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"The Ethical Spine of Yoga: Why Yama and Niyama Still Matter"

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Introduction

In the vast and rich tradition of Indian yoga philosophy, the foundational ethical codes known as Yama and Niyama are most famously articulated in the Patañjali Yoga Sūtras, where they form the first two limbs of the Ashtanga Yoga (Eightfold Path). These ten principles—five yamas and five niyamas—are celebrated as the ethical backbone of yoga, guiding the practitioner's moral and personal conduct.

However, while Patañjali's text gave them their iconic status, the Haṭha Yoga tradition, particularly the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā authored by Swātmārāma, also places significant importance on Yama and Niyama—often overlooked in modern interpretations of Haṭha Yoga. What's unique is that Haṭha Yoga not only preserves these principles but also expands, contextualizes, and integrates them into the energetic and practical dimensions of yogic life.

In the *Yoga Sūtras*, Yama (restraints) and Niyama (observances) are seen as universal disciplines (*mahāvratas*) that form the necessary foundation for higher yogic practices like āsana, prāṇāyāma, and meditation. Patañjali emphasizes that without mastering these, the mind cannot be stilled, and the spiritual seeker cannot proceed safely or fruitfully toward samādhi (absorption or liberation).

Haṭha Yoga, often stereotyped as a purely physical path, in fact, affirms the same ethical necessity. Swātmārāma's *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* (1.17–18) clearly outlines ten Yamas and ten Niyamas, extending the scope of ethical practice beyond what Patañjali lists. This highlights a crucial insight: while Patañjali focused on the philosophical and psychological dimensions, Haṭha Yoga weaves these values into the energetic, physical, and practical life of a sādḥaka.

- Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras present Yama and Niyama as philosophical and universal ethical codes necessary for calming the mind.
- Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā carries forward the same ethical framework, but emphasizes their energetic and practical function, preparing the body and prāṇa for spiritual transformation.

In fact, Swātmārāma begins the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* by stating that Haṭha Yoga is the stairway to Rāja Yoga. Therefore, Yama and Niyama form a shared foundation for both, uniting the internal discipline of the mind (Patañjali) with external discipline of body and energy (Haṭha).

In the classical text *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, authored by the yogi Swatmarama, ten **Yamas** (moral restraints) and ten **Niyamas** (observances) are prescribed as essential guidelines for yogic life. These form the ethical and mental foundation upon which deeper spiritual practices like āsana, prāṇāyāma, and meditation are built.

Although traditionally associated with religious or moral codes, these principles serve a deeper yogic purpose. They help the practitioner (sādḥaka) conserve pranic (vital) energy,

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develop mental clarity, and prepare the body-mind system for higher states of awareness. Interestingly, similar moral values are found across many spiritual traditions, affirming their universal relevance.

Swatmarama, however, does not emphasize strict enforcement of these disciplines. Instead, he suggests that they should be internalized gradually and naturally through consistent spiritual practice. Let us delve into each Yama and Niyama in detail.

The Ten Yamas (Restraints or Ethical Disciplines)

Yamas are moral principles meant to regulate one's behavior toward others and the world. They cultivate inner discipline and harmonize one's actions.

In Hathayogapradipika it is said:-

अहिंसा सत्यमस्तेयं ब्रह्मचर्यं क्षमा धृतिः।
दयार्जवं मिताहारः शौचं चैव यमा दश॥

1. Ahimsa (Non-Violence)

True non-violence extends beyond refraining from physical harm. It includes abstaining from harsh words, harmful thoughts, or negative intentions. It encourages compassion, patience, and respect for all life forms.

2. Satya (Truthfulness)

Truthfulness implies speaking and thinking in alignment with reality. It encourages honesty that does not cause harm. A sādḥaka must ensure that their words are truthful, yet gentle and uplifting.

3. Asteya (Non-Stealing)

Asteya involves more than not taking others' possessions. It also means not coveting what belongs to others—time, attention, ideas, or energy. The development of inner contentment helps eliminate the tendency to steal.

4. Brahmacharya (Celibacy or Right Use of Energy)

Often understood as celibacy, Brahmacharya really emphasizes the wise conservation of vital energy. When practiced properly, it enhances vitality, clarity, and spiritual progress. It involves controlling impulses and channeling energy toward higher goals.

5. Kṣhamā (Forgiveness)

Forgiveness is the ability to release resentment and anger. It reflects emotional maturity. A yogi should remain composed even in the face of insult or injury, understanding that forgiveness purifies the heart and mind.

