

YAMA

In the yoga system of Patanjali, practice is divided into eight stages or limbs called *Ashtanga*. The first two limbs, *yama* and *niyama*, establish ethical and behavioral parameters for our conduct. When observed, they establish a harmonious relationship between our experience of the inner and outer worlds. The first limb, or *anga*, is called *yama*, which means something that is controlled, regulated, or restrained. This should not be misunderstood as something which is obliterated or repressed. Repression is an emotional reaction which forces thoughts and impulses into the unconscious layers of the mind, where they remain an active force and continue to affect our behavior. Yama is a conscious practice which is observed with insight, self-awareness, and self-discipline.

Certain behavioral qualities can create distress in our lives and in the world around us when they are not wisely exercised. Therefore it is important that we learn techniques to control them. Yama (conduct which is controlled) and niyama (conduct which is cultivated) are guidelines that help to make our human experience harmonious and joyful. There are five yamas and five niyamas, each practiced or observed on three levels: thought (*baudhika*), word (*vachika*), and physical action (*sharirik*).

Thought is said to be the source of words and actions. In other words, something first needs to be thought, before it can be communicated or verbalized, and then acted upon. The five yamas are the restraint in thought, word, and deed from violence (*ahimsa*), lying (*satya*), stealing (*asteya*), sensuality (*brahmacharya*), and greed (*aparigraha*). The five niyamas are the observances of purity (*shaucha*), contentment (*santosha*), austerity (*tapas*), self-study (*svadhyaya*), and attunement (*Ishvar-pranidhana*).

-AHIMSA-

(NON-VIOLENCE)

Mental Non-Violence

(Baudhika Ahimsa)

The first yama is *ahimsa*. It is translated as *non-violence* and is considered to be the greatest of the yamas. All of the other yamas are practiced so that we may become established in *ahimsa*. Together with wisdom and compassion, *ahimsa* is symbolically referred to as one of the “jewels above the head of God.” This suggests that even our concept of God must yield to the observance of *ahimsa*, and that we need to learn to treat all sentient beings, all Life, with benevolence and compassion.



To fully understand what is meant by non-violence, we must reflect deeply upon our concept of violence. In order to sustain our existence in this world, we must in some way take life. Even if we consume only vegetable matter and no animal flesh, we are still taking life. This goes back to the definition of yama — actions that need to be controlled and tightly regulated mentally, verbally and physically. Whether you are a soldier in battle or a householder deciding whether or not to exterminate an unwanted insect, these actions require serious consideration. We need to examine the effect of our actions, not just on humanity, but on all life.

To begin observing mental non-violence, the first things we need to explore are the structure and the contents of our own mind. We may want to reflect on the following thoughts: How often do I indulge in anger? Do I anger easily? Do I repress anger when I experience it or am I able to find a constructive outlet for the energy? It is important that we reflect on how we experience and process angry and violent thoughts. We need to understand how these thoughts affect our experience of life and our interactions with the world. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to come to understand the genesis of the violence and anger within us. Where does it come from and what triggers it?

On a subtler level we need to reflect on what is destructive to us and to those around us. Each soul is unique with different needs and different strengths. What is destructive to your happiness? What is destructive to your peace of mind? What is destructive to your dream, to your contentment? All of these subtle and potential forms of violence, which we direct at ourselves and others, need to be renounced through the practice of ahimsa.

Verbal Non-Violence (Vachika Ahimsa)

When we verbalize angry or destructive thoughts, our words impact our bodies, our minds, and the world around us. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of violent words knows that the aftereffects can be devastating and quite long lived. More often than not, physical injuries will heal and be forgotten long before verbal violence is forgotten. The analogy of a bell is sometimes used to better understand the impact of verbal violence. Although the sound vibrations generated by a bell can be heard for miles around, the vibration is most intense within the bell itself. Whatever damage may be done in the outer world through verbal violence, greater still is the violence which is done to the person who is its source. A wise soul once said, “Coat your words with honey. You never know when you may need to eat them.”

