

## **Path to Happiness**

10 pillars of wisdom from the Yoga Sutra lead the way to true freedom.

By Hillari Dowdle

Chances are, you ponder who you are and where you are in life, accept the current realities as best you can, and yet still plan a path toward your ideal. Your yoga practice undoubtedly helps you on this journey. And the yoga tradition suggests more than just postures to aid your transformation. Centuries ago, the great sage [Patanjali](#) laid out a kind of map—one that suggests not just asana and [meditation](#) but also attitudes and behaviors—to help you chart your own course to contentment.

At first glance, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, written in Sanskrit and interpreted in many ways, may seem esoteric and impenetrable. But the ancient manual is worth a closer look, because it contains essential advice for daily living. "Patanjali has offered us guidelines that will allow us to have enhanced emotional and mental well-being and a more fulfilling and meaningful life," says Joan Shivarpita Harrigan, a practicing psychologist and the director of Patanjali Kundalini Yoga Care. "The Yoga Sutra is specifically designed to lead to greater happiness and spiritual fulfillment for you and everyone around you."

Much is contained within this ultimate guide to virtuous transformation, including the eightfold path of classical yoga (or ashtanga yoga), which suggests a program of ethical restraints or abstentions ([yamas](#)), lifestyle observances (*niyamas*), postures (*asanas*), breath control (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses ([pratyahara](#)), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and absorption into the Divine ([samadhi](#)). They are designed to lead you, step-by-step, toward everlasting contentment.

If you've been practicing yoga for a while, you're familiar with asana, pranayama, and meditation. But you might not know much about the first two steps of the path: the five yamas and five niyamas. These are the ethical precepts, or core values, of yoga as well as its starting place—meant to be practiced before you do your very first Sun Salutation. They provide a recipe for living in the world with ease.

"The yamas are really about restraining behaviors that are motivated by grasping, aversion, hatred, and delusion; the niyamas are designed to create well-being for ourselves and others," says Stephen Cope, a senior Kripalu teacher and the author of [The Wisdom of Yoga](#). People sometimes think of them as yoga's Ten Commandments, but they aren't concerned with right or wrong in an absolute sense. "There's no thought of heaven or hell. It's about avoiding behaviors that produce suffering and difficulty, and embracing those that lead to states of happiness."

## **You Can Transform Your Life**

Rather than thinking of the yamas and niyamas as a mandatory "to-do list," view them as invitations to act in ways that promote inner and outer peace and bliss. "They create harmony within you, and in relationship to your environment and to others. Where there is harmony, consciousness can expand," says John Friend, the founder of Anusara Yoga. "They lead us to a natural revelation of insight into the nature of being, and joy naturally arises."

They also provide a mirror in which to study your practice and your Self. Viniyoga teacher and Yoga Sutra scholar Gary Kraftsow says they represent the qualities of an integrated human being. You get there through practice, contemplation, meditation, and working to transform yourself. "The path of practice begins with understanding and refining the different dimensions of who you are, and it unfolds progressively, not all at once," says Kraftsow. "The whole goal of yoga is Self-realization, which can also be called freedom." The yamas and niyamas give you infinite opportunities to truly transform your life.

Patanjali doesn't tell you how specifically to "do" the yamas and niyamas—that's up to you. But if you align your life with them, they'll lead you to your highest aspirations: peace, truth, abundance, harmonious relationships, contentment, purity, self-acceptance, love, and meaningful connection to the Divine—the essence of happiness. Here, we've asked prominent [yoga teachers](#) and philosophers to share their interpretations of the yamas and niyamas to help you make them a part of your path.

### **[Ahimsa: Nonharming](#)**

In [yoga philosophy](#), ahimsa—often translated as "non-violence" or "nonharming"—is the opportunity to relinquish hostility and irritability, and instead make space within your consciousness for peace. "In that space, all the anger, separation, and aggression resolve themselves," says Kraftsow. This allows you to let others be who they are, and to relate to the world in a whole new way.

To incorporate ahimsa into your life, look at all the attitudes you have that might be keeping you from feeling at peace. "I encourage students to notice how many times they have an enemy image of something—a neighbor, a co-worker, even the government," says Judith Hanson Lasater, a renowned yoga teacher and the author of six books, including [A Year of Living Your Yoga](#). "Write down your five most negative thoughts," she says. "These thoughts themselves are a form of violence." Lasater recommends that you hold your negativity in your consciousness and step back from it a bit. Just noticing the negativity will help you stop feeding the thoughts and will lead you toward peace.

