

Yama

Definitional Essay Theosophy Trust

Yama names ethical restraint in Patanjali's yoga; *Yama* also names the divine figure associated with death in Indian religious tradition. These uses open related questions about limits, responsibility, and freedom, but they should first be distinguished. Professor Iyer explains the restraints as foundations of spiritual practice. H.P. Blavatsky interprets the mythic *Yama* through mortality, the awakening of self-conscious mind, and the dual possibilities of *Manas*. The symbol becomes richer when its contexts remain clear.

The idea of restraint provides an entrance to the yogic meaning: an impulse need not determine an act. The student learns to bring speech, desire, and conduct under deliberate guidance. A rein gives direction to energy. Used inwardly as an image, it suggests that power becomes useful through intelligent self-command. It does not establish that every episode in the mythology is a coded description of yogic technique.

In Patanjali's yoga, *yama* is the first limb of the eightfold discipline. Professor Iyer emphasizes that the eight limbs are logically successive but ethically and psychologically simultaneous. One cannot truly practice concentration, contemplation or *samadhi* while ignoring restraint. Without *yama*, spiritual practice easily becomes self-deception, psychic disturbance, ambition or refined selfishness.

The five *yamas* are *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*: nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, continence and non-possession. They purify relation to life, speech, property, energy and identity. Together they constitute the *mahavrata*, the Great Vow. They are not altered by time, place, class, nationality, condition or level of attainment.

Yama is therefore not repression. Repression pushes something downward. *Yama* brings impulse into conscious relation with the soul's aim. It says: this speech would injure; this desire would appropriate; this energy must be conserved; this grasping makes the heart small. Restraint is intelligent refusal in the service of freedom.

Ahimsa is the root of restraint. Harmlessness must be practiced in body, speech and mind. Professor Iyer, following Shankaracharya, refuses a narrow interpretation. *Ahimsa* means avoiding harm even through an unkind thought. It is exact compassion, the state in which the mind becomes incapable of casually injuring the common field.

Yama as restraint becomes deeper when seen with *Yama* as death. Death is the great restraint upon the fantasy of endless postponement. It strips away social role, possession, ornament,

argument and self-image. To remember death rightly is not to become morbid, but to become honest. What cannot be carried through death should not govern life.

H.P. Blavatsky gives *Yama* an occult depth. *Yama* is the god of the dead, but also the first of men who died and departed to *Devachan*. This is because *Yama* embodies the race first endowed with *Manas*. Without self-conscious mind, there is neither heaven nor Hades in the human sense. Death becomes meaningful when consciousness can remember, choose and meet consequence.

Yama is linked with the third root-race, the first humanity to taste self-conscious death. He symbolizes the awakening of mind, the emergence of individual responsibility, and the entrance into mortality as self-conscious beings. To become human is to know death; to know death is to become responsible for thought and action.

Blavatsky's account belongs to her esoteric interpretation of human origins. It is a symbolic and doctrinal reading, not a historical conclusion derived from the surviving Vedic texts alone. In this reading, mortality and moral responsibility become linked through self-consciousness. Its inward question remains close: how does the knowledge that an action has consequences change the choice made now?

The figure of *Yama-Yami* adds the psychological key. Blavatsky states that *Yama-Yami* symbolizes dual *Manas* in one mystical meaning. The mind is twofold: it can turn upward toward Spirit or downward toward matter. It can restrain itself or become the transgressor. It can judge and also commit the act judged. The "twofold-ruler" is both judge and criminal within the human being.

This is not guilt, but self-knowledge. The same mind that sees the good can rationalize its betrayal. The same consciousness that knows restraint can evade it. The path begins when the mind stops pretending judgment belongs only outside itself. One must see the witness, impulse, excuse, wound and possibility of self-conquest.

Yama must also be rescued from crude fear. Blavatsky notes that the *Rig Veda* nowhere shows *Yama* as punishing the wicked; the Pluto-like judge is a later creation. The deepest meaning is not punishment but law, transition and mirror. When later texts speak of judgment, the essential meaning is karmic consequence. One meets what one has made.

Chitragupta, the hidden brightness, reads the account from the Great Register in which every deed and thought is impressed. This teaches that consciousness is self-recording. A careless thought is not nothing. A small lie is not nothing. A gentle restraint is not nothing either. Every inward motion has weight.

