

SACRED TEXTS

Yamas & Niyamas: Yoga Ethics for Daily Life

The ten principles of Patañjali in Sanskrit, word by word, with a ten-week practice journal



यम नियम

yama niyama

YOGIDE

Free sample

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Contents

Before you begin	4
Which texts we use	4
How to pronounce what you read	5
How to use this book	5
Chapter 1. The eight limbs and the place of ethics	6
Patañjali's text in a few lines	6
Why ethics comes first	6
The five yamas	7
The great vow	7
The five niyamas	8
Other lists: five, ten, or more	8
Not commandments, not optional	9
Chapter 1 recap	9

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Before you begin

Most people meet yoga through the body: a class, a posture, a breath. Sooner or later a question arrives that no posture can answer. How should I live? What do I do with my anger, my habits, my phone, my money, my desires, the person who annoys me at work? The yoga tradition answered that question long before it described a single standing pose. In the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali, the first two of the eight limbs of yoga are not about the body at all. They are the **yamas**, five restraints, and the **niyamas**, five observances. Together they are ten short words that ask a lifetime of work.

This book is a companion for that work. It is not a book of rules handed down from above, and it is not a book of soft affirmations either. It gives you the Sanskrit sutras themselves, with a word-by-word reading and our own translation; it explains what the classical commentators understood by each word; it shows where the same ideas appear in the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gītā and the later yoga texts; and then it brings each principle down to the ordinary day: the kitchen, the inbox, the mat, the family table.

It rests on three promises.

First, the text comes first. Each of the ten principles is introduced by the sutra that names it and the sutra that describes its fruit (Yoga Sūtra 2.30 to 2.45), printed in devanāgarī, in IAST transliteration, word by word, then translated. The translations are our own, made from the Sanskrit for this book. When we report what a commentator says, we name him and we stay close to what he actually wrote. When a modern reading goes beyond the text, we say so.

Second, practice over theory. Every chapter ends with exercises and with the journal questions for its week. Chapter 13 gathers them into a ten-week programme: one principle a week, a few minutes each morning and evening, with a weekly review. You need a notebook and a pen. Nothing else.

Third, no moralising. The yamas and niyamas are not a test you pass or fail. Patañjali himself treats them as a direction of travel. You will not become perfectly truthful in a week, and you do not need to. What changes, slowly, is the quality of attention you bring to small choices. That attention is already yoga.

A word of care.

Some exercises in this book invite you to look honestly at your habits, your relationships and your past. If you are living with depression, trauma or an eating disorder, or if a chapter (tapas, śauca, brahmacharya) touches something painful, go gently and talk with someone you trust or with a qualified professional. Ethics in yoga is meant to free, never to punish. If an exercise makes you harsher with yourself, put it down; that is ahimsā too.

Which texts we use

The heart of this book is the second chapter of the Yoga Sūtra, the Sādhana-pāda, sutras 2.28 to 2.45. Our Sanskrit follows the standard text printed in the Ānandāśrama edition (Pune, 1904) and its digital transcription on GRETIL, the Göttingen register of Sanskrit texts. Where we mention the oldest

commentary, the Yoga-bhāṣya attributed to Vyāsa, we paraphrase it from the Sanskrit; several scholars now consider the sutras and this commentary as a single work, the Pātañjala-yoga-śāstra, but the traditional names are kept here for clarity.

We also quote, in our own translations, a few verses from the Bhagavad Gītā, the Īśa, Taittirīya and Śāṇḍilya Upaniṣads, the Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā and the Manusmṛti. Full references are given in the Sources chapter, with public-domain English translations you can compare.

How to pronounce what you read

Sanskrit is written here in two ways: devanāgarī (अहिंसा) and IAST, the international transliteration (ahiṃsā). A few signs are enough:

Sign	Sounds like	Example
ā, ī, ū	long vowels: father, machine, rule	āsana, īśvara
a	short, like the u in "but"	yama
ṁ	nasal, closes the syllable (m or ng)	ahiṃsā
ḥ	a light echo of breath after the vowel	yamāḥ (yamāha)
ś, ṣ	both close to "sh"	śauca, puruṣa
c	always "ch" as in church	citta
ṛ	a vowel r, like "ri" said quickly	ṛta
jñ	often said "gy" in North India	jñāna
th, ph	aspirated t and p, never English "th" or "f"	tha, phala

How to use this book

Read Chapters 1 and 2 first: they set the ten principles in their place within the eight limbs and give you the one technique Patañjali offers for working with them. Then read the chapter of the principle you will practise this week. Chapter 13 is the journal programme. You can follow the order of the sutras (ahiṃsā first, īśvara-praṇidhāna last), or begin with the principle that calls you most. Many people find it helpful to start with ahiṃsā, because, as the commentators insist, all the others serve it.

