

Patanjali's Program

Like Samkhya, Patanjali framed the basic questions and outlines of yogic practice unforgettably. Patanjali has the admirable virtue of getting straight to the point. He presents us with a textbook on achieving **inner silence**, all for the purpose of realizing the Self. In it, his teachings address three very practical issues:

1. The Goal

Patanjali is very clear from the start about what the **goal** of yoga is, which is the **Self**, and what the immediate, practical attainment is, which he defines as **freedom** from the 'whirlwind of the senses' – Samadhi.

2. The Struggle and Its Lessons

Patanjali lays out very clearly the **Struggle** that we have to face in this quest. The struggle concerns the **choices** we must make in order to make inner silence even possible, let alone attainable. Patanjali's teachings on ethical precepts – known popularly as the *yamas* (ethical restraints) and *niyamas* (observances), as well as the practices leading to concentration are implicitly framed in this larger context of choice. This is clear from the attention he gives to **karma**. Our choices have not only immediate consequences, but also a *momentum* that propels us into future experiences as well; they determine our future experiences and tendencies to perceive, think, and choose in ways that are formed by our past experience. This is the very real and practical power of karma just on a purely psychological level. Karma is of course not just psychological, but is the fundamental physical and metaphysical law of the universe – cause and effect.

3. The Virtue

Because choice involves feelings, perceptions and attitudes that have momentum, *good* choice requires a cultivated *habit* of understanding and choosing in the face of our struggles with thought and desire. Choice involves more than just the intellect deciding right and wrong, good and bad; choice inherently involves positive will and action, investing energy in a particular direction – which inevitably excludes other possible directions. One choice narrows the field of possible choices that follow, and so in this sense the whole business of yoga becomes one of **commitment**.

Yoga, which is concerned with particular kinds of choices leading to particular ends or results (i.e. the 'calming of the whirlwind of thought') requires not just understanding, but **Virtue** as well. Patanjali is interested in far more than simply presenting moral precepts and practices; for these to be effective or meaningful in the end, one must cultivate a **yogic heart**, which means arriving at a settled and fully self-aware disposition to think, choose and act for the sake of the goal of moving forward in yoga, rather than for the sake of satisfying isolated desires as they come up in the moment. **Yoga is not just a matter of what we choose to do, but how and who we choose to be**, since it is this lived choice that so powerfully determines how we will think, experience and act in the world in the future.

Because of this, the one paramount virtue in yoga is **steadfastness**. Patanjali's discussion of practice makes it clear that without steady effort and right intention, the precepts and practices amount to little, and in fact can bring results (powers and abilities) that inflate the ego and lead you astray. Patanjali's is a path of steady progress through steady effort, with right feeling and intention.

This virtue of steadfastness is another word for the goal of yoga itself, becoming established in the Seer, the Self.

To fully appreciate the power and significance of the Yamas and Niyamas, we need only consider what kind of motive and mind-set would lead us to think and act in a way that is contrary to these precepts. The only ‘punishment’ for acting contrary to the precepts is to become more fully entrenched in that same mind-set and experience, which increasingly makes one victim to the fluctuations of thought that blind and bind us to our limited, fearful and painful experience. That in itself is punishment enough.

The Big Picture: The Tradition of The Yamas and Niyamas

While reference to Patanjali on the subject of the Yamas and Niyamas these days is fairly exclusive, it’s highly unlikely that Patanjali thought of himself as original in presenting them. If anything, he gives a ‘short list,’ and they appear in the second pada almost as a matter of course, and not as a centerpiece of his philosophy. For these principles had been around and were quite generally accepted; there are actually *ten* of each, and the expanded list, to my mind, makes them all the more inspiring and interesting. The source for this list is both Sir John Woodroffe’s book, The Serpent Power, and also Harish Johari’s book, Chakras.¹²

You’ll notice in these lists that some elements are shifted around — for instance, ‘saucam’ (purity of mind and body) appears as a yama rather than a niyama, and also asteyam (non-stealing) seems sufficient to cover aparigraha (non-coveting) as well.