The Katha Upanishad brings *Yama* into another light. *Yama* is the teacher of *Nachiketas*. The young seeker comes to the house of Death and refuses the glittering gifts offered to him — riches, kingship, long life, pleasures and heavenly enjoyments. *Nachiketas* seeks only the secret of immortality. *Yama* tests whether the aspirant wants the pleasant or the Real.

This gives restraint luminous depth. *Yama* is not merely saying no to temptation; it is saying yes to the Real. One restrains speech because truth is sacred. One restrains harm because every being belongs to the One Life. One restrains grasping because the immortal Self cannot be possessed.

On the razor-edged Path, Professor Iyer says, everything is finely balanced and highly energized. The greater the knowledge, the greater the responsibility and courage to accept the consequences of thoughts, images, emotions and acts. Spiritual life intensifies accountability. The path does not make one fragile; it makes one exact.

This exactness must remain compassionate. *Yama* without compassion becomes harshness. Restraint without love becomes rigidity. Moral law without Universal Brotherhood becomes judgment. The Heart Doctrine asks the student to be firm with the lower self but merciful toward beings.

Human Solidarity gives restraint a public measure. In a group discussion, a harmful claim may need to be challenged. *Ahimsa* does not require silence about the harm; *satya* does not require humiliation of its speaker. We can correct the statement accurately, protect the person affected, and leave room for a changed understanding. This demands more attention than either an angry attack or an evasive politeness.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means including the people who will live with the consequences after the exchange is over. A passing victory in argument may leave others afraid to speak. A truthful correction offered with proportion may strengthen shared trust. The five restraints work together here: we refrain from injury, falsehood, appropriation, misuse of energy, and the wish to possess the outcome. The example is an ethical application of the teaching; it does not make an ordinary disagreement equivalent to an initiatory trial.

Yama also teaches stewardship of limits. Modern life often treats limits as enemies. *Yama* teaches that limits can be sacred. A boundary may protect tenderness. A restraint may conserve energy. A refusal may save integrity. A silence may prevent harm. The bridle is not the enemy of the horse; it allows power to become direction.

Yama is not a dark god waiting only at the end of life. He is present whenever conscience speaks, whenever restraint protects love, whenever mortality clarifies value, whenever the soul refuses the glittering gift and chooses the immortal. To understand *Yama* is to see that the path to

freedom begins with restraint; to live *Yama* is to let every limit become a doorway into the deathless.

Glossary

Ahimsa — Harmlessness or nonviolence in thought, speech, and action.

Anga — A limb or component; in the quoted discussion, one of the eight limbs of yoga.

Aparigraha — Non-possession or non-grasping; one of the yogic restraints.

Asana — Posture; the steady bodily position within the discipline of yoga.

Ashta — Eight; used in explaining the eight limbs of yoga.

Asteya — Non-stealing or freedom from appropriation; one of the yogic restraints.

Brahmacharya — Continence and disciplined conservation of energy in thought and conduct.

Chitrugupta — The recorder who reads the moral account in the symbolic portrayal of *Yama's* judgment.

Devachan — The assimilative, blissful post-mortem state described in Theosophy.

Dharana — Concentration; the gathering of attention upon a chosen point or object.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Mahavrata — The Great Vow; the universal commitment expressed by the yogic restraints.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.

Nachiketas — The seeker taught by *Yama* in the *Katha Upanishad*.

Niyama — A positive yogic observance; *niyamas* is the plural.

Pitri — An ancestor or progenitor; *Pitris* is the plural.

Pitri-pati — Lord of the *Pitris*; a title of *Yama*.

Pranayama — The regulation of breath and life-energy within the integrated discipline of yoga.

Pratyahara — Withdrawal or abstraction of the senses from their objects.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; a discipline with gradations culminating in spiritual cognition.

Satya — Truth or truthfulness; one of the yogic restraints.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The integral yoga discussed in Professor Iyer's exposition of Patanjali.

Veda — Sacred knowledge; the *Vedas* are the ancient body of revealed Indian scripture.

Yama — Ethical restraint in yoga; also the divine figure associated with death and the teaching of immortality.

Yama-Yami — The paired mythic figures interpreted by Blavatsky, in one esoteric meaning, as dual *Manas*.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 281.