Chapter 1. The eight limbs and the place of ethics

Patañjali's text in a few lines

The Yoga Sūtra is a collection of 195 or 196 short aphorisms (the count varies by one sutra between editions), usually dated to around the early centuries of the common era. It is divided into four chapters, or pādas. The first defines yoga as the stilling of the movements of the mind (YS 1.2) and describes the states of absorption. The second, Sādhana-pāda, the chapter on practice, is written for people who are not yet established in that stillness, which is to say for nearly all of us. It is in this chapter that Patañjali sets out the path of eight limbs, aṣṭāṅga yoga.

The eight limbs are announced in a single sutra.

YS 2.29

· यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥

yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhārādhyānaśamādhayo 'ṣṭāv aṅgāni

Word by word. yama: restraint · niyama: observance · āsana: seat, posture · prāṇāyāma: extension and regulation of breath · pratyāhāra: drawing the senses back · dhāraṇā: holding attention on one place · dhyāna: meditation, continuous flow of attention · samādhayaḥ: absorptions · aṣṭau: eight · aṅgāni: limbs.

Translation. Restraint, observance, posture, breath regulation, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation and absorption are the eight limbs.

Note the word aṅga. It means a limb, as an arm or a leg is a limb of the body. It is not a rung that you climb and leave behind. A child does not grow its arms first and then its legs; all the limbs grow together, at different speeds. In the same way, you do not have to become a saint before you are allowed to sit, breathe or meditate. But you will notice, sooner or later, that your meditation is only as calm as your life, and that the first two limbs quietly hold up the other six.

Why ethics comes first

The sutra just before the list explains why the limbs are practised at all.

YS 2.28

· योगाङ्गानुष्ठानादशुद्धिक्षये ज्ञानदीप्तिराविवेकख्याते ॥ yogāṅgānuṣṭhānād aśuddhikṣaye jñānadīptir ā vivekakhyāteḥ

Word by word. yoga-aṅga: the limbs of yoga · anuṣṭhānāt: from the practice · aśuddhi: impurity · kṣaye: when it wears away · jñāna: knowledge · dīptiḥ: light, shining · ā: up to · viveka-khyāteḥ: discriminating

vision.

Translation. Through practice of the limbs of yoga, as impurity wears away, the light of knowledge shines, up to discriminating vision.

The image is one of cleaning. Patañjali does not say that the limbs produce clarity; he says they wear away what hides it. In daily language: a mind busy with lies to maintain, grudges to feed, things to hide, envy to manage and cravings to satisfy has very little room left to be still. The yamas and niyamas reduce that noise at its source. This is why the tradition places them before posture and breath. It is not that ethics is more "spiritual" than the body; it is simply practical.

The five yamas

YS 2.30

· अहिंसासत्यास्तेयब्रह्मचर्यापरिग्रहा यमाः ॥ ahiṃsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ

Word by word. ahiṃsā: not harming · satya: truthfulness · asteya: not stealing · brahmacarya: conduct that leads to brahman, traditionally continence · aparigrahāḥ: not grasping, not hoarding · yamāḥ: the restraints.

Translation. Not harming, truthfulness, not stealing, continence and not grasping are the restraints.

Yama comes from the root yam, to hold, to rein in. It is the same root as in prāṇāyāma, the reining-in of breath, and it is also the name of the god of death who "holds" all beings. The yamas mostly concern how we act towards others: what we do with our hands, our words and our wanting.

The great vow

YS 2.31

· जातिदेशकालसमयानवच्छिन्नाः सार्वभौमा महाव्रतम् ॥ jātideśakālasamayānavacchinnāḥ sārva-bhaumā mahāvratam

Word by word. jāti: birth, kind, species · deśa: place · kāla: time · samaya: circumstance, convention · anavacchinnāḥ: not limited by · sārva-bhaumāḥ: extending to every level, universal · mahā-vratam: the great vow.

Translation. When they are not limited by kind, place, time or circumstance, and extend to every level, they are the great vow.

The commentary attributed to Vyāsa illustrates this sutra with the case of a fisherman: his non-harming is limited by kind, because he harms fish and only fish. Others limit their restraint by place ("not in a holy place"), by time ("not on a festival day") or by circumstance ("only for the sake of the gods and the brahmins", Vyāsa writes, quoting the conventions of his time). When the restraints are kept with no such exception at all, they become the mahāvratā, the great vow.