6. Dhṛti (Fortitude or Endurance)

This is the power to persevere through discomfort, challenges, or obstacles. Whether facing physical extremes or emotional turmoil, the yogi maintains steady practice without complaint.

7. Dayā (Compassion)

Compassion is the heartfelt recognition of unity with all beings. It stems from understanding that every life shares

the same inner essence (ātman). Compassion inspires acts of kindness without expecting reward.

8. Ārjava (Humility or Simplicity)

Ārjava means straightforwardness and modesty. It involves shedding pride, practicing honesty, and approaching others with a humble heart. True humility emerges when ego is subdued through self-awareness.

9. Mitāhāra (Moderate Diet)

What we eat directly affects both the body and the mind. A balanced, sattvic (pure) diet nourishes the practitioner and supports spiritual practice. Overeating or extreme fasting are both discouraged.

10. Śauca (Cleanliness)

Cleanliness includes both external hygiene and internal purification. Outer cleanliness is maintained through yogic kriyas and healthy living, while inner purity involves cultivating pure thoughts, emotions, and intentions.

The Ten Niyamas (Observances or Inner Disciplines)

Niyamas focus on one's internal behavior and relationship with the self, promoting a disciplined, focused, and elevated state of consciousness.

तपः संतोष आस्तिक्यं दानमीश्वरपूजनम्।
सिद्धान्तवाक्यश्रवणं ह्रीमती च तपो हुतम्।
नियमा दश संप्रोक्ता योगशास्त्रविशारदैः॥

1. Tapah (Penance or Austerity)

Tapah refers to the discipline of enduring life's dualities—heat and cold, hunger and thirst, comfort and discomfort—without distraction. Through tapas, impurities are burned away, and the body and senses are strengthened.

2. Santoṣa (Contentment)

Contentment means accepting what life brings without excessive desire or dissatisfaction. It is a state of mental peace born from recognizing that inner fulfillment is independent of external conditions.

3. Āstikya (Faith in the Divine)

This is a deep-rooted belief in the existence of a higher reality. Faith in scriptures, teachings, and the presence of divine consciousness empowers the practitioner to remain steadfast on the path, even when results are not immediate.

4. Dāna (Charity or Generosity)

Dāna involves offering resources, knowledge, time, or emotional support to those in need. True charity is done selflessly, without expecting recognition or reward. It purifies greed and cultivates empathy.

5. Īśvara Pūjana (Worship of the Divine)

Worship is not limited to religious ritual. In yoga, it means surrendering one's ego and dedicating all actions to the Divine. This practice aligns the individual with cosmic consciousness (Īśvara).

6. Siddhānta Śravaṇa (Study of Spiritual Teachings)

Listening to sacred texts or the wisdom of realized beings deepens one's understanding of spiritual truth. It provides clarity, inspiration, and the framework for further inquiry and reflection.

7. Hrī (Modesty or Humbleness)

Hrī involves modest behavior, restraint in desires, and disinterest in superficial pursuits. It reflects a mind that seeks truth over pleasure and lives with spiritual dignity.

8. Mati (Wisdom or Discernment)

Mati is the power to discern truth from illusion, the eternal from the temporary. It is the foundation of spiritual inquiry and helps one navigate the subtle complexities of yogic life.

9. Japa (Mantra Repetition)

Japa is the repetition of sacred sounds (mantras) to refine mental vibrations and connect with higher states of consciousness. When practiced with focus and devotion, japa purifies the subconscious and unlocks spiritual potential.

10. Huta or Yajña (Sacrifice or Offering)

Beyond external rituals, sacrifice means letting go of ego-based desires and dedicating life to a higher cause. It signifies offering one's attachments and selfish motives into the fire of transformation.

Conclusion:

The ten Yamas and ten Niyamas described by Swatmarama in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* are not mere religious dogmas but represent a complete ethical and psychological framework for inner transformation. They offer practical tools for developing a sattvic lifestyle, conserving pranic energy, and refining the mind-body complex for higher yogic states.

Though rigorous, these disciplines are not meant to be forced upon oneself. Rather, through steady sādhanā (spiritual practice), they arise organically, bringing harmony, strength, and spiritual insight. In the modern context, embracing these timeless principles—even gradually—can lead to a more purposeful, peaceful, and awakened life.

In modern times, yoga is often reduced to posture and breathwork. However, both Patañjali and Swatmarama insist that without Yama and Niyama, even the most advanced practices will fail to yield lasting spiritual transformation. These disciplines guide us not just in how to act, but in **how to be**—centered, compassionate, and connected to the inner self.

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