10 Traditional Yamas

1. Ahimsa — non-violence
2. Satyam — truthfulness
3. Asteyam — non-stealing
4. Brahmacharya — refraining from sexual indulgence
5. Kshama — bearing patiently the pleasant and unpleasant
6. Dhrti — fortitude in happiness and unhappiness
7. Daya — mercy and kindness
8. Arjavam — simplicity
9. Mitahara — moderation in diet (for the sake of cultivating sattva guna)
10. Saucam — purity of mind and body

10 Traditional Niyamas

1. Tapah — austerity

¹² The Serpent Power, Sir John Woodroffe, p. 190; Chakras, Harish Johari, p. 48-49

2. Santosa — contentment
3. Astikyam — belief in spiritual teachings (i.e. the Vedas)
4. Danam — charity: gifts to the deserving of what one has lawfully acquired
5. Ishwara Puja — worship of the Divine as having taken form
6. Siddhanta Vakya Sravanam — study of the nondual teachings of Vedanta
7. Hri — modesty or shame felt for wrongful actions (with the resolve not to repeat them)
8. Mati — the mind is directed toward imbibing spiritual teachings, and toward doing spiritual practice with a discerning mind
9. Japa — the recitation of mantra
10. Hutam — performance of religious observances

Siddhis that Indicate Success in the Yamas and Niyamas

Patanjali does point out that practical effects do follow from imbibing and living the Yamas and Niyamas as virtues or a settled way of being that has been faithfully cultivated in one's attitude or feeling as well as in one's actions. The seeker gains Siddhis – supernatural or powers beyond the normal – by which one effortlessly exerts an influence upon the world by one's very presence, as well as having access to knowledge and powers of action not available to us by the usual means. This happens primarily through the Yamas, while the Niyamas more directly influence one's inner state, bringing happiness and contentment.

Yamas

As the Yogin becomes established in Non-injury, all beings coming near him cease to be hostile. (35)

When truthfulness is achieved, the words of the Yogin acquire the power of making them fruitful. (36)

When non-stealing is established, all Jewels (i.e. the best of things) present themselves from all directions. (37)

When continence is established, Virya (strength or unimpeded power – both of knowledge and action) is acquired. (38)

On Attaining perfection in (the spirit of) non-acceptance (i.e. the spirit of the Yamas as a whole – detachment toward sense objects and the body), knowledge of past and future existence arises. (39)

Niyamas

From the practice of purification, aversion toward one's own body is developed, and thus aversion extends to contact with other bodies. (40) Moreover, purification of the mind, pleasantness of feeling, one-pointedness, subjugation of the senses and the ability for self-realization are acquired. (41)

From contentment, unsurpassed happiness is gained (42)

Through destruction of impurities, the practice of austerities (tapas) brings about perfection of the body and organs. (with that, supernatural powers – clairvoyance, clairaudience etc, since austerities remove the impurities of subjection to the limitations of the body) (43)

From study and repetition of the mantras, communion with the desired Deity is established. (44)

From devotion to God, samadhi is attained. (45)

Three Practical Actions of yoga

While Patanjali's Yamas and Niyamas and their fruits can be treated on many levels with many shades of meaning (which have been handled extensively in many books on the subject), we can take a step back to see the big picture and summarize the upshot of Patanjali's positive precepts of the Niyamas by saying that the practice of yoga, in whatever form it takes — whether as a meditative inward practice of self-inquiry, outer practices such as hatha yoga, or service in the world — involves **three practical actions**.

1. **Intend** – *choose* the practice – choose to act, following your heart – stoke the fire of practice to generate energy, burn off what is unwanted or unneeded – *tapas*. The choice of positive practices outlined by the Niyamas of course also implies restraint from other kinds of actions (outlined by the Yamas) — such is the nature of choice and commitment.
2. **Imbibe** – *own* the lesson – focus and take it in, make the understanding and experience your own, place yourself within it. Remembrance of your purpose; taking the opportunity for self-study and self-understanding – *Svadhyaya*
3. **Surrender** – give yourself without anticipating the fruits – best is to offer the fruits to a higher power, awareness, the Divine, without holding back – *Ishwara Pranidhanani*

Second Pada of the Yoga Sutras: the Struggle

In the second Pada or section of his work, Patanjali deals with the struggle of yogic practice, the obstructions or 'afflictive causes of misery' he calls *klesas* (pronounced *clay*'-shas) that are at the roots of desire and karmic action, and how to deal with them.