Physical Non-Violence
(Sharirik Ahimsa)

Violence at the physical level is the most obvious. Most of us refrain from committing acts of physical violence against others, but we are often unaware of the subtler acts of violence we commit against ourselves. In the Yoga Sutras (Book II: Sutra XVI) it says, *Heyam duhkham anagatam*, which translates as “Pain and suffering that has not yet occurred can and is to be avoided.” There are many things which we do in our lives that are not in our best interest. Often they are subtle and will not yield problems for years. Because of this, we somehow rationalize doing them. The simplest choice that we make each day can have profound effects upon us in the future, whether that future is the next day, the next year, the next lifetime, or the next breath. Remember the formula $I \times D = F$? One way to measure intensity is by awareness. If due to unawareness, we produce an unhealthy, destructive behavior or habit, such as improper diet or smoking, the force or result of that habit will be determined by how long the habit has existed—its duration. It will require a conscious force of at least equal intensity and/or duration to counteract the effects of the behavior. As the great sage said, “We are the result of all that we have thought, said, and done.”

Physical violence against others or oneself usually begins as a mental or emotional pattern that is self-destructive. This attitude can even enter our asana practice. If we become goal oriented, we may try to force movements or to open areas of the body prematurely. This attitude can cause damage to our physical body. The truth is that the present is the only reality that we have. It is the only place in which we can act. If we can find a feeling of wholeness and balance in the present, then this is good yoga.

-SATYA-
(TRUTHFULNESS)

Mental Truthfulness
(Baudhika Satya)

Translated literally, the second yama is truthfulness. Referring again to the concept of restraint, it is helpful to understand *satya* as non-lying, because truthfulness itself need not be restrained. The concept of truthfulness, however, is easily distorted and can become quite obtuse because the nature of thought is quite subjective. As the Buddha said, “Our mind is our world.”



Each of us has had a unique set of life experiences and have synthesized them in distinct ways. How these experiences have been organized within our thought processes determines the bias of our consciousness. This presupposes that virtually all of us have a bias to our consciousness. The fact that we have different opinions in response to receiving the same information tends to verify this.

On one level, it could be said that each individual experiences his or her own truth. We then seek out like-minded individuals with whom we can compare our life experiences, thinking that if enough people agree with us, we know the truth. But when we look at the diversity of what is called truth, the subjective quality of it is apparent. The danger arises when we begin to think that what we find to be true should be true for everyone. The more attached we become to our truth or to converting others to sharing our views, the more we risk violating ahimsa (non-violence). The challenge is to seek out and embrace our own truth without dogma or judgment about the truth of another.

On a deeper level, can we ever really know what is objectively true? As human beings, we find ourselves in the position of having to function as though we know what is true, when it is highly unlikely that we do. As long as we experience life through the biases of our body and mind, we are existing in a subjective realm.

If two children are playing and a dog walks into the room, each will respond according to the bias of his or her mind. One may run and hide in the closet, the other child may let the dog lick her face and play with it like a toy. How many dogs walked into the room? You could say two dogs entered the room, one a symbol of danger and fear, the other a symbol of pleasure and playfulness, one in each child's mind, biased by their past experiences. But truth is neither of these subjective interpretations of the dog. The dog is neither a monster nor a toy. It is an entity unto itself, a dog. To see Life as it is, and not as we fear it may be, or desire it to be, is to observe satya (truthfulness) within our minds.

Verbal Truthfulness (Vachika Satya)

To speak the truth is no less of a challenge. This is due largely to the nature of language; words do not have a fixed meaning. Even the dictionary usually offers several meanings for the same word, some quite diverse from one another. The bias of our life experiences also affects how we hear and react to different words. If we seek to speak the truth, do we need to use words as they are true in our consciousness, or should we use words as the listener will hear them?

If the goal is for the listener to hear the truth, then speaking as the listener hears would seem to be the most desirable approach. Because this is such a challenging task, it is very helpful to employ the technique of dialogue. One person speaks his or her truth as accurately as possible, and then the other person responds, expressing what he or she heard. This can continue back and forth until a mutual understanding is reached. With practice, this exchange can work reasonably well between two mature individuals. However, the technique is not as effective when speaking to a group because the margin for miscommunication increases proportionately with the number of people involved.

Reflect on this from the position of a yoga teacher. Much of what we communicate as teachers comes through the use of words and the feelings we express through them. Yoga asana is a very focused and often demanding subject to practice as well as to teach. To find language for the most articulate and effective communication is a constant quest. Our language needs to evolve in response to who is listening and how we experience our words being heard. In order to accomplish this, we need to minimize the bias within our own consciousness, so that we can function more as a vehicle for the teachings, than as “the teacher.” This is an important distinction.