Honesty requires a remark. Almost everyone lives with exceptions. The sutra does not condemn that; it shows the horizon. A useful exercise, which you will find again in Chapter 13, is simply to notice your own

exceptions: the place, the time, the kind of person or the circumstance in which you allow yourself to lie, to take, to harm. Seeing them is the beginning.

Indian readers will know that the same five words, ahiṃsā, satya, asteya, brahmacarya, aparigraha, are also the five great vows (mahāvratā) of Jain monks and nuns, with lighter "small vows" (aṇuvratā) for lay Jains. The Buddhist lay precepts (pañcaśīla) cover close ground: not killing, not taking what is not given, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, no intoxicants. The ethical core of yoga belongs to a wide and shared Indian conversation, not to one school.

The five niyamas

YS 2.32

· शौचसंतोषतपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि नियमाः ॥ śaucasaṃtoṣatapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ

Word by word. śauca: purity, cleanliness · saṃtoṣa: contentment · tapaḥ: heat, discipline · svādhyāya: one's own study, recitation · īśvara-praṇidhānāni: dedication to the Lord · niyamāḥ: the observances.

Translation. Purity, contentment, discipline, study and dedication to the Lord are the observances.

Niyama also comes from yam, with the prefix ni-, "down, in": a holding-in, a rule one keeps. The niyamas mostly concern the relationship with oneself and with what is greater than oneself. The last three are not new: Patañjali opened the chapter with them.

YS 2.1

· तपःस्वाध्यायेश्वरप्रणिधानानि क्रियायोगः ॥ tapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni kriyāyogaḥ

Translation. Discipline, study and dedication to the Lord are the yoga of action.

So the niyamas contain, folded inside them, a complete small yoga, kriyā-yoga, offered to people who are not ready for long meditation. We will come back to it in Chapters 10 to 12.

Other lists: five, ten, or more

Patañjali's five-and-five is the best-known list, but it is not the only one. Later texts, especially the group of medieval works called the Yoga Upaniṣads, give ten yamas and ten niyamas. The Śāṇḍilya Upaniṣad (chapter 1) lists as yamas: not harming, truthfulness, not stealing, continence, compassion (dayā), straightforwardness (ārjava), patience (kṣamā), steadiness (dhṛti), moderate eating (mitāhāra) and purity (śauca). Its niyamas are: discipline (tapas), contentment (saṃtoṣa), faith in the teaching (āstikya), giving (dāna), worship of the Lord (īśvara-pūjana), listening to the established teaching (siddhānta-śravaṇa), modesty (hrī), conviction (matī), repetition of mantra (japa) and observance of vows (vrata).

The Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā, in most printed editions (including the Sanskrit text on GRETEL and Pancham Sinh's of 1914, verses 1.17-18), also includes a pair of verses listing ten yamas and ten niyamas, close to the Śāṇḍilya's; some editions leave them out, which shifts the numbering of the following verses. What the Pradīpikā does say firmly is that moderate eating, mitāhāra, is the most important among the yamas, just as non-harming is among the niyamas and siddhāsana among the postures (HYP 1.40 in those editions,

1.38 in editions without the two verses). The lists move; the spirit remains.

Not commandments, not optional

Two misunderstandings are common.

The first treats the yamas and niyamas as commandments, a moral code with a judge behind it. Patañjali's tone is different. He never threatens. He describes, in sutras 2.35 to 2.45, what happens when each principle becomes stable, *pratiṣṭhita*, firmly set. The motive he gives in 2.34 is not fear of punishment but clear sight: harmful thoughts bear fruit in suffering and ignorance. It is the logic of a doctor more than of a judge.

The second treats them as optional extras, a "philosophy" one may skip to get to the poses. Historically this is the reverse of the tradition. In the Yoga Sūtra, posture receives three sutras; the restraints and observances receive sixteen. In India, ashrams that teach āsana to visitors usually still begin the day with a talk, a chant or a reading, and most teachers in Rishikesh will tell you, with a smile, that the real practice begins when you roll up the mat.

Chapter 1 recap

- The eight limbs are limbs, not rungs: they grow together.
- Their purpose (YS 2.28) is to wear away what hides clarity.
- Five yamas (YS 2.30) concern our conduct towards others: not harming, truthfulness, not stealing, continence, not grasping.
- Five niyamas (YS 2.32) concern our relation to ourselves and to the sacred: purity, contentment, discipline, study, dedication.
- Kept without exception they become the "great vow" (YS 2.31); most of us start by seeing our exceptions.
- Other texts list ten and ten; the spirit is shared across Indian traditions.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 47 pages.

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