

# Practicing the Yamas in Daily Living

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## Introduction

Yoga is at its essence, both a science and a holistic practice. Yoga is a technology—a set of techniques that reflect sound psychological principles culminating in spiritual transformation. Patanjali's **Yoga Sutras**, is a collection of 195 aphorisms or pithy sayings, and is perhaps the most important text for a practitioner of Yoga; it explains important yogic concepts and practices, all aimed at the attainment of liberation through Self-Realization. While Patanjali's system is known as "Eight-Limbed Yoga," it is more properly understood as "*kriya-yoga*," culminating in purification through the practices of asceticism, study, and devotion to the Lord.

Adherence to the teachings of the **Yoga Sutras** can lead to liberation—achieved through Self-Realization—where one comes to the awareness that one's identity, is essentially, "Being, Consciousness, and Bliss," or *sat-cid-ananda*. This is true of everyone—for we are all one. The **Yoga Sutras**, and indeed, all of the Yoga tradition, demands that we leave our ego and body consciousness behind. Both serve as impediments on our path towards Self-Realization.

The *yamas* are moral disciplines that are at the heart of Patanjali's **Yoga Sutras**. In this essay, I will explore what the *yamas* mean and how they can be incorporated into daily life. I will do this from the vantage point of Christianity—at times comparing the two, since I spent over twenty some years as a teacher of theology and spirituality at various Christian institutions. I am especially interested in the ways that the two traditions—Christianity and Yoga—intersect, particularly in their spiritual practices and teachings. By undertaking this approach, I am personalizing the *yamas*, and making them even more meaningful.

Justin O'Brien, author of ***A Meeting of Mystic Paths: Christianity and Yoga***, rightly observes that yoga is commonly misunderstood by many Christians. It is often mistaken for an Eastern religion, but this is not an accurate perception or understanding. "*For a Christian, the techniques and philosophy of yoga can serve as an invitation to foster the biblical injunction to perfect oneself as God's image*". (28) *Yoga and Christianity are like two streams flowing from the same fountain of perennial wisdom. Each has a different approach in assisting human development.*" (28)

While this essay focuses on the implications of the daily living of the *yamas* as a yogic practice, it is important to recognize that the practice of the *yamas* bears much in common with the teachings of all major religious traditions, not only Christianity—but Buddhism, Judaism, and most other traditions as well. If anything, an understanding and practice of the *yamas* can enrich the lives of any spiritual practitioner.

## THE YAMAS

Both Christianity and yoga are governed by ethical standards. For the Christian, these ethical standards are derived from the New Testament virtues, the **Beatitudes** given on the **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5: 1-7: 29 and Luke 6: 20-49), and from the **Ten Commandments** (Exodus 20: 2-17).

Patanjali's **Yoga Sutras** and its underlying spirituality, consist of eight aspects or what are referred to as—"limbs" of yoga, also known as *ashtanga*. These consist of the following: the *yamas* (discipline), the *niyamas* (restraint), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (sense-withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (ecstasy).

The *yamas* consist in turn, of five moral principles which govern our relationships and transactions with the outer world. As Georg Feuerstein notes, the *yamas* are "*a universal creed [that is]...essential for cooperative living and inner growth.*" He also asserts, that "*the foundation of Yoga, as of all authentic spirituality, is a universal ethics.*"

Yoga calls us to remember who we are—to remember our true nature. If we are to experience transcendental awareness, we must live lives dedicated to transformation—exercising mindfulness in thought, word, and deed. The **Yoga Sutras**, and particularly the implied moral obligations of the *yamas*, enable us to not only live good lives rooted in moral integrity, but they provide a road map for attaining inner freedom and self-transcendence. The Christian scriptures and particularly its mystical and devotional literature, have amply addressed the importance of each of the five moral disciplines in its own teachings and practices throughout the centuries.

