

An Analysis of the Ethical Foundation of Yama and Niyama of Astanga Yoga

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Abstract:

The Yamas and Niyamas provide an extremely relevant ethical framework in the context of contemporary life, where stress, distraction, and moral ambiguity are commonplace. They offer guidance for leading a dignified and conscious life, assist re-establish equilibrium, and inspire a sense of purpose. In the end, they serve as a reminder that yoga is a way of life based on ethical conduct and spiritual insight rather than only a physical activity. Adopting these values enables people to live more truthfully, promoting both individual and collective freedom. The cornerstone of a person's spiritual and moral development is the ethical basis of Yama and Niyama, the first two limbs of Ashtanga Yoga as described by Maharishi Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. The growth of virtues required for advanced yogic practices, inner discipline, and harmonious living are all facilitated by these principles. The five yamas—Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (continence), and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness)—are the universal moral precepts or social ethics. They stand for pledges to maintain social peace and behave morally in interactions with others. In contrast, niyamas are private observances that encourage self-control and inner purity. Santosha (contentment), Tapas (asceticism), Svadhyaya (self-study), Shaucha (cleanliness), and Ishvara pranidhana (surrender to the divine) are a few of these. Yama and Niyama collaborate to produce a thorough ethical framework that strikes a balance between social responsibility and personal growth. Within the larger framework of Ashtanga Yoga, these moral practices serve as the foundation for more profound spiritual and meditational activities rather than just being preludes. Advancement in higher limbs such as Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi becomes erratic or surface-level if these rules are not

followed. This ethical foundation guarantees that honesty, empathy, and purposefulness serve as the practitioner's compass.

Furthermore, despite cultural and religious differences, these lessons are still applicable today. The tenets of Yama and Niyama are eternal instruments for social harmony and personal growth because they can promote ethical consciousness, mental health, and holistic well-being in the present era.

Keywords: Yama, Niyama, Astanga Yoga, self-realization, liberation, inner peace, bliss etc.

Introduction:

In today's world, people are becoming very artificial than spiritual. It is not the fault of the people because with the rapid growth of the world people have to step out through it. People have less time to spend with close one, their attention mostly goes to earn money and most importantly they lost their connections with their self so for these reasons the traumatic diseases like depression, anxiety etc are mostly seen in now-a-days. The actual meaning of peace, calm, spirituality is lost somewhere in today's world. People forgot their actual motives to come to this world, instead of that they competing with one another for the purpose of money. So, to realize their existence and to attain peace, meditating through Yoga is very important. In modern context we thought Yoga is just like body postures. But in actual, the concept of Yoga is wider than just like body postures. In essence, yoga is a spiritual practice that aims to bring balance between the mind and body. It is an art and science of healthy living. The great sage Patanjali in his philosophy broadly discuss about the Yoga.

Yoga Philosophy is one of the six major important schools of Indian Philosophy. It focuses on the idea of uniting body, mind and spirit to achieve liberation. According to Patanjali, "chitta vritti nirodhah" is the proper definition of Yoga. Every Indian philosophical schools give their own ways to attain liberation by removing ignorance (Avidya). Yoga Philosophy believes that spiritual blindness is the root cause of ignorance. This philosophy suggests different methods to overcome from the ignorance. The philosophical underpinnings of yoga continue to place a strong emphasis on the growth of self-awareness, enlightenment, insight and dispassion (Krishnananda, 1982). This philosophy believes that every people has capacity to manifest oneself. So, Astanga Yoga is one important method to manifest our potential. Astanga Yoga is comprises of eight interrelated limbs. In Sanskrit "Ashta" means

Eight and “Anga” means limbs so it means eight limbs. These eight limbs guides us towards self-knowledge, liberation and cessation from suffering. This is mentioned in Yoga Sutras of Patanjali which are compiled 200 BCE ago. The Eight Limbs are like- Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi. Among these eight limbs first two limbs said about internal disciplines.

Brief introduction to Yama and Niyama

Yama

ahimsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ (P.Y. 2/30)

In Patanjali Yogasutra Yamas are categorised into five different section. These are Ahimsa (non violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non stealing), Brahmcharya (celibacy) and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) (Dashora, 2016). These five segments are the set of disciplines specified for the self development. These Yama shows a path to stopped a person mind (Chitta) from negative waves(Chitta vrittis) which paves a way for liberation. Also, the harmful things of the society can be by practising Yamas in day today life.

