

Niyamas

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The *niyamas* are the five binding observances of yoga: purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study and surrender to the divine. In Professor Iyer's account of Patanjali, they form the positive dimension of ethical practice. They concern what is consciously cultivated so that the mind may become a clearer instrument of spiritual understanding. Their Sanskrit names are *shaucha*, *santosha*, *tapas*, *svadhyaya* and *ishvarapranidhana*. Together they bring an aspiration into the rhythm of daily life. An intention becomes more trustworthy when it is supported by habits through which attention, motive and conduct can repeatedly be renewed.

The *niyamas* stand beside the five *yamas*, the restraints beginning with nonviolence. The distinction is useful, but the two groups are inseparable in practice. Refraining from deceit supports honest self-study; contentment helps weaken the urge to appropriate; devotion is tested by the care taken with other lives. In "*Sadhana Pada*," Professor Iyer explains that the eight limbs of yoga are logically successive while remaining ethically and psychologically interconnected. The observances are therefore not a preliminary examination that can be passed and forgotten. Their meaning deepens as the whole discipline develops.

Shaucha means purity, inward as well as outward. Its inward concern is the clarification of what enters and shapes consciousness, together with the purification of intention. Ordinary cleanliness can support an orderly life, but it does not by itself establish spiritual purity. A carefully arranged room may still be occupied by resentment or vanity. Conversely, difficult material circumstances do not reveal a person's moral worth. The useful enquiry concerns what can actually be cared for: the honesty of a motive, the quality of speech, the use of attention, and the wish to avoid contaminating relationships with needless harm.

Santosha means contentment. Professor Iyer distinguishes its satisfaction from the temporary relief that follows gratification. Wants can multiply faster than they are met, leaving the mind perpetually suspended between anticipation and disappointment. Contentment begins to loosen that cycle. It allows appreciation of what is present without forbidding intelligent effort to improve circumstances. A person can seek necessary shelter, oppose injustice or learn a difficult skill while cultivating *santosha*. The observance asks whether inward steadiness must always wait for the world to satisfy the next demand. It makes room for gratitude within an unfinished life.

Tapas is austerity or self-discipline, understood as the deliberate ordering of energy towards a worthy end. Its seriousness is easily confused with severity. Yet an excessive undertaking that

injures the capacity to think and serve may defeat its own purpose. A more faithful beginning can be an honest commitment kept through ordinary resistance: a period of study, a responsibility completed, or a harmful habit steadily examined. The value lies in the transformation of will. We discover that every impulse need not become an instruction, and that a freely chosen purpose can gradually organize scattered energies.

Svadhyaya is self-study, including the study and contemplation of sacred teaching. Professor Iyer describes careful reflection, recitation and inward assimilation, not merely the collection of information. A passage becomes fruitful when it helps us understand both a principle and our actual response to it. Why does a teaching about generosity please us until a particular possession is involved? What does an irritation disclose about expectation? Such questions make reading answerable to life. They also protect self-study from becoming endless inspection of personal faults, since the larger teaching provides a direction beyond the fault itself.

Ishvarapranidhana is surrender or devotion to *Ishvara*, the divine spiritual focus of the yogic path. In Professor Iyer's interpretation, the discipline turns consciousness towards the Supreme Spirit within the heart and loosens the demand that the personal will remain the measure of everything. Devotion gives the other observances a unifying purpose. Purity, contentment, discipline and study are offered to a reality understood as greater than their private reward. This surrender does not excuse careless judgement or the abandonment of conscience. Its sincerity appears in the fidelity with which the student seeks truth and accepts responsibility.

The five observances can be recognized within one ordinary beginning of a day. A space is made ready, what is sufficient is acknowledged, a reasonable commitment is chosen, a meaningful passage is considered, and the day's work is inwardly offered to a worthy purpose. This is an illustration of their relationship, not a prescribed ritual or a claim of advanced yoga. Circumstances may allow only a few quiet moments. The essential quality is wholeheartedness. A small practice that renews attention and improves conduct has more substance than an elaborate routine maintained chiefly to preserve an attractive self-image.

