



Tools for Cultivating Happiness: YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

The purpose of yoga is to achieve liberation from suffering through the realisation of our true nature. By practicing the eight limbs of yoga, we purify our conscience so we can perceive our inner divinity. Two of these eight limbs, the yamas and niyamas, are the social and personal ethics that form the foundation of a yogic lifestyle that enables us to advance along a spiritual path towards enlightenment. These are tools for cultivating happiness and self-confidence. When you come across an obstacle, a moment that tries your patience, a person that rubs you the wrong way, think of it as an opportunity to practice using these tools. This will help you put your spirituality into action.

YAMAS

Ahimsa

Non-violence. To cause no harm, exercise compassion. Be kind in thoughts, words and actions, to yourself and to others. Practice non-violence on the mat and off. Critical words, self-flagellation and gossip are forms of violence. A yogic lifestyle requires us to be vegetarian so we do not hurt animals. When are people violent? When they are afraid. Where there is love, there is no fear. Hence, non-violence is a form of compassion.

Satya

Truth. Always speak your truth. Act according to your truth. Be authentic. No masks. You are good enough; you do not have to pretend to be someone else to fit in. Be honest with yourself. When we lie, we disconnect from our true selves. We confuse our minds, and we cannot trust ourselves. One lie leads to another, and soon, you are a prisoner in your own masquerade. Let the truth set you free.

That does not mean you should hurt someone's feelings by speaking bluntly. The highest ranking yama is ahimsa (non-violence), so we should honour the principle of non-harming first. Tell the truth in such a way that it does not cause harm. The Greek tragedian, Sophocles said, "Truly, to tell lies is not honourable; but when the truth entails tremendous ruin, to speak dishonourably is pardonable."

Asteya

No stealing. Do not steal other people's possessions, ideas, or time. Do not take more than your share. If it is not given freely, do not take it.

Brahmacharya

Be wise with your sexual energy. Sexual energy exchange should not be frivolous, but rather, the cherry on top of deep connection and intimacy. Do not use sex to control or cause pain. Practice restraint.

Aparigraha

Do not be greedy. Attach to nothing, connect to everything. Always show gratitude for what you have. Take only what you need. If you receive something, give something else away. When you face change (in your job, relationships, home) consider what you try to cling to, and why. Let go of who you were to make space for who you are becoming. Trust and let go.

NIYAMA

Shoucha

Cleanliness in body, thoughts and actions. This is the foundation for physical health and the doorway to tranquil states of meditation. It may be compared to ablutions and fasting to cleanse the body and the organs. One should also have a clean mind and an uncluttered home where energy can flow freely. Yoga offers many kriyas for cleaning the mind and body. Choose what you put into yourself: food, emotions, and thoughts. Toxins in the gut affect your liver and your brain. As the body becomes clean, you experience radiant health; as the mind becomes clean, you feel clear, relaxed and cheerful.

Santosa

Contentment. This comes from acceptance of ourselves and our experiences. If you are struggling with acceptance, contemplate karma. Whatever comes your way, you have

drawn to yourself. Now be content with it. Everything is perfect. With contentment comes delight, happiness, and joy. Let go of the past. Do not punish yourself for not being wiser, for making choices that now seem foolish. Trust the process. Look for the lessons in your experiences to evolve. Meditate to get distance from your present situation, to see life in a larger context. Ride the ups and downs with poise. If you are stuck in an obsessive spiral of negative thoughts and beliefs, break the cycle with yoga.

If your personal narrative is full of negative beliefs, change your story. Examine when you built these beliefs and dismantle them; replace them with beliefs that serve you. Become aware of the stories you tell yourself. It is difficult to see the goodness in yourself and others if you are constantly putting yourself down. Let go of your distorted lens of self-doubt and see your own astonishing light. Then, santosa becomes possible.

Tapas

Discipline. Tapas refers to the heat that comes from determined effort. The effort of the asanas, the effort of a regular practice of any sort. Sadhana. What does not challenge you, does not change you. To bring about transformation, we must be committed, regular and passionate. Practice with fervour. Take small steps and make it easy for yourself to stay committed. Remove the temptations that challenge your will power.

Svadyaya

Self-study. Know thyself. Yoga is the journey inwards. Journaling is a powerful way to understand your thought patterns and underlying belief structure. But here, self-study is about coming to the realisation that the Self is divine. Here we are talking about the Cosmic Self (purusha), that is connected to the universal Self. In yoga, the image offered is of the ocean and its waves. Each wave is an individual being, unique in location and space, but the substance of each wave is the sea itself. Similarly, the individual awareness is never separate from the infinite consciousness.

Rumi says, "I am not a drop in the ocean. I am the ocean in a drop." As we practice, our mind evolves, and we can see this truth with clarity. Repeating 'So Hum, Hum Sa' (I am the universe, the universe is me) can help us achieve clarity. Do not take my word for it.

Ishvara pranidhana

Surrender. Trustful surrender to God. This means, trust the process, trust the Source. You are connected and supported. Align yourself with your higher powers. When you meditate, transcend the limitations of your attachments and ego, and connect with the Divine. Offer up your practice as worship.

These practices will guide you towards wholeness and fulfilment. To play with these ideas further, contemplate, journal and meditate on how they turn up in your life, and where there is room for improvement, make small changes to evolve.

Photo: Alison Joyce

Shazia Omar is an activist, a writer and a yogini. www.shaziaomar.com. [YouTube.com/ShazzyOm](https://www.youtube.com/ShazzyOm). [Insta @ShazzyOm](https://www.instagram.com/ShazzyOm). [Facebook: yogilatesindhaka](https://www.facebook.com/yogilatesindhaka).