Niyama

śaucasamtoṣatapahsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhān āni niyamāḥ (P.Y. 2/32)

Niyama are also divided into five sections in a similar manner. These are known as Shauch (purity), Santosh (contentment), Tapas (austerity), Swadhyaya (self-study) and Ishwar Pranidhaan (Complete surrender to God) (Dashora, 2016). These resolutions of self-discipline offered for human upliftment have been collectively known as Niyama. Regular practices of all Niyama provide emotional stability as well as enrich the beauty of the soul.

Hence, through this paper the author tries focuses on ethical considerations of Yama and Niyama which helps one’s in self realization. Yama and Niyama are code of conduct to lead a ethically blissful life. And also through this paper author tries to realize the relevance of Yama and Niyama in modern world.

Objectives:

- i) To study the basic fundamental principles of Yama and Niyama.

ii) To assess the role of Yama and Niyama in the philosophical pursuit of liberation and their ethical necessity in the path of self- realization.

iii) To understand the necessity of Yama-Niyama in modern society.

Significance of the Study:

In this paper the first two limbs of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, Yama and Niyama, are examined for their ethical underpinnings in order to determine their applicability in modern world. It looks at their function as guiding principles for peace and individual behaviour. The study emphasises the intellectual depth by examining them closely. The study makes a connection between modern ethical issues and wellbeing and the ethics of ancient yoga. It seeks to connect conventional wisdom with contemporary theoretical and applied frameworks. This study tries to comprehend Yoga with ethics.

Basic Principles of Yamas:

1. Ahimsa (Non- Violence):

Ahimsa is a first principle of Yama. It is a moral and ethical principle of not harming anyone. It is a core value system which encourages people to lead a morally good life. One who doesnot harm anyone (man or any other being) with their deeds or words, that is called Ahimsa. By applying Ahimsa there is no chance of growing hatred.

2. Satya (Truthfulness)

One should never said lie, for their own benefit. Speaking truth always dears to others. Satya means honest to oneself or to the society. While we apply truthfulness in our practical life it builds our confidence also. And that confidence helps in right decision making.

3. Asteya (Non- stealing)

Non- stealing doesn't directly defines only to materialistic things it also means to not stealing anyone words and emotions as well. It teaches us to restrict our desires and wants and to built self awareness, By practicing Asteya in our life we will be aware of our own deeds and will not pay attention on other things.

4. Brahmacharya (Celibacy):

This principle refers to self -discipline. It means control on our senses and desires. By controlling over the senses one can restore their energy which will help in mental and physical strength. Along with self-discipline it develops self control.

5. Aparigraha (Non- possessiveness):

Aparigraha means not collecting. One should happy with whatever they have. People should accumulate what is necessary for living a simple and healthy life. Aparigraha restricts greediness. This principle also teaches self-control and self-restraint from unnecessary things.

Role of Yama in the philosophical pursuit of liberation and their ethical necessity in the path of self-realization:

Yama teaches what we should do and what not. Yama is the foundation of our bliss. It helps to lead a discipline life. No other forces can make our life discipline. It should realize by internally own self. The yamas shows our interactions with the world at large. Yamas are the first of the eight limbs of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga philosophy, and they form the basis of the moral discipline necessary for achieving moksha, or spiritual emancipation. The Yamas, which consist of five universal moral precepts—Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (celibacy or moderation), and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness)—serve as profound internal guidelines that lead the aspirant towards inner freedom and self-purification in addition to being social ethics. Yamas are based on Samkhya-Yoga's dualist metaphysics, which holds that liberation means realising one's inner self (purusha) and distancing oneself from the material nature (prakriti). A clear, peaceful mind free from want, fear, or illusion is necessary for this realisation. The ego-driven urges that bind the self to ignorance and suffering are controlled by the Yamas. When firmly practiced, for instance, ahimsa eliminates animosity and fosters compassion—qualities necessary to break the delusion of separateness and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all beings. Furthermore, the Yamas' transforming power on consciousness makes them ethically necessary. In order to prepare the mind for more profound internal practices like meditation (dhyana) and absorption (samadhi), they purify the practitioner's connections with the outside world. These higher phases become unstable or inauthentic when they lack an ethical foundation. Therefore, the Yamas are necessary prerequisites for spiritual advancement rather than discretionary characteristics.