Human Solidarity gives the observances a test beyond private satisfaction. Does increased order make us more available to others, or merely more irritated when they interrupt? Does study deepen our respect for another person's difficulty, or supply a vocabulary for judging it? Does discipline make our promises more reliable? Professor Iyer explicitly places the development of meditative capacity within a lifetime of service to humanity. The *niyamas* serve that purpose when their inward effects become greater patience, clearer discrimination and more dependable care in the field of shared life.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes how an observance is understood. Contentment then includes freedom from competitive comparison; purity includes the wish not to burden a

conversation with malice; self-study includes learning how our choices affect people whose lives differ from ours. The circle widens from a private programme of improvement to the relationships through which character becomes effective. We still work upon our own conduct, since that is where responsibility can be exercised directly. But the purpose of the work increasingly includes the dignity and welfare of those who encounter us.

Professor Iyer cautions that the *niyamas* cannot be contained within fixed, narrow concepts. Purity of conduct can deepen purity of thought, and a clearer motive can reveal another meaning of discipline. The observances unfold through practice rather than yielding all their meaning at once. This protects them from becoming badges of attainment. Someone may keep an outward rule impeccably while discovering a subtle desire for superiority beneath it. The discovery is useful. It shows where the next act of honesty is needed and allows the practice to become more inwardly exact.

The handling of contrary thoughts is part of that learning. Professor Iyer describes the deliberate cultivation of constructive opposites: a movement towards generosity where possessiveness has been indulged, or towards kindness where resentment is taking hold. Such work is more than verbally denying an emotion. We need to recognize the situation truthfully and choose what will nourish a better response. A difficult feeling may still require time and understanding. The observances supply a patient direction, allowing firmness to coexist with compassion and repeated beginnings to coexist with a serious commitment.

HPB's insistence upon enlightened application and the guidance of conscience gives these disciplines their proper measure. They are meant to become living faculties, not a system of self-punishment. Through them, the day acquires points of recollection: chances to clean what has become confused, receive what is sufficient, strengthen a useful resolve, learn from a teaching, and offer the work beyond ourselves. Little by little, the observances cease to feel like additions placed upon life. They become ways of inhabiting it more truthfully, with a mind increasingly steady and a heart more capable of serving.

Glossary

Abnegation — The relinquishment of a claim or personal advantage; in the source, the offering of the fruits of action.

Altruism — A concern for the welfare of others that moves beyond exclusive personal advantage.

Apotheosis — Elevation into divinity; used in the cited account of self-study for its fulfilment in direct spiritual communion.

Ashtangayoga — Eight-limbed yoga; Patanjali's integrated discipline of ethical preparation and meditation.

Austerity — Voluntary discipline and simplicity directed towards a worthy purpose; a rendering of *tapas* in the cited texts.

Bhagavad Gita — The dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna within the *Mahabharata*, teaching disciplined action, knowledge and devotion.

Bhakti — Devotion; the inward dedication of feeling, thought and will to a spiritual ideal or the divine.

Contemplative — Pertaining to sustained, reflective or meditative attention directed towards meaning and spiritual understanding.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relevant relationships, causes and responsibilities outside an immediate personal view.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity and interdependence, made active through thoughtful responsibility and care.

Immanent — Present within a field of existence, rather than merely outside it.

Ishtadevata — The chosen deity or divine focus upon which the aspirant concentrates devotion and meditation.

Ishvara — The divine Lord of the yogic discipline; Professor Iyer interprets *Ishvara* as the Supreme Spirit immanent in all souls.

Ishvarapranidhana — Surrender or devoted dedication to *Ishvara*; one of the five *niyamas* and a central element of yogic practice.

Isomorphic — Corresponding in structure; Professor Iyer uses it to relate surrender in consciousness to the offering of action.

Kleshas — The afflictions of Yoga psychology: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and clinging to phenomenal existence.

Krishna — The divine teacher of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*; a spiritual focus for devotion and the offering of action.

Mantra — A sacred utterance or formula employed with attention and understanding; mantras is the plural.

Meditative absorption — The deepening of concentration in which consciousness becomes profoundly engaged with its object or spiritual focus.

Nirvana — Spiritual emancipation or liberation; its precise philosophical meaning depends upon the tradition and context.

Niyamas — The five binding observances of yoga: purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study and surrender to the divine.

Noetic — Pertaining to spiritual intelligence and the higher activity of mind, distinguished from merely personal or reactive thought.

Praxis — Practice or practical application; here, the lived discipline of yoga.

Probity — Integrity and moral uprightness.

Purusha — The spiritual seer or Self in *Sankhya* and Yoga; Professor Iyer interprets its highest realization through a universal spiritual synthesis.

Raja Yoga — The royal discipline of inward self-mastery, meditation and spiritual realization.

