It is this process that awakens the forgotten truth of the Self in the student. Tejas is the serene radiance and compelling glint in the eye of those that are spiritually realized.

However, abstinence does not a master make. Many great masters of the past and present lived a married life. Brahmacharya in the context of married life is not about abstinence but about not being bound by craving, observing moderation in sexual activity, and finding other, richer avenues to express and receive love.

Nongreed (Aparigraha)

Greed bespeaks a basic craving, an unsatisfied state of mind. Unfulfilled craving gives birth to greed, and it is this inner gnawing to find fulfillment that leads to the other vices.

This yama can also be understood as not accepting gifts. Though we might consider it impolite to refuse gifts, something other than manners is at work here: Does the acceptance of the gift bring about a feeling of obligation in the mind of the receiver? If so, and neutrality is lost, then it is better to decline the gift. If not, you can accept it with loving gratitude. We see the problem of the obligatory gifts in politics. In these cases the recipient's judgment and even freedom to act from conscience can be compromised.

2.31. These Great Vows are universal, not limited by class, place, time, or circumstance.

This sutra emphasizes the importance of the yamas. They are even accentuated over the niyamas, since they apply to everyone, whether or not they are spiritual seekers. These are the guiding principles for anyone regardless of occupation, status, locale, the time of day, year, or life, or what the context is. Since they transcend all circumstances and challenges, they are as valid today as they were thousands of years ago.

2.32. Niyama consists of purity, contentment, accepting but not causing pain, study, and worship of God (self-surrender).

The word *niyama* indicates the essential principles that govern spiritual growth. While the yamas are universal—for everyone in all circumstances and stages of life—the niyamas are particularly important practices for spiritual seekers who wish to prepare the mind for Self-realization.

Purity (Saucha)

This refers to purity on the physical and mental levels. To achieve it, we need to regulate what is allowed into our bodies and minds as well as to clean any toxic material already present.

Most of us have occasionally hampered our digestion by eating food in unhealthy quantities or of poor nutritional quality. This leads to incomplete digestion, with the partially digested food becoming toxic when it stays in the body too long. In order to cleanse the body of the toxins that are already present, yogis use the postures, cleansing practices, and breathing techniques of Hatha Yoga. Then, to help maintain the toxin-free body, a vegetarian diet consisting of light, easily digested foods is suggested.

We can understand mental toxins in a similar way. Mental toxins rob the mind of its energy and focus and incline it toward unhappiness and anger. Sources of mental toxins include:

- Thoughts or experiences that have not been completely digested, i.e., unresolved, misperceived, or not assessed properly
- Anything we cling to because of selfish attachments
- Vices, such as the opposites of the yamas

All of the above can exist as *samskaras* (latent impressions). Activated by external or internal cues, they influence activity on the conscious level. Often they are unseen motivators seemingly beyond our control.

To cleanse mental toxins, yogis carefully monitor what is allowed to go in the mind, while practices such as meditation, self-analysis, and prayer clean the toxins from past activities.

Text

Contentment (Santosha)

There can be no contentment where there is craving. The mind that focuses on acquisition or achievement withdraws from the present by shifting attention from what it has and what is available to it to hopes of a future fulfillment of a desire. The mind also has a tendency to relive the past, to dwell in a land of regrets and missed opportunities, or to worry about future needs and wants.

Contentment is the ability to live in the present moment, outside the continuous passage of time. The moment is precious because it reflects the infinite possibilities that exist outside the confines of time. Every moment holds the information, guidance, and support we need to succeed and grow spiritually. It has been said that God is either “now, here,” or “nowhere.” When our thoughts and actions are rooted in the moment, we come closer to the experience of the Absolute.

Over time, contentment develops the faith that the Divine Consciousness animating all life will provide what we need (though not necessarily what satisfies our greed). “Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, they spin not, but are arrayed in a splendor even greater than King Solomon’s” (Luke 12.27). Contentment, because it develops faith and steadies the mind, is enough to take us to Self-realization.

The final three principles of *niyama* were already discussed at the beginning of this chapter, so our discussion here will be brief (see *sutra* 2.1).

Accepting But Not Causing Pain (Tapas)

Tapas suggests a state of spiritual maturity. It asks us to recognize and accept life's inevitable occurrences of pain. We are challenged to refrain from striking out in fear, anger, or retaliation when pain does arrive. There is no blame attributed to anyone or anything, no shaking of angry fists at the heavens. Instead there is the acceptance of pain as the teacher of vital lessons. Yet tapas should not be misunderstood as a passive, do-nothing-and-trust-in-God resignation in the face of injustice. Mahatma Gandhi is a good example of this. He and his followers were well aware that they would have to face many painful situations, yet they accepted the harsh treatment without returning harm or even expressing hateful thoughts to the British. By adhering to nonviolence and truthfulness, they were able to liberate India.

Study (Svadhya)

Raja Yoga seeks to have a complete and harmonious development of the individual. It is a system in which the teachings act as checks on an exaggerated growth of any aspect of the personality.

By including study as one of the fundamental teachings, it is clear that Sri Patanjali does not expect his students to travel the path to enlightenment fueled by vague feelings, blind faith, or superstition but by understanding.

In addition to scriptural study, traditionally this niyama includes the study of the lives of sages and saints, the repetition of mantras, and the study of the nature—the ways of life—of human, animal, and plant.

The fact that mantra repetition is included as a form of learning implies that study means something more than the accumulation of facts and the ability to reason. It recognizes that a mind focused on any object will penetrate it to find deeper levels of understanding. Therefore our education attains depth as well as breadth. Repetitive study also strengthens the ability of the mind to meditate.

Worship of God or Self-Surrender (Ishwara Pranidhana)

We tend to think of worship as prayer and ritual. But in focusing on the externals, we may miss the attitude behind the actions. Self-surrender is the inner environment in which worship flourishes.

Self-surrender is the willing dedication of time, energy, and abilities to a person, cause, or achievement in hopes of receiving a valued reward. It's no different for those who "worship" fame, fortune, and so on. They, too, must sacrifice their time, energy, and skills in order to achieve what they desire. Worship of God requires that we give ourselves completely—that we willingly sacrifice our selfishness. In this surrender, nothing can be held back. But the rewards are incredible. The great saint, Maanikkavaachakar wrote this after his experience of enlightenment:

God, I thought You are all wise, that You are omniscient.
Now I see that you are a little foolish. You are not a good businessman. I worked and prayed and finally was able to surrender to You completely. And what did You give me in return? You. It's not good business. What are You going to do with me? I am nothing special. But, I have You and with You, I have everything.

The practice of self-surrender includes dedicated service—performing actions for the welfare of others without selfish expectations. In yogic terms, this is known as the path of Karma Yoga. The ego gives up a little ignorance with every dedicated act.

Related Sutras: 1.23–1.27: List characteristics of Ishwara.

We will consider the next two sutras together.

2.33. When disturbed by negative thoughts, opposite (positive) ones should be thought of. This is pratipaksha bhavana.

2.34. When negative thoughts or acts such as violence and so on are caused to be done, or even approved of, whether incited by greed, anger, or infatuation, whether indulged in with mild, medium, or extreme intensity, they are based on ignorance and bring certain pain. Reflecting thus is also pratipaksha bhavana.

This is the second time that Sri Patanjali presents the causes of certain pain (see sutra 2.15: "To one of discrimination, everything is painful indeed, due to . . ."). In both sutras, ignorance is the source.