"My favorite description of ahimsa is of a dynamic peacefulness prepared to meet all needs with loving openness," says Charlotte Bell, a longtime Iyengar Yoga teacher and the author of [Mindful Yoga, Mindful Life](#). "There's a suggestion of a state of balance that can evolve, that meets each situation in an open and accepting way."

This openness can extend to others. "You may mistakenly think that to refrain from harming another brings benefit to that other, and not to yourself," says Sharon Gannon, the co-creator of Jivamukti Yoga. "But when you start to understand how karma works, you realize that how you treat others determines how much suffering you experience." Gannon believes that if you truly become "other centered" (putting the happiness and well-being of others first), then not only do you experience less suffering, but the other yamas also unfold effortlessly.

### **Satya: Truthfulness**

The Yoga Sutra holds truth among the highest of ideals. Many interpretations promise that once you're fully vested in satya, everything you say will come to be realized.

But be careful not to confuse your point of view with the truth. "You have to have integrity and humility to realize that the truth may be bigger than you," says Nischala Joy Devi, the author of her own translation of the Yoga Sutra, [The Secret Power of Yoga: A Woman's Guide to the Heart and Spirit of the Yoga Sutras](#). "In each moment, you must ask yourself: Am I speaking the truth? Am I just giving my opinion, filtered through my mind and all my prejudices?"

Satya requires that you consider both the spoken and unspoken aspects of your words. You don't want to mislead through omission; neither do you have to say everything that's on your mind—especially if it's hurtful. "Don't gossip, even if the information you're giving is true," says Kraftsow. "Instead, speak only of the highest. Use your words to elevate the listener." When you do so, you elevate yourself in the process.

Many spiritual seekers find that spending time in silence helps them notice the distinction between opinions and reality. Slowing down your internal chatter can help ground you in satya. "Silence is discriminative restraint," says Cope. "You are able to examine the roots of speech on an inner level, which enables you to better control your gross outward communication." You then establish a way of interacting with the world that includes both ahimsa and satya, both peacefulness and truthfulness.

### **Asteya: Nonstealing**

Don't steal, the Yoga Sutra says, and all good things will come to you. Because asteya is commonly translated to mean refraining from taking anything that is not freely offered, the first things most people think of are money, clothes, food, and other tangible stuff. But there's more to asteya than what is found on the material plane.

"There are lots of things you can steal," says Devi. "You can steal someone's time if you are late. You can steal someone's energy. You can steal someone's happiness. You can steal someone else's ideas if you represent them as your own."

Asteya also calls for a focus on how and what you consume. "If you are taking something, you need to consider how to give back the appropriate energy or amount," says Friend. "Because everything is interconnected, whatever you receive is taken from somewhere else. Most people don't stop to consider all the different levels of energy involved in all they are consuming. Energetically and karmically, you create a major imbalance if you take and don't pay back." Or, to borrow a line from the Beatles: "The love you take is equal to the love you make."

To invite asteya into your life, consider what you truly need and refrain from letting your desires persuade you to take more. Have fair trade be your mantra—not only in your shopping habits but also in all of your day-to-day interactions. Respect the time and energy of others, give credit where credit is due, and see if you can help build up the world's kindness reserves by giving more than you take.

### **Brahmacharya: Energy Moderation**

The most talked about interpretation of brahmacharya is celibacy. But you needn't become a monk to be a good yogi. You can just accept a broader interpretation of this yama. "It literally means 'walking in the way of God,'" says Harrigan. "It's about preventing the dissipation of one's energy through the misuse of the senses. It's a personal energy-conservation program—when you practice brahmacharya, you are not letting the senses rule your behavior; you are not urge driven."

Anything that causes turbulence in the mind and stirs the emotions might be seen as a violation of brahmacharya: overstimulating foods, loud music, violent movies, and yes, inappropriate sexual behavior. "Whatever disturbs the mind and body disturbs the spiritual life—it's all one energy," says Devi. "Brahmacharya asks you to consider how you spend it. Look at energy like money in the bank: If you have \$100, you don't want to spend it all right away so that you have nothing left. Become a good energy manager."

Brahmacharya has real applications in the physical practice, says Bell. "When you're working with asana, you need to learn to regulate your effort so that you're not pushing and forcing, which drains the life force," she explains. "I'll put my students in a pose and have them consider what they would have to do—or stop doing—to stay in it for an hour. Almost universally, their faces will relax and their shoulders will drop down, and they'll find that they put energy into things they didn't need to. Asana should be replenishing your energy, not draining it."