The Klesas are of five kinds:

1. **Ignorance** – not seeing the real nature of things –

- Seeing the impermanent as permanent
- Seeing misery as happiness
- Seeing the not-Self as Self

2. **Egoism** – mistaking your own mind / ego for your true Self
3. **Attachment** – hankering for more pleasure from remembrance of previous pleasure
4. **Aversion** – hurt and anger towards things that cause misery from remembrance of previous hurt.
5. **Fear of loss or death** – fear of the familiar coming to an end, fear of annihilation, of ceasing to be. An instinctive, ingrained fear.

Each is bound up with the other, with ignorance at the root. The **Klesas** form a whole **pattern of desiring to have and to be** something or ‘someone,’ and a **fear of losing** what one has. Each of us plays this out in our own unique ways, based on our experience and inclinations.

These causes of misery are in a very real sense ‘hard-wired’ into our psychic system as part and parcel of our individual existence – they are built into our very way of being and experiencing, and are the **fundamental concerns that motivate us in all thoughts and acts**.

When **acted out** in specific experiences, they become **samskaras – latent impressions**. These impressions in turn color the way we see the world and the way we respond to it – thus reinforcing the influence of the Klesas in future actions.

Klesas + Situation ⇒ actions ⇒ samskaras (impressions) ⇒ reinforce Klesas

For example, the experience of humiliation in a school play early on in life forms a samskara of aversion to all forms of public speaking – each additional humiliation only reinforces both the specific samskara *and* the underlying aversion.

The Ego exists for the sake of **living out and fulfilling your samskaras**, in keeping with your own very individual patterns born of the **Klesas**.

- Our specific patterns of acting and reacting – what we are attached to, based on our own experiences of pleasure – are **samskaras**, ingrained in us by experience.
- **Most of us are aware of our samskaras – but we haven’t looked more deeply into their root in the Klesas**. Being aware of the Klesas gives us perspective on our samskaras; otherwise we can feel **victimized** by our past, not knowing why we remain under their sway.

If we are to become established in the experience of the Self through meditation, Patanjali suggests, then the task of yoga is first to root out the influence of these Klesas, which give rise to our samskaras; otherwise we are treating the symptoms of our dis-ease, rather than the causes.

Patanjali has already outlined his plan for attaining yoga in the face of these obstacles; the yamas and niyamas in particular play a vital role in loosening the hold of the Klesas, particularly by leading us to act steadfastly and courageously in a way that is contrary to the worst fears raised by the Klesas. The Second Pada of the

Yoga Sutras is intended to help us better understand what is at stake.

Patanjali's Eightfold Path

The larger context for putting an end to the Klesas is Patanjali's eightfold or eight-limbed path – his 'Ashtanga Yoga' (where 'ashta' means eight, and 'anga' means 'limb') – as a program for advancing to the state of samadhi. The progression through stages of practice is:

1. Yama
2. Niyama
3. Asana
4. Pranayama
5. Pratyahara – withdrawal of the senses
6. Dharana - one-pointed focus
7. Dhyana – meditation
8. Samadhi

Each step of practice along the way is meant to further sever one's identification with Prakrti or the material self and world. We tend to assume by historical hindsight that the meanings he gave to these terms are the same as what we assume. For instance, 'asana' or a steady and comfortable way of staying quite evidently meant seated postures for meditation to Patanjali. The asanas of the later tradition of hatha yoga were more than simply that, and involved processes and purposes that went beyond the kind of meditation envisioned by Patanjali, processes that had to do with the unfolding of the Kundalini – processes which did not appear in Patanjali's work or account of meditation.

The practice of pranayama is likewise quite different in Patanjali's hands, and is suited to his idea of meditation and samadhi, and closely connected to them as well.

The Third Pada: Becoming Established in the Truth

The third Pada deals with the practices of meditation that lead to samadhi. These can be separated into three steps of practice:

1. **Dharana – holding something in your awareness** as the object of your focus – such as a mantra or object of devotion. Dharana stabilizes the flow of thoughts by directing them toward a single object. This practice develops singleness of mind & heart, mastery of body
2. **Dhyana:** with steady practice, Dharana becomes **Dhyana** – meditation – an **uninterrupted flow** of consciousness toward that object. With this, your attention subtly shifts away from the object and toward the flow of your own awareness.
3. **Samadhi:** as the flow of your awareness becomes stable, the object drops out of sight; then your **intelligence is in equipoise, steady in its own self-presence** in a kind of effortless effort of inner stillness.