Recollection — The deliberate recovery of a worthy meaning or purpose; inward remembrance that can renew attention and conduct.

Sadhana — A sustained discipline or practice directed towards spiritual realization.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; in the cited account, a deepening in which the object stands alone and the sense of separateness recedes.

Santosha — Contentment; inward sufficiency cultivated through freedom from the continual multiplication of wants.

Self — With a capital letter in this spiritual context, the enduring or universal spiritual principle, distinguished from the possessive personal self.

Shaucha — Purity, inward and outward; the first of the five *niyamas*.

Sublimation — The transformation of a lower or disruptive tendency into a more constructive expression.

Supreme Spirit — The highest spiritual reality or Self as conceived in the cited Theosophical exposition.

Svadyaya — Self-study, including the study, recitation and contemplation of sacred teaching.

Tapas — Austerity or self-discipline; the deliberate ordering of energy towards spiritual purification and self-mastery.

Taraka — Transcendent; used in the cited exposition of spiritual knowledge and the yogic path that reaches beyond ordinary limitations.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The transcendent royal discipline of yoga as expounded by Professor Iyer in his studies of Patanjali.

Trusteeship — Responsible care and use of resources for a wider good; Professor Iyer develops its ethical meaning through Gandhi's teaching.

Vesture — A body or instrument through which consciousness is expressed; vestures is the plural.

Yamas — The five restraints of yoga: nonviolence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-possession.

Yoga — An integrated discipline of ethical preparation, concentration and spiritual realization.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 281.

"The *niyamas* or binding observances are also five, constituting the positive dimension of ethical probity. They are *shaucha* (purity), *santosha* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity, self-discipline), *svadhyaya* (self-study) and *ishvarapranidhana* (surrender to the Lord). Like the *yamas*, the *niyamas* cannot be fully grasped as specific and bounded concepts. First of all, they should be seen as evolving conceptions – for example, purity of thought is deepened through purity of conduct – and then they will rapidly unfold subtler levels of meaning as the aspirant attains more intensive depths of meditation. Purity of volition is thus ever enriched and refined."

Meditation thought: The five observances are living disciplines whose meanings deepen together. Their positive purpose is the clarification of intention and the transformation of conduct.

2. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

"Although the stages through which consciousness must ascend are sequential in one sense, the practice of *Taraka Raja Yoga* involves eight limbs or aspects which are logically successive but ethically and psychologically simultaneous. In fact, one can hardly pursue one part of Patanjali's eight-limbed yoga (*ashtangayoga*) without also attending to its other divisions. Just as a human being, despite his ignorance, is an integrated whole, so too *ashtangayoga*, despite its logical sequence, is an integral unity."

Meditation thought: The limbs of yoga belong to an integrated whole. A gain in one area becomes sounder when the other dimensions of ethical and inward preparation remain active.

3. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

"Patanjali initiated his teaching concerning praxis by calling attention to the three chief elements in the discipline of yoga: *tapas*, austerity, self-restraint and eventually self-mastery;

svadhyaya, self-study, self-examination, including calm contemplation of *purusha*, the Supreme Self; and *ishvarapranidhana*, self-surrender to the Lord, the omnipresent divine spirit within the secret heart. The threefold practice or *sadhana* can remove the *kleshas* or afflictions which imprison *purusha* and thus facilitate *samadhi* or meditative absorption."

Meditation thought: Discipline, study and devotion form a mutually supporting practice. The removal of affliction requires both clarified understanding and a reorientation of the energies of life.

4. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

"Expansiveness too has its compelling effects. *Shaucha*, inward and outer purity, protects the mind and body from moral and magnetic pollution, and prevents one from tarnishing or misusing others. One acquires a dependable degree of serenity, control of the senses and one-pointedness in concentration, thus preparing oneself for the direct apprehension of *purusha*, the Self. *Santosha*, deep contentment, assures satisfaction not through the gratification of wants (which can at most provide a temporary escape from frustration), but rather through the progressive cessation of craving and its prolific yearnings and regrets."

Meditation thought: Purity and contentment concern the quality of consciousness. Satisfaction becomes more enduring as it depends less upon the endless multiplication and gratification of wants.

5. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

"*Tapas*, austerity, penance or self-discipline, removes pollution inherited from one's own past and releases the full potentials of mind, senses and body, including those psychic faculties mistakenly called supernatural only because seldom developed."

Meditation thought: The source places austerity within a larger spiritual discipline. Its inward aim is the removal of impediments; unusual faculties are not the measure of useful daily practice.

6. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

"*Svadhyaya*, self-study, calls for careful study and calm reflection, including the diligent recitation and deep contemplation of texts, thus giving voice to potent mantras and sacred utterances. It achieves its apotheosis through direct communion with the *ishtadevata*, the chosen deity upon whom one has concentrated one's complete attention, will and imagination. This exalted state readily leads to *ishvarapranidhana*, one-pointed and single-hearted devotion to the Lord. Such devotion soon deepens until one enters the succeeding stages of meditative absorption (*samadhi*)."

Meditation thought: Study matures through reflection and inward assimilation. The movement towards devotion gives learning a purpose beyond collecting statements or displaying familiarity with sacred language.

7. R.N. Iyer, “*Samadhi Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 274.

“Rather than naïvely thinking that one is suddenly going to surmount every obstacle and obscurity in one's own nature, one can sedulously foster *bhakti*, total devotion and willing surrender to *Ishvara*, the Supreme Spirit immanent in all souls, even if one has hardly begun to grasp one's true selfhood. Such sustained devotion is *ishvarapranidhana*, the potent invocation of the Supreme Self through persistent surrender to It, isomorphic on the plane of consciousness with abnegation of the fruits of all acts to Krishna on the plane of conduct, as taught in the *Bhagavad Gita*.”

Meditation thought: Devotion allows a sincere beginning without demanding immediate perfection. A higher orientation can be maintained while the student is still learning the nature of the self.

8. R.N. Iyer, “*Sadhana Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 281.

“Instead of suppressing such scattered thoughts or wallowing in hideous self-pity, one must firmly and deliberately insert into the mind their potent opposites – love for hate, tenderness for temerity, sweetness for spite, virile confidence for the devilry of self-doubt, authentic self-conquest for compulsive self-indulgence. Thus what begins as a shrewd defence against deleterious thoughts becomes a deft substitution of one kind of thought for another and results in sublimation, the skilful transformation of the tonality and texture of consciousness.”

Meditation thought: A destructive pattern can be met by deliberately cultivating its constructive opposite. The work concerns a real change in the quality of response, rather than hiding an unwelcome thought.

9. R.N. Iyer, “*Sadhana Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

“With the firm foundation of *yamas* and *niyamas*, one can begin to benefit from the noetic discipline of intense meditation and become modestly proficient in it over a lifetime of service to humanity. Since the untrained mind is easily distracted by external and internal disturbance, real meditation is aided by an alert and relaxed bodily vesture.”

Meditation thought: Meditative capacity is placed within a lifetime of service. The observances become fruitful when their effects include greater reliability, patience and concern for humanity.

10. R.N. Iyer, “*Gandhian Trusteeship*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 343.

“Grandiose gestures about giving up external possessions and impulsive statements about our good intentions have little practical impact on our character. The initial step should be at the level of thought. We should think clearly and deeply about the principles of trust and trusteeship. What does trusteeship mean as an idea and as an ideal? What are its practical implications? And what would we have to give up for it to become a potent mantram in our lives? This form of reflection and self-questioning initiates a period of ‘mental gestation’. It

allows us to strengthen our understanding, dispel illusions and light the subtle fire of altruism.”

Meditation thought: Honest reflection helps a resolve acquire substance. Before making a grand gesture, one can understand the principle and the practical changes it asks of one’s life.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, “On Self-Sacrifice,” p. 137.

“By the enlightened application of our precepts to practice. By the use of our higher reason, spiritual intuition and moral sense, and by following the dictates of what we call ‘the still small voice’ of our conscience, which is that of our EGO, and which speaks louder in us than the earthquakes and the thunders of Jehovah, wherein ‘the Lord is not.’”

Meditation thought: HPB joins practice with reason, intuition and conscience. These faculties help keep the observances intelligent and prevent discipline from becoming mechanical or punitive.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment II, p. 24.

“Shalt thou abstain from action? Not so shall gain thy soul her freedom. To reach Nirvana one must reach Self-Knowledge, and Self-Knowledge is of loving deeds the child. Have patience, Candidate, as one who fears no failure, courts no success. Fix thy Soul’s gaze upon the star whose ray thou art, the flaming star that shines within the lightless depths of ever-being, the boundless fields of the Unknown.”

Meditation thought: Loving deeds and patient perseverance belong to the path together. The daily observances are fulfilled more deeply when they make the heart increasingly available for useful action.