“When any object is forcibly confined, it exerts crude pressure against its external constraints. In the ethical realm, effortless self-restraint produces a powerful glow of well-being which others can appreciate and even emulate. When, for example, one is established in *ahimsa*, others do become aware of an encompassing and inclusive love, and latent or overt hostility dissolves around one’s radius of benevolence.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish self-restraint from pressure imposed on another. Let the measure of discipline be the room it creates for considerate action.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 280.

“Patanjali enumerated the eight (*ashta*) limbs (*anga*) of this *Taraka Raja Yoga* as five which concern karma and lay the foundation for meditation, and three which constitute meditation itself: restraint (*yama*), binding observance (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), regulation of breath (*pranayama*), abstraction and withdrawal from the senses (*pratyahara*); concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and complete meditative absorption (*samadhi*).”

Meditation thought: Place restraint at the beginning of the meditative effort. Which ordinary responsibility needs more careful attention?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 280.

“The *yamas* or restraints are five, constituting a firm ethical foundation for spiritual growth, starting with *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and including *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (continence) and *aparigraha* (non-possession).”

Meditation thought: Consider the five restraints together. A truthful response should also respect life, dignity, and what belongs to another.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 281.

“Hence the *yamas* are not altered by condition and circumstance, social class or nationality, nor by time nor the actual level of spiritual attainment. Together they constitute the awesome *mahavrata* or Great Vow, the first crucial step to true spiritual freedom.”

Meditation thought: Examine a convenience used to excuse a harmful act. What would fidelity to the principle require here?

5. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Yama”, pp. 378–379.

“A hymn speaks of *Yama* as the first of men that died, and the first that departed to the world of bliss (*Devachan*). This, because *Yama* is the embodiment of the race which was the first to be endowed with consciousness (*Manas*), without which there is neither Heaven nor Hades.”

Meditation thought: Read this as Blavatsky’s esoteric interpretation of the myth. Consider how self-conscious choice deepens responsibility for consequences.

6. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Yama”, p. 379.

“As Dr. Muir truly remarks, the *Rig-Veda*—the greatest authority on the primeval myths which strike the original key-note of the themes that underlie all the subsequent variations—nowhere shows *Yama* ‘as having anything to do with the punishment of the wicked’.”

Meditation thought: Keep the earlier and later portrayals distinct. Fear can narrow a symbol that also concerns continuity and transition.

7. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Yama”, p. 379.

“One has to study the true character of *Yama-Yamî* throughout more than one hymn and epic poem, and collect the various accounts scattered in dozens of ancient works, and then he will obtain a consensus of allegorical statements which will be found to corroborate and justify the Esoteric teaching, that *Yama-Yamî* is the symbol of the dual *Manas*, in one of its mystical meanings.”

Meditation thought: Observe the different directions available to mind. Which motive is strengthening the direction you presently choose?

8. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Yama”, p. 379.

“The ‘twofold-ruler’—the epithet of *Yama-Yamî*—is regarded in the exoteric teachings of the Chino-Buddhists as both judge and criminal, the restrainer of his own evil doings and the evil-doer himself.”

Meditation thought: Notice the capacity both to judge an action and to rationalize it. Honest self-study brings those movements into the same field of attention.

9. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Yama”, p. 379.

“Once there, the Recorder, the Karmic messenger called *Chitragupta* (hidden or concealed brightness), reads out his account from the Great Register, wherein during the life of the human being, every deed and thought are indelibly impressed.”

Meditation thought: Let the image of a record encourage care for small acts. A restraint or a kindness belongs to the moral account as surely as an injury.

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume II, p. 40.

“*Pitri-pati* is the lord or king of the *Pitris*, *Yama*, the god of Death and the Judge of mortals.”

Meditation thought: Consider mortality in relation to inheritance. What received pattern can be met with greater responsibility in the present?

11. R.N. Iyer — “The Nachiketas Flame”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 375.

“In the *Katha Upanishad* Nachiketas simply could not see the point of the glittering gifts *Yama*, the god of death, offered him: riches, kingship, kingdoms and earthly happiness.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish an attractive reward from the purpose for which you began. What would you still seek if the reward were removed?

12. R.N. Iyer — “The Nachiketas Flame”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 375.

“On the razor-edged Path, as it is called in the *Katha Upanishad*, everything is finely balanced and highly energized. The greater the knowledge, the greater must be the responsibility and courage to accept the consequences of all thoughts, images, emotions and acts.”

Meditation thought: Let increased understanding bring increased care. Consider a likely consequence before releasing a word or action into shared life.