Experiment with this practice on your mat, then take it into the rest of your life. No matter what's going on—whether it's being delayed for your next appointment by a long line at the supermarket, or nervously kissing a new love interest—ask yourself: Can I let go of my tension and relax into this moment?

Notice how the situation doesn't need your stress to resolve itself. And by not giving so much energy to intense moments—by not squandering your life force—you are more at ease and happier in all moments.

### **Aparigraha: Nongrasping**

Aparigraha means "nongrasping," and it can be a tough sell in this consumer culture of ours. But freedom from wanting more and more is just that: freedom.

"Aparigraha is the decision to not hoard or accumulate goods through greed but rather to develop an attitude of stewardship toward the material world," Harrigan says. "Before you bring anything into your home, ask yourself: Do I need this for my role in life? As a parent? As a spiritual seeker? Or am I just accumulating stuff out of my own fear and greed?" If you don't consider these questions, your possessions can take over. "Once you get so much stuff, you have to take care of and defend it," Harrigan says. "You start to get attached to it and identify with it. It's easy to start thinking you are your stuff, but the truth is that stuff comes and goes."

The idea is: Just let it go. "If our homes are filled with old junk that doesn't apply to us anymore, there's no room for new energy to come in," says Bell. That holds true for the nonmaterial ideas and attitudes you cling to as well. "If you are hanging on to old beliefs about yourself or your relationships, or clinging to a career that no longer feeds you, there's no latitude to move in a different direction."

To invite aparigraha, try a simple practice. "Acknowledge abundance and practice gratitude," says Devi. "You don't need more and more if you are grateful and feeling fulfilled with what you have in the moment."

### **Saucha: Purity**

Saucha's the first of the niyamas, the active observances. It involves keeping things clean, inside and out. "For me, [the concept of] saucha means both physical and mental hygiene," says Cope. "You want to keep your thoughts uncluttered so you can feel free from afflictive emotions; you keep your body and environment in order, to create a sense of calm." A mind trained by meditation has more complexity and orderliness. Physical orderliness can also affect the mind. So get rid of clutter, scrub floors, simplify your life—all these are expressions of saucha.

But don't get too hung up on the idea of literal purity. "When you work at purifying the body, you begin to understand that it will never be perfectly clean," Kraftsow says. Patanjali says, "look more deeply at what the body is: The more you clean it, the more you realize that it is an impermanent, decaying thing. Saucha helps break up excessive fixation with your body, or the bodies of others."

When you learn to disidentify with the body, the Yoga Sutra suggests, you can get in touch with your essence—the part of you that's pure and free from aging, disease, and decay. When you understand your true undying nature, it's easier to stop striving for physical perfection and instead rest in joyful awareness.

### **Santosha: Contentment**

In nearly every translation of Yoga Sutra II.42, santosha is interpreted as the greatest happiness, the underlying joy that cannot be shaken by life's tough moments, by injustice, hardship, bad luck. "Contentment is really about accepting life as it is," says Bell. "It's not about creating perfection. Life will throw whatever it wants at you, and you ultimately have little control. Be welcoming of what you get."

You can practice this on the mat quite easily, by acknowledging your tendency to strive to do a perfect pose and accepting the one you've got. "There's no guarantee that you'll get enlightened when you do a backbend with straight arms, or touch your hands to the floor in Uttanasana," says Bell. "The process of santosha is relaxing into where you are in your pose right now and realizing that it is perfect." Lasater compares santosha to the deep relaxation possible in Savasana (Corpse Pose). "You can't run after contentment," Lasater says. "It has to find you. All you can do is try to create the space for it."

If you release your mind from constantly wanting your situation to be different, you'll find more ease. "It's not fatalism; it's not to say you can't change your reality," says Cope. "But just for the moment, can you let go of the war with reality? If you do, you'll be able to think more clearly and be more effective in making a difference."

During those times when you don't feel content, just act for one moment as if you were. You might kick-start a positive feedback loop, which can generate real contentment. It might feel absurd when your inner landscape isn't shiny and bright, but the simple physical act of turning up the corners of your mouth can have amazing effects. "Smile," suggests Devi. "It changes everything. Practicing smiling is like planting the seed of a mighty redwood. The body receives the smile, and contentment grows. Before you know it, you're smiling all the time." Whether you're practicing asana or living life, remember to find joy in the experience.