The *yamas*, and the **Ten Commandments** are both rooted in virtue and in virtuous action. Virtuous living leads to joy and happiness, while conversely, non-virtuous living and action, culminates in suffering. Liberation is the ultimate goal of the yoga practitioner, and this is realized when one transcends suffering which is ultimately rooted in *karma*. If we cultivate positive behavior—if we are compassionate, kind, caring, patient, generous, and practice non-harming—these virtuous actions will lead to joy and contribute to the end of suffering. St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, recognized how important it was to cultivate many of these very virtues.

The five *yamas*, or moral precepts, are the following:

1. nonharming (*ahimsa*)
2. truthfulness (*satya*)
3. nonstealing (*asteya*)
4. chastity (*brahmacarya*)
5. greedlessness (*aparigraha*)

Justin O'Brien, in his book, **A Meeting of Mystical Paths**, describes these same *yamas* in the following manner:

*ahimsa—the art of non-violence in thought, word, and deed*  
*satya—the art of truthfulness towards others*  
*asteya—the art of non-stealing*  
*brahmacharya—the art of sexual continence*  
*aparigraha—the art of non-attachment (31).*

## Ahimsa

The most important of the moral obligations is non-violence or non-harming. It is also foundational to all the other moral precepts. If this precept is not cultivated as a yogic discipline, then all of the other spiritual practices—meditation, *asanas*, *pranayama*, and self-restraint—are in the end, without merit. The practice of non-harming underlies all the other precepts, and indeed, all of our actions. The practice of non-violence brings to the forefront the question of how we live our every day lives. As can be noted, this precept implies so much more than just non-killing—it demands that we all live in harmony and seek to establish and maintain cooperation with others—this is of paramount importance for all yoga practitioners. This precept is ultimately grounded in the notion all created being are interconnected.

Non-harming is also rooted in a reverence for life that most Christians would find familiar. In the creation accounts described in the first two chapters of the book of **Genesis**, it is noted that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Because of this, Christians are called to treat every human being as a child of God. Some Christians are routinely taught as part of their religious instruction, that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; the implication is that each Christian must treat their bodies with respect, and care for it in an appropriate manner.

For many yoga practitioners, this dictate to act in ways that are in accordance with non-harming, leads them to choose a vegetarian lifestyle. They also tend to be very concerned for how animals bred for consumption are treated. In fact, the dedicated practitioner is very concerned with consumption in general. As Georg Feuerstein notes in his tape series ***The Lost Teachings of Yoga (LTY)***, “*we are completely responsible for how we are present in the world.*” Thus we need to reflect on our actions, and the impact of what we do, what we buy, and even what we think—for our very thoughts can be violent in nature.

This understanding of non-violence from the yogic perspective has much in common with Christianity—particularly with the Catholic tradition of social justice—deeply rooted in the scriptures and early Christian teachings. Non-violence has always been a part of that tradition. In the first three centuries of Christianity, many Christians routinely were put to death in the Roman Empire rather than choosing to participate in military service—so strong were their beliefs that the taking of another’s life did not reflect the Christian ideal. In more recent decades, it has become more common for Christians to actively protest against violence in many arenas—in both political and economic realms for example. A strong belief in the principle of *ahimsa*, should lead one to actively protest the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—to any means necessary. It may mean choosing to become more politically active so as to more positively influence the outcome of future elections.

## Satya

The second precept (*satya*) mandates truthfulness for the yoga practitioner, and it is directly related to non-harming. Feuerstein observes in the ***Lost Teachings of Yoga***, that “*non-harming helps us overcome anger, and truthfulness helps us to overcome illusion.*” He also notes that “*a society that is based on lies and deception cannot exist.*” The implications of this for our own culture and country are tremendous. The practice of lying has become such an accepted practice in our culture and our society that we often hardly blink at dishonesty, even when it occurs on a grand scale. Lying has never been acceptable or condoned by any society or religious tradition. Our own country was founded on a number of values and ethical principles. Feuerstein (LTY) reminds us that Thomas Jefferson did not respect those who were dishonest and he wrote about lying as a contemptible practice. I was greatly reminded of this when I took my son to his college orientation session at the University of Virginia prior to his first year as a student and Echols Scholar there. Students at the University of Virginia exercise self-governance, particularly in the promulgation of its Honor Code, based on Jefferson’s works. If a student violates this code, he is expelled by his peers. There are no second chances or exceptions to this.