The Yamas thus bridge the gap between the internal and the outward, between action and realisation, and between moral discipline and intellectual knowledge. They help the seeker achieve the ethical clarity required for the ultimate realisation of the self as pure, unconditioned consciousness by guiding them towards a life of honesty, simplicity, and integrity.

Basic Principles of Niyama:

1. Shauch (Purity):

It means clean our body and mind from negative things and promote purity. The "purity and cleanliness" principle applied both within and externally. It encourages both physical and mental purity. The use of the Shauch principle results in both mental and physical purification. In addition, we should keep a clean atmosphere around us in order to sustain excellent health. Shauch also denotes the purifying of the mind. As a result, every person needs to think clearly since only then can a strong society be built on the solid ideas of all its members.

2. Santosh (Contentment):

The ability to be grateful is an art. To be satisfied means we must be happy with what we have and let go of all unneeded wants. Satisfaction must originate internally. Internal dissatisfaction is an emotion that disrupts the psyche. We should happy with whatever we have, we shouldn't dissatisfy with desirable things. Inner happiness is very much necessary for self-growth. With the absence of inner happiness an individual cannot bring a happiness in a society. So, from both individual and societal perspective people should live with inner happiness.

3. Tapas (austerity):

Tapas practice improves our conscious awareness and changes us on the inside. It involves enduring every challenge that leads to constructive life improvements. We can become more committed and disciplined through this practice, which strengthens our inner fortitude. The fundamental idea underlying the austerity principle is to endure both physical and mental hardship while maintaining mental stability.

4. Swadhyaya (self study):

Self-understanding is produced by adherence to the Swadhyaya principle. Constantly reading spiritual literature aids in inner self-purification and improvement. It refers to studying in a way that improves our thoughts, minds, and eventually our souls. With the aid of life lessons and the holy texts that our seers and sages unveiled many moons ago, Swadhyaya cultivates the capacity to perceive our actual inner nature. It is crucial to avoid thinking negative thoughts when faced with adverse situations.

5. Iswar Pranidhan (complete surrender to God)

Devotion, faith, and fruitful surrender to the Almighty are the characteristics of Ishwar Pranidhaan. This practice teaches the selfless action of Bhakti Yoga, which is a devotion-based spiritual practice. We must give up our egocentric character and yield to ourselves in order to achieve complete self-refinement. This small act of devotion instantaneously restores our soul's connection to the Supreme Soul. Following this routine infuses our deeds with abundance of love, grace, and inner serenity. Therefore, one should dissolve one's ego and submit to the Supreme Power in any kind of dire situation. This exercise can support the growth of inner faith and self-assurance to face any challenge.

Role of Niyama in the philosophical pursuit of liberation and it's ethical necessity in the path of self-realization:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the crucial function that Niyama, the second limb of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, plays in the moral and philosophical framework that directs a person's path to moksha (freedom). According to classical Indian philosophy, liberation is a lived realisation of one's innate freedom from ignorance (avidya) and suffering (duhkha), rather than just an esoteric or philosophical objective. In this framework, the Niyamas—*Svādhyāya* (self-study), *Tapas* (discipline), *Santoṣa* (contentment), *Śauca* (purity), and *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* (surrender to the Divine)—are fundamental ethical practices that govern inner life, cleanse the mind, and promote spiritual development. There are two goals for this study. First, it aims to examine how each Niyama serves as a transforming practice that brings the individual into alignment with the deeper philosophical truths of non-duality, impermanence, and detachment, in addition to serving as a moral command. The study's second goal is to assess how important these ethical practices are for developing *vairāgya* (dispassion) and *viveka* (discernment), which are necessary for the realisation of the Self.

according to Vedantic and Yogic traditions. The investigation will also look at how ignoring moral principles affects the stability and genuineness of spiritual experiences. In order to demonstrate how Niyamas are not supplementary or optional but rather crucial pillars in the intellectual and ethical pursuit of liberation, the research will synthesise concepts from the Yoga Sūtras, Upanishads, and modern commentaries. The paper's ultimate goal is to show how Niyamas act as a link between philosophy and practice, guaranteeing that the road to self-realization is based on both moral rectitude and practical knowledge.

Relevance of Yama and Niyama in modern context:

The fundamental ethical principles of yoga, particularly Yama and Niyama, are still incredibly relevant in today's quickly changing society, where social unrest, technological innovation, and mental health issues rule daily life. Although these practices have their roots in ancient spiritual traditions, their core ideas are highly relevant to the modern world and can serve as a guide for anybody looking to live a more meaningful, grounded, and conscious life—not only yogis.