Physical Truthfulness (Sharirik Satya)

Expressing truth through our bodies requires some degree of self-awareness and integration. The inflection and intonation of our words reveals as much about our thoughts as the literal meaning of the words themselves. Our bodies also express what we think and feel. Most of us are relatively unconscious of how much we express through our postures and actions and how much we are affected by the postures and actions of others. Our bodies can easily betray the truth about what we think and feel.

As Hatha Yoga practitioners and teachers, we need to be aware of the language of the body. Through our own practice and observation, we begin to develop insight into how particular physical actions correlate with specific internal states. As we learn through our own experience, we become more capable of perceiving this dynamic in others. The more adept we are with body language, the better we will function as teachers. As we develop the ability to understand the language of the body, we become capable of bringing unity to our thoughts, words, and deeds. In doing this, we more effectively communicate our truth.



-ASTEYA-
(NON-STEALING)

Mental Non-Stealing
(Baudhika Asteya)

Asteya means non-stealing. *Asteya* means refraining from taking anything that is not ours: physically, mentally, or spiritually. The loss of a possession is nothing compared to the loss of our health, our self-image, or our peace of mind. The practice of *asteya* means that we refrain from taking someone's happiness, their moment of prominence, or their dream. To observe *asteya* in a healthy, balanced way, like all *yama*, requires constant self-awareness, self-discipline, and wisdom. We need to be ever mindful of what we think, and say, and do.

As we practice *asteya*, we learn not to take that which we have not earned, as well as that which is not ours. In terms of our mind, there is a great difference between what we have memorized and what we actually know and have made our own. Any piece of knowledge is meaningful only to the degree that it has been integrated into our consciousness. Whenever possible, we should embrace the opportunity to learn directly and for ourselves. This in no way minimizes the role of a teacher. It actually helps to define it. One of the roles a teacher plays is to present information in such a way that the student can learn what he or she needs to learn in the way that is most appropriate for that individual at that moment. There is a tremendous power in knowledge. By earning it through experience, we are better prepared to put it to good use.

It has been said that amateurs imitate, while professionals steal. There are people who seem to believe that it is actually easier to take than to earn, but this is shortsighted. In the long run, thoughts not earned and assimilated only cloud our consciousness. We have a tendency to define ourselves by the information that we accumulate in our minds. If we take an idea that is not really our own and use it to define ourselves, we may end up trying to live someone else's life or someone else's truth, which only creates discontent. When we fail to embrace *asteya*, we also violate *satya* (truthfulness), which in turn disturbs the practice of *ahimsa* (non-violence).



Verbal Non-Stealing (Vachika Asteya)

When we verbalize something, it begins to solidify, to take form. The benefits of disciplining the mind are more clearly appreciated when we see the results that our words have on the world. As mentioned earlier, language is very subjective in nature. The more we embrace satya with our words, the easier it is to embrace asteya as well. The greater the truthfulness of our mind, the more easily we speak in words that truly express our own experience of life and of self. When we communicate with the world, it is always best to speak from our heart and our own mind. If we try to emulate someone else, even a noble soul, we will only effectively communicate what we have made our own.

Language often has a social and cultural context. Borrowing elements of speech or other's ideas in order to more effectively reach the listener can be a valuable communication tool. It only qualifies as stealing if we act as though the thought or style of speech is our own. When necessary, borrow whatever language is needed to most effectively communicate. Just remember that it is borrowed, so that it can be returned at the appropriate time. More often than not, this technique demonstrates our flexibility as a speaker or teacher.

Physical Non-Stealing (Sharirik Asteya)

Little really needs to be said at this time about the inappropriateness of actually stealing physical objects. The laws of our civilization establish guidelines, which we as a culture have more or less agreed to live by. However, if we look at the status of the environment and observe just how much we have stolen from it, it is easy to understand how narrow our concept of stealing is culturally and just how much room for interpretation these laws permit.

Stealing creates a void, an imbalance. Receiving a gift, whether from nature or a person, does not. The challenge that the practice of asteya poses is to understand how we can fully live and participate in the world without creating imbalance. Life is dynamic; it is always changing. Through the practice of ahimsa, satya and asteya, we learn to perceive and become sensitive to the changing order of life. In yoga, this order is called *rita*. This insight enables us to receive and to impart as needed in order to sustain balance and equanimity within us and in our relationship to the world around us.



