

## Ethics in Yoga

### Introduction

Ethics as espoused in yoga is not presented in most yoga classes. It is felt that an important aspect of yoga practice is overlooked, perhaps in the enthusiasm of practicing the movement of the body and stillness of the mind. If one understands the purpose and the ultimate role of yoga in guiding one towards altered states of consciousness, then it is necessary to look into the entire yoga protocol of eight steps as presented by Sage Patanjali. The first two steps are yama and niyama, the ten features of ethical commitments that should be followed while dedicating oneself to yoga practice.

### Yama and Niyama

Yama constitutes five aspects consisting of “non-violence, truth, honesty, sensual abstinence and nonpossessiveness” (p. 187).<sup>[1]</sup> The five niyamas are “cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study and resignation to God” (p. 188).<sup>[1]</sup> While these ethical practices are common to many spiritual traditions, the sage says these have universal validity and should be practiced diligently. The sutras go in detail explaining each of the above ten commitments and methods of countering thoughts that might tempt a person to overlook any of the above yama or niyama. A psychological method to overcome the desire for inappropriate action is recommended; this consists of training the mind to revert back to the commitment through “contrary thought” process. In other words, if a desire arises to tell say, a falsehood, we think of the long-term consequence of such an action, and stick to truth even if it brings short-term discomfort. This method of “contrary thinking” is useful till we are well established in yama and niyama.

Thus, off-the-mat practices of yama and niyama are of importance if one desires to get the full benefit of yoga, namely attaining higher levels of consciousness. This is the goal, and the method enunciated in the sutras provides a clear path toward the goal. Having physical and mental health is of course important; however, stopping with these obvious benefits are not sufficient to a seeker. Hence, the importance of the practice of the first two steps of yoga.

It is possible that any of the eight angas or steps of yoga if carried to perfection will have impact on all other angas also. Yoga teachers know this from the report of their students; the total personality of the student of yoga seems to take a more humane and friendly approach to psychophysical problems. Yoga thus impacts all kosas or sheaths that constitute a human. Even practice of only one anga, say asanas alone, could have impact on all the kosas. We see the progress of such students in interpersonal

and intrapersonal relations and achieve better emotional regulation. However, the effect of practice of one anga alone could be transient on other kosas and might take long time to achieve.

It is seen in some recent studies that practice of yama and niyama could facilitate better balance in subtle energy flow through acumeridians. Students who have practiced yama and niyama seem to move toward more satvic outlook with concern for welfare of self and others in the environment. This satvik quality— as against rajasik and tamasik— reflects a holistic spiritual outlook, a quality which is needed in this age of environmental degradation and poor interpersonal relations both at workplace and at home. The outcome of practicing yama and niyama is reported in a recent work which concludes as follows: “Furthermore, the practice of the Yama and Niyama techniques heightens awareness and cognitive ability, provides the basis to regulate emotions, and removes blockages of vital energy in meridians” (p. 615).<sup>[2]</sup> This report on college students is easy to implement in early years of university education, when most students go through stress due to changed circumstances, loneliness and challenges of going through physical and emotional upheavals.

### Conclusion

Ethics could be virtue based or duty based. In virtue-based ethics, we ask the question as to what kind of person each of us want to be and if one’s behavior is leading one towards that goal. In the second view, we ask the question what duties one should carry out thus arriving at ethical principle through reasoning. While it is convenient to separate intellectually one’s own ethical actions, normally it is a blend of both the above that gives rise to an action. Once the virtues are well enunciated and one follows them, it is likely that the behavior outcome will result in one’s own spiritual advancement as well as extend peace in the environment.

The practices of ethical principles which are universal in their nature are of importance for a world polarized into many strong views. The ultimate goal of practicing these ethics should also be brought to focus so that the practitioner is motivated to continue with these practices. The ethical practices of yama and niyama anchors one in emotional regulation and improved intra- and interpersonal relations. This could lead one to inner peace and compassion towards all beings and the environment at large.<sup>[3]</sup> It is also important the younger generation is exposed to ethics and ethical reasoning of events happening around them. This could lead people to look for solutions based on ethical principles that transcend temporal and spatial limitations.

## TM Srinivasan

*Division of Yoga and Physical Sciences, Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, (S-VYASA Yoga University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India*  
E-mail: [editor@ijoy.org.in](mailto:editor@ijoy.org.in)

## References

1. Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Four Chapters on Freedom. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust; 1976.
2. Xu W, Kumar IR, Srinivasan TM. Effects of Yama and Niyama on body energy systems: Evidence from Electro Photonic Imaging—A randomised controlled trial. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 2021;14:610-7.
3. Freeman H, Vladagina N, Razmjou E, Brems C. Yoga in print media: Missing the heart of the practice. *Int J Yoga* 2017;10:160-6.

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 license, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Access this article online	
<b>Quick Response Code:</b> 	<b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.ijoy.org.in">www.ijoy.org.in</a>
	<b>DOI:</b> 10.4103/ijoy.ijoy_40_21

**How to cite this article:** Srinivasan TM. Ethics in yoga. *Int J Yoga* 2021;14:87-8.

**Submitted:** 30-Mar-2021

**Revised:** 23-Apr-2021

**Accepted:** 23-Apr-2021

**Published:** 10-May-2021