### **Tapas: Right Effort**

Tapas is translated as "self-discipline," "effort," or "internal fire," and the Yoga Sutra suggests that when tapas is in action, the heat it generates will both burn away impurities and kindle the sparks of divinity within.

"Tapas is the willingness to do the work, which means developing discipline, enthusiasm, and a burning desire to learn," says Bell. "You can apply tapas to anything you want to see happen in your life: playing an instrument, changing your diet, cultivating an attitude of loving kindness, contentment, or non-judgment. In yoga, it's often seen as a commitment to the practice. You figure out what you can do, and do it every day. If it's only 10 minutes, fine—but make that time sacrosanct."

Connect to your own determination and will. "Holding a posture is tapas," says Cope. "You are restraining yourself from moving and are watching what happens. In this way, you build the capacity to tolerate being with strong sensation, and you get to answer the question: What is my real limit? And you develop the skill of witnessing, which is one of the most important skills of classical yoga."

The effort you use when you engage tapas is directed toward cultivating healthful habits and breaking unhealthful ones. "Asana is tapas, but if you become an asana junkie, then your tapas is to stop practicing asana," says Kraftsow. "One goal of tapas is to stop anything you do mindlessly because you've become habituated." When you use your will to overcome your conditioning, you free yourself from the many unconscious actions that cause suffering. Yes, discipline is actually a path to happiness.

### **Svadyaya: Self-Study**

Happiness is our nature, and it is not wrong to desire it. What is wrong is seeking it outside when it is inside. To tap into the wellspring of happiness that lies within each of us, try dedicating yourself to svadyaya, the art of self-study, of looking within and asking the eternal question: Who am I?

The Yoga Sutra suggests that the study of the Self leads you toward communion with the Divine. It's a lofty aim, but you can develop svadyaya as you move through everyday life. "Some traditions see study as a contemplation of the ultimate. Others see it as study of how you are: your functions, habits, and the ways your karma is playing out," explains Cope. "For most of us, the most fruitful practice will be looking at the Self. Are you on time and orderly? Or are you sloppy and late? What makes you mad or happy? How do you feel about that person on the next mat who's invading your space?"

Develop the capacity to find the answers without chastising or lauding yourself in the process. Swami Kripalu, the founder of Kripalu Yoga, said the highest spiritual practice is self-observation without judgment. "Svadyaya is a skillful and systematic investigation of how things are," says Cope. "When you practice self-observation, you begin to uncover and address the unconscious patterns governing your life." When you can notice, but not judge, what you are doing and how you are feeling in every moment, you open a window to empathy for yourself and gain the stability you need to extend it to others.

Bell recommends another aspect of svadhyaya: the study of sacred texts, such as the Yoga Sutra, the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhism's Heart Sutra, or the Bible. "That's where the wisdom side develops," she says. "If you are only looking at the Self, it is easy to lose perspective. When you read the texts in service of svadhyaya, you'll read something that really resonates, and you'll begin to understand that...all beings experience these things." Study helps you understand the universality of life experiences and thereby increases your compassion for yourself and others.

### **Ishvara Pranidhana: Dedication to the Highest**

Few dispute that the last of the niyamas, Ishvara pranidhana, is the pinnacle of spiritual practice. Yoga Sutra II.45 says that liberation—the highest happiness—comes only from a love of, communion with, and surrender to, God.

To embrace Ishvara pranidhana, it helps to understand what "God" is. "You don't have to believe in an anthropomorphic representation of God to accept that there is a divine design, a benevolent essence in the universe," says Harrigan. "It's about offering oneself to the divine matrix. It's letting our own holy essence guide our actions and catching the sacred power of life. This higher power is there for all of us, Patanjali says. That is the promise of the Yoga Sutra."

You can capture Ishvara pranidhana in any moment, Harrigan says. "You can always pause to look for the higher essence in any situation," she explains. "You can ask yourself, 'What is the best goodness here?' You can imagine that you have your own wise inner adviser, and ask, 'If I were to set aside my own desires and aversions and concerns for comfort, what would you advise for me?'"

Ishvara pranidhana is a cornerstone of Anusara Yoga. "We emphasize devotion, and service, making an artistic offering to the greater good, and bringing more beauty and love into the world," John Friend says. "If you do that, you won't need to think about not hurting anyone or not lying or stealing. If you dedicate your heart to loving and serving God, all other things fall into place."

**Note:** Sutra interpretations that appear throughout this story are taken from Bernard Bouanchaud's book [The Essence of Yoga](#).