As an analogy, asana can be a tremendous teacher. If we are not truthful with ourselves (satya) and we take an asana to a degree that we have not earned (asteya), we can easily do violence to ourselves (ahimsa). But, as we become aware of *rita*, the order of life, the order of our body and mind, we begin to aspire towards balance and equanimity. As we cultivate this attitude of balance and bring it into our asana practice, we become aware of the results it yields. This in turn enables us to more easily attune to this attitude and to apply it to other aspects of our lives.

-BRAHMACHARYA-
(NON-SENSUALITY)

Mental Non-Sensuality
(Baudhika Brahmacharya)

Brahmacharya is often defined as celibacy. Though this may be accurate in some circumstances, this definition encompasses only a small part of what brahmacharya means. If we take brahmacharya at its most literal definition, we find that *Brahma* is seen as the creative force or principal within us and *acharya* means a master teacher who lives his philosophy. So brahmacharya could be translated as *becoming the master of one's creative force*. This definition provides many different levels of interpretation.

One of the great mantras of yoga is *aham brahmasmi*, which translates as *I am the creative principle*. It is a recognition of the creative potential within us, the power to create other human beings, as well as the creativity to solve the problems we encounter every day. Yoga embraces the philosophy that we create the circumstances of our life, on every level, and only we can alter them. The proper use of the creative forces of our being is what brahmacharya is all about.

The practice of brahmacharya acknowledges that both the desires to create and to procreate are among the motivating forces we experience as humans. To harness and direct this energy in a balanced way can provide the vitality to accomplish tremendous things. Left undisciplined, this same energy creates chaos. By necessity, the expression of the desire to procreate requires both active and receptive elements for it to manifest. Our mind has been conditioned by habit to understanding this in terms of male and female relationships. However, in reality both of these creative urges are an expression of the dynamic quality of life.

The challenge presented by observing brahmacharya is to keep this energy in a healthy balance, while giving it its proper expression. If we think of brahmacharya only in terms of sexual expression, the scope of this energy's capacity to express itself becomes quite narrow. Since sexual expression requires another person for its greatest creative fulfillment, the complexity of expressing it and keeping it in a proper perspective increases exponentially. An enormous amount of our effort can be invested in trying to sort this out and resolving the confusion which it creates in our mind.

What many people are really seeking is the satisfaction or contentment of creative self-expression. For some this may be a feeling of power, for others it may be a sense of accomplishment or fulfillment, for some the bliss of becoming one with another being, experiencing something larger than themselves. What the yogi is seeking is an experience of completion, of wholeness, of touching life in a way that is only experienced by a recognition and awareness of our true nature. Each of us is a self-existent spiritual being, a part of Life and not apart from it. This experience of integration and wholeness, of being a part of life, creates a feeling of bliss and delight. In one way or another, we have all had this experience of bliss. On some level, we remember it and we continue to seek it.

Because this state of internal integration is so difficult to attain or sustain, most people seek to manifest it in the physical world or to experience it sexually with another person, and there is nothing wrong with this. We just need to honestly evaluate where we are in our quest for wholeness and what avenues we should pursue in order to find our fulfillment. With a proper respect for ahimsa, satya, and asteya, we can wisely explore appropriate avenues for our creative expression.

Verbal Non-Sensuality (Vachika Brahmacharya)

Language is a wonderful tool for conducting this exploration. It can be the interface between thought and action. Clear communication with other people helps us to discover the most harmonious expression for our creative and procreative drives. We have said that this energy requires both active and receptive elements. With respect to the use of words, this means we need to be a good listener, as well as a good speaker.

If marriage or a relationship is the appropriate path for an individual, language is a necessary tool for exploring compatibility and appropriateness before sexual interaction occurs. As any relationship deepens, it is important that we regularly reflect on



ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, and the fifth yama of non-greed, as guidelines for how to conduct ourselves. Our words have the power to create as well as to destroy. Our choice of words affects not only our consciousness but also the consciousness of others. We are a part of life — not apart from it.

Physical Non-Sensuality (Sharirik Brahmacharya)

The physical expression of brahmacharya has been the subject of reflection and debate since the dawn of civilization. More often than not, this energy is experienced as sexual in nature. Even though this is only one possible manifestation, it seems to be the most common and dominant form.