Despite material wealth, modern society faces a distinct set of problems, including overconsumption, burnout, a loss of connection to nature and community, and an increase in worry and discontent. Aligning oneself with a lifestyle that fosters harmony both inside oneself and with the outside world is the fundamental goal of Yama and Niyama. They provide a moral and individual rule of conduct that speaks to the common human experience and cuts over religious and cultural divides.

These yogic practices inspire people to think carefully about how their words, deeds, and ideas impact both other people and themselves. These teachings promote awareness, self-control, and reflection in an era where quick gratification and surface-level affirmation frequently take the place of true connection and purpose. They make people think about their behaviours, their reasons, and how they affect their environment.

Enhancing mental clarity and emotional resilience is one of the important ways they are still relevant today. These activities encourage people to slow down, put inner peace first, and make decisions based on awareness rather than instinct in an era where stress is prevalent due to social media and perpetual news cycles. This can result in more balanced approaches to ambition and success, healthier relationships, and better decision-making.

Moreover, Yama and Niyama have societal significance as well. In an increasingly polarised and culturally misunderstood society, these teachings promote responsibility, respect, and a feeling of shared well-being. They provide a framework that promotes justice, community, and a sustainable relationship with the environment—all of which are essential for tackling today's most important problems.

At the individual level, these behaviours cultivate honesty, self-control, and a feeling of direction. They mentor people's inner development in addition to their outside behaviour. These lessons serve as a reminder that true well-being starts with our inner landscape, which includes how we treat ourselves, how we see the world, and how we handle life's obstacles. This is especially important in the contemporary wellness movement, which occasionally places greater emphasis on outward looks or physical performance.

Essentially, human nature and the pursuit of connection, meaning, and peace have not altered, despite the fact that society has undergone significant change since these concepts were first taught. Despite being written in an antiquated language, the knowledge of Yama and Niyama provides a timeless path for anybody looking to live more mindfully, compassionately, and with balanced in the current world.

Conclusion:

In summary, the ethical underpinnings of Ashtanga Yoga's first two limbs, Yama and Niyama, provide timeless ideals that cut across religious, cultural, and geographic boundaries, serving as the cornerstone of a yogic existence. These principles are continuous commitments that lead the practitioner towards self-realization and peaceful existence rather than just being first steps. The Yamas and Niyamas are extremely practical guidelines that support moral behaviour, mental clarity, and spiritual development rather than being abstract or esoteric.

In our interactions with the outside world, the Yamas—which include non-violence (ahimsa), honesty (satya), non-stealing (asteya), celibacy or moderation (brahmacharya), and non-possessiveness (aparigraha)—emphasize self-control and the development of a moral compass. They promote compassion, lessen individual ego, and build a society that is more just and peaceful. Fundamentally, the Yamas emphasise the value of human accountability

and the interdependence of all beings, which makes them particularly pertinent in the modern world when materialism and individualism can obfuscate morality.

The Niyamas, which emphasise self-discipline and internal growth, include purity (shaucha), contentment (santosha), discipline (tapas), self-study (svadhyaya), and resignation to a higher power (Ishvarapranidhana). By fostering integrity, fortitude, and a greater comprehension of oneself and the cosmos, these observances help people develop their inner landscape. By adhering to the Niyamas, practitioners cultivate a genuine dedication to spiritual exploration and change, learn to control desires, and accept life's obstacles with grace.

The Yamas and Niyamas provide the ethical framework for both individual behaviour and group cohesion. They call for self-reflection, deliberate living, and behaviour that is consistent with higher ideals. In this sense, they transcend the mat or meditation cushion and permeate all aspects of life, including relationships, the workplace, the environment, and society. Their capacity to guide people from self-centredness to selflessness, from fragmentation to oneness, and from unconscious behaviour to conscious awareness is what makes them ethically fundamental.

The Yamas and Niyamas provide an extremely pertinent ethical framework in the context of contemporary life, where stress, distraction, and moral ambiguity are commonplace. They offer guidance for leading a dignified and conscious life, assist re-establish equilibrium, and inspire a sense of purpose. In the end, they serve as a reminder that yoga is a way of life based on moral rectitude and spiritual insight rather than only a physical activity. Adopting these values enables people to lead more genuine lives, which promotes both individual freedom and societal well-being.

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