

Off the Mat: Living Yoga in Daily Life

Week 3: The Yamas, or Five Restraints

The Yamas and The Niyamas

- Yoga's ethical guidelines
- They can guide us toward real satisfaction and joy in life.
- They call us to focus on how we are living in love and truth, rather than what we accomplish.
- They compose a different measure of success, one more lasting and deeply satisfying.
- They focus on how it *feels* live in alignment with goodness and truth (hint: feels good!)
- They are not about what you "should" do, according to someone else. Rather, about making choices create a life full of joy for *you*!

"The result of a skillfully lived life is nothing less than joy. Not the kind that comes when things are going our way and disappears just as quickly, but the kind that bubbles up from within, the kind that comes from our own sense of mastery in our life, that no matter what life brings, we are ready. Maybe there is nothing to figure out ahead of time. There is only a life to live well, or not. Which are you choosing for yourself?"

-Deborah Adele, *The Yamas and Niyamas*

The Yamas

1. Non-harm (ahimsa)
2. Non-lying (satya)
3. Non-stealing (asteya)
4. Non-excess (brahmacharya)
5. Non-possessiveness (aparigraha)

"Part of the genius of restraint in speech is that when the acting-out behavior is removed, the underlying tension that is driving the behavior can become conscious."

-Stephen Cope, *The Wisdom of Yoga*

Practicing "just a little moment" of restraint

1. **Notice** when you do something that is out of alignment.
2. Simply **stop**. Don't keep doing it.
3. Just **witness** it. Be curious and observe. Step away from negative self-talk and guilt.
4. **Repeat** the process the next time, and see if you can get deeper toward the root. What is driving the behavior in the first place?

The Yamas are about what you *don't* do, which means they require restraint and discipline. To maintain the strength of spirit that discipline requires, we can nourish ourselves with these three things:

1. **Balance.** Take quiet time to rest, relax, sooth, be quiet, and reflect. Don't spread yourself too thin. Take care of yourself. Bring more ease and pleasure into your life.
2. **Self-Compassion.** Hold yourself accountable in a healthy, productive way. Recognize that you, like everyone else, is imperfect, and you screw up. When you do, don't be harsh with yourself. Forgive yourself, and figure out how you could do better next time.
3. **Gratitude.** Shift the focus from scarcity to abundance, from fear to trust. "As it is, plenty!"

How to Practice Non-Harm (Ahimsa)

The foundation for the rest of the Yamas. If we don't ground our lives in non-violence, everything else is precarious.

1. Don't be harsh with yourself in how to talk to and treat yourself. This includes rushing, overcommitting, not allowing yourself to rest, and being overly critical of yourself. Practice self-compassion and balance.
2. Don't say unkind things about people. Watch your mouth :) Don't gossip or be critical of others. "Be a forklift, always lifting people up!" -Yogi Bhajan.
3. Don't try to fix people, or give unsolicited advice. Instead, shift to a mindset of supporting and listening to others when they need help.

How to Practice Non-Lying (Satya)

The subtle implications of not lying involve being true to yourself, keeping your word, living your values and speaking truth in relationships.

1. Don't say yes to something when you don't have time to commit to it. Be realistic and honest with yourself and others to make your word good.
2. Investigate nice vs. real in your life. Don't say things that are not true, or agree with someone, just to be nice. Notice when you have a tendency to be nice, instead of being real with someone. Consider what fears might be underneath the behavior.
3. Don't ignore issues in a relationship. Express yourself, wielding the sword of non-lying with the sheath of non-harm to have a loving but honest conversation.

How to Practice Non-Stealing (Asteya)

We steal from others when we insert our energy into their lives, making their happiness, failure, experiences about us. We steal from the collective good when we use more resources than we need.

1. Don't compare yourself to others, compete with them, or use them to make yourself feel better.
2. Don't steal from others by making conversations all about you. Listen to others without waiting for your turn to speak. Hear what they are trying to say.
3. Don't waste resources. Turn off lights, turn down the heat, eat less energy-intensive food.
4. Don't strive to own more than you need. Enjoy all the plentiful free things in the world: sunsets, parks, public library, taking a walk.

Practicing Non-Excess (Brahmacharya)

Practicing non-excess is about mindful awareness of what is "just enough," whether it is food, work, rest, fun, etc.

1. Don't overeat. Practice eating to the point of "just enough." Eat slowly and enjoy your food. Track the sensation of when you have satisfied your hunger, and then stop (mindful eating practice).
2. Don't make yourself too busy. Being too busy makes us numb to the simple pleasures of life, so we try to feel something more by overindulging.

Practicing Non-Possessiveness (Aparigraha)

Calls us to take each moment as it comes, and let it go. Clinging makes life heavy and disappointing. Letting go makes life expansive and fresh!

1. Use your breathing practice. Sit or lay quietly, noticing your natural breath, feel in coming in and out. Trust that the next breath will come on its own.
2. If there is something that you "must have," for a good day, practice not having it once and notice what happens.
3. Take yourself out of your routine, especially if you are someone who finds great comfort in your routines.
4. In traveling, don't pack more than you need when you take a trip, and let your expectations be open to what will happen. Have an adventure!

The Law of the Transmutation of Energy: The Yamas are about *channeling* energy, not suppressing it. When you restrain your energy in one area, that energy is transmuted into some more subtle physical or mental power.

“Being firmly grounded in nonviolence creates an atmosphere in which others can let go of their hostility. For those grounded in truthfulness, every action and its consequences are imbued with truth. For those who have no inclination to steal, the truly precious is at hand. The chaste acquire vitality. Freedom from wanting unlocks the real purpose of existence.”

-The Yoga Sutras

Off the Mat: Week 3

1. Continue your daily meditation practice, perhaps adding an element of Balance, Self-Compassion or Gratitude.
 - To cultivate Balance, make your practice more restful. Suggestions: Lie down comfortably instead of sitting, listen to a guided relaxation before bed, journal for a period of time, or extend the length of your practice.
 - To cultivate Self-Compassion, do a breathing meditation with one palm over your heart. Or listen to a guided self-compassion meditation. See resources on course website for suggestions.
 - To cultivate Gratitude, include a gratitude practice in your AM or PM meditation. Write down five things you are grateful for every day in a notebook, or make a gratitude jar.
2. Review your Mindfulness Practices handout from Week 2. Choose something to practice this week. It could be one time, or every day: decide what feels realistic and enjoyable, and write down your intention to do it. These mindfulness practice help us cultivate the awareness, slower pace, and appreciation for life that we need to skilfully practice the yamas.
3. Choose one of the yamas to practice, and a specific way you will practice it. Write it down in a positive statement. For example, “This week, I will practice non-harm in my speech by not saying anything unkind or malicious about people.” Read this statement during your daily practice.