Repressing any part of our human nature can be as much a form of violence as applying no control or discipline at all. This energy is a natural urge, and one way or another it seeks and finds expression. Remember that intensity times duration equals force. The longer an energy has been held in check or repressed, the greater will be the force of its expression when the opportunity arises. Finding the most balanced expression of our creative and procreative desires is essential. One of the most important concepts regarding yama is that it is to be observed depending on time, place and position. This means that the observance of brahmacharya for someone who is married is not the same observance as it would be for someone who is single. We are living as human beings and need to interact with and express ourselves as human beings in a healthy and balanced way. With wisdom, this can and should be a delightful experience.

-APARIGRAHA- (NON-GREED)

Mental Non-Greed (Baudhika Aparigraha)

Aparigraha is often defined as non-greed. In discussing *baudhika aparigraha*, we are referring to the contents of the mind. As we go through life, we collect memories of life experiences. These memories are used as references to help us make decisions about how to behave in the present, in order to create the future we desire. For this reason, the contents of our minds have great value. Yet, just as we collect more than we need in material possessions, we can easily collect more than we need in our memories.

Thoughts and emotions coexist within the mind. Because emotions usually contain more experiential weight than thoughts, emotional patterns have more momentum and are often more difficult to see objectively. For most people, emotional biases affect the thought process more readily than the thought process affects the emotions. This can be a good thing, because the thought process needs to be used to temper and refine the emotional experience, not to repress or eliminate it. However, our emotions need to be healthy and balanced so that their influence on our thinking will not be destructive to us or to those around us.

The more intensity an experience has at its inception, the more momentum it carries and the more we tend to relive it. The more we relive it, the greater its momentum becomes over time. Because of this, we often hold onto thoughts long after they have outlived their usefulness. These thought patterns, to a great degree, bias our experience of life. Consider for a moment how much our thought process affects and defines our experience of who we think we are. Then reflect on how much the content of our mind biases how we experience life and therefore affects what we become. The more information we have in our minds, defining who we are, the less freedom we have to be anything else.

Try to imagine for a moment how much of your internal dialogue is really necessary for you to function efficiently in the world. It should not take much reflection to realize that the vast majority of it is superfluous. Most of our internal dialogue is just a series of thought patterns we simply do not know how to let go of. Observe how freely children experience the world before they are given language with which to create rigid mental parameters.

The practice of aparigraha challenges us to only take into our consciousness that which is needed, to use it *only* as long as needed, and then with gratitude for having had the experience, to let it go.

Verbal Non-Greed (Vachika Aparigraha)

The word *sutra* means *a thread*. When applied to language, *sutra* means that a concept is expressed in its most concise form. Often we find ourselves saying relatively little with many words. We may even find ourselves saying things that do not need to be said. An old axiom suggests that we should speak only when it is an improvement on silence.



When we have become established in the yama of verbal non-greed, we not only communicate clearly and succinctly, but we also become very good listeners. As we begin to remove the clutter from our mind, it becomes easier to be less greedy with our words. When we are less greedy in our thoughts and words, we are more prepared to really listen. At this point we may begin to hear the teachings of life. Life is talking. Life is teaching. All we need to do is become quiet enough inside to hear.

Physical Non-Greed (Sharirik Aparigraha)

What differentiates need from greed is rarely clear to us. Periodic reflection on the status of our environment can help to keep things from getting out of hand. Remember, if we “have” something, it also has us. The more possessions we have, the more energy they require from us for their care and maintenance — not to mention the bigger house we need just to hold them all.

Idealistically we could ask the question: what do we really need beyond food, clothing and shelter? In actuality, we are much more complicated beings than that. Yet most of us could easily look around our homes and prioritize what is being used and what is not. This evaluation needs to take into consideration more than just utilitarian items. Decorations, for instance, can certainly serve the purpose of affecting our moods. Books, even the ones we bought and never read, can be an important resource. So what we think we need in order to be happy, healthy and functional is really quite subjective and dynamic.

In asana practice we can also become physically greedy. We may try to take too much from an asana and end up hurting ourselves. This attitude is something that we need to restrain both within ourselves, as well as in our students.

We become greedy when we fail to practice satya, asteya, and brahmacharya. We become greedy because we are not observing one of the most important niyamas — contentment. If any of the last four yamas are not respected, then the most important of all the yamas, ahimsa, is also violated. *Heyam dukham anagatam.* “Pain and suffering that has not yet occurred can and is to be avoided.”

The niyamas will be discussed in next month’s lesson.