A couple of verses from an ancient scripture that Feuerstein quotes in his tape series, reminds the yoga practitioner that “*there is no virtue greater than truthfulness, [and that] worship without truthfulness is worthless.*”

To be truthful strengthens us as individuals and as a people. To be people of truth is to be people of integrity. When we lie once, it becomes easier to do so again, and in the end, the fruit that we will bear will not be life-giving and will be worthless. But sometimes to proclaim the truth is dangerous. As noted earlier, many Christians and martyrs of other traditions as well, have given their lives for their beliefs.

If you come from a Judeo-Christian heritage, you cannot help but compare all of the moral disciplines to the **Ten Commandments**. Note particularly, the commands to not lie, steal, bear false witness against another, to not commit adultery, or covet another's property.

These ethical standards are important to both the yogic and Christian traditions. They also bear direct similarity to the Buddhism and the **Eight-Fold Path** which also regulates proper conduct. These eight steps and the **Four Noble Truths** which constitute the major doctrinal themes of Buddhism, will be listed here for the sake of comparison:

### ***The Four Noble Truths***

1. *Life is suffering (dukkha).*
2. *Craving is the source of suffering.*
3. *In order to end suffering, one must end craving.*
4. *The means to end craving is the Noble **Eightfold Path**.*

### ***The Noble Eightfold Path***

1. *Right views*
2. *Right intention*
3. *Right speech*
4. *Right action*
5. *Right livelihood*
6. *Right effort*
7. *Right mindfulness*
8. *Right absorption.*

The first two of these precepts has as its aim to instill wisdom in the Buddhist practitioner. The next three directly address what is conducive to moral living, and the last three aim at achieving concentration.

### *Asteya*

Non-stealing (*asteya*) is the next of the *yamas*, and its practice is fundamental to the two traditions under consideration. Non-stealing is however, just as important in other traditions and its practice is necessary for any culture and society to flourish. When it is not adhered to, the moral fabric starts to unravel. According to yogic teaching, non-stealing is being able to be "*equally indifferent to straw or a gem.*" (Feuerstein, LTY). Implicit in this discipline is the practice of non-attachment. It is also a fundamental virtue in the Christian tradition, particularly evident in the lives and practices of mystics, who sought to embody non-attachment as way to attain union with the Divine. In the yogic tradition, non-attachment dispels illusion, thus disclosing our true nature or Ultimate Reality.

When our attachment to things makes us wealthy at the expense of others, this becomes violence—it becomes a form of harming others. The **Catholic Social Teachings** of the last century have addressed this thoroughly in **Encyclicals** and other pronouncements, beginning with **Rerum Novarum**, written by Pope Leo XIII, in 1891. This Encyclical Letter ushered in the modern era in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. In this letter and subsequent documents, it has been asserted that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity. As such they have the right to life, to liberty, to a just wage, to health care, to security, to protection under the law, to freedom of expression and religion—just to name a few. When we deprive another of any of these rights, we are in essence doing violence to them—and we are taking from them what is rightfully theirs.

Similarly, the early Christian writers and theologians called for a just distribution of wealth among all. It was considered immoral for one to own property or material things if another was lacking. In the New Testament book of **Acts of the Apostles**, we see the first Christians opting for communal living, where the wealthy shared their resources with those less fortunate. Widows were provided for, the homeless were sheltered, and the poor were given food and clothing.

In our current culture, there is a movement towards living a life of greater simplicity, a trend which became popular with the works of Duane Elgin. The yogic tradition which as we have seen, dates back to over five thousand years, and the Christian tradition, slightly older than two thousand years, would both support and sanction this trend.

### Brahmacharya

The discipline of *brahmacharya*, which is often misunderstood to mean celibacy, really means chastity, and implies using sexual energy in an appropriate fashion.

Sexuality is rooted in desire, and while desire may be negated by some, it is to some extent, necessary for the human condition to thrive. Desire cannot be totally eradicated, because it gives rise to all other activity. As Feuerstein notes (LYT), desire underlies virtue and even an ascetical lifestyle—because the practitioners of each must make the choices to live virtuous lives, or to embrace asceticism. Before the choice can be made, there must exist the desire for an individual choice or lifestyle. Therefore, one should not try to eliminate desire. All of humankind's most memorable accomplishments were rooted in desire. The body is regarded in the yogic tradition as an avenue for liberation, and thus, meant to free the practitioner.

In both the Christian tradition and the yogic tradition, particularly among its mystics, the practice of chastity is believed to enable one to more deeply experience Union with the Divine. This practice is not just physical, but also presupposes the practice of chastity in thought as well. Christians believe that all sexual activity should take place within the context of marriage, which some Christians view as a sacrament. Certainly the Christian is supposed to exercise self-control. In the earlier part of Christian history, sex was regarded as only acceptable for procreation. There are Christians today who still believe this. In the Catholic tradition, the notion of sex for union as well as procreation is a teaching only a few decades old.

In the yogic tradition, there is also the practice of restraint and self-control among married householders. However in the more recent **Tantric** tradition of yoga, sexual energy is also sanctioned as a way to experience Ultimate Reality or Divine Union.

### Aparigraha

Finally, as we have seen, non-attachment (*aparigraha*) is related to the discipline of non-stealing. Implicit in this discipline is the notion of simplicity and freedom from greed. In our society, any attempt to combat an acquisitive nature is indeed, countercultural. We are constantly bombarded with advertising that urges us to buy this or that product. Indeed, it tells us that we cannot possibly live without the item being sold. Our senses are bombarded, with advertising on TV, on the internet, in magazines and billboards. It has been often quoted that the average person is bombarded with hundreds, if not thousands of ads on a daily basis. To maintain a sense of non-attachment in the midst of all of this requires a heroic undertaking. We are always looking for the next best thing—we upgrade our cars, our computers, and our houses—and are never really satiated in our quest.

The mystics of both traditions have committed themselves to lives of non-attachment. Far from embracing lives of deprivation, the extant literature reveals the rich experiences and the inherent freedom which comes from non-attachment.

## Conclusion

The sincere practice of the *yamas*, whether one is a yoga practitioner or not—can lead to radical self-transformation. This is not to say, that the practice—indeed the very living of these virtues would not be a difficult challenge. But it occurred to me—that even if only all practitioners of yoga in this country—a figure that has been estimated to be in the millions—were to internalize the practice of the *yamas*, this country—and ultimately the world—would indeed become a better place. The practice of *ahimsa* would radically transform our economy and culture—our diets, our politics. If yoga practitioners in this country would first realize that the Yoga Tradition is more than an exercise technique, and would choose to embody some of its timeless philosophical principles, our immediate communities could be transformed—one at a time.

If practitioners of the world's major religions took its teachings to heart—and enfolded them—they would join forces with yoga practitioners to make this a better place. And if a dedicated yoga practitioner is also dedicated to a major religious tradition and its teachings—then so much the better. The practice of the *yamas*, will enrich everyone's life as both a yoga practitioner and a member of a spiritual community. This person will be able to transform—not only his or her life—but the world as well.

The more I read and study about the ***Yoga Sutras***, the more I realize that I have barely scratched the surface. The more I realize that contained within 196 aphorisms, is a wealth of wisdom from sages long ago, that will unfold for me, throughout the years, and yet which I will never come to totally possess or know. There is a wealth of knowledge in this work that will keep me ever desiring more.