

# Yoga Philosophy Basics: The 5 Niyamas

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The five niyamas are constructive tools for cultivating happiness and self-confidence; the opportunities to practice them arise every day. Here is a brief description of each niyama, along with helpful tips to put your spirituality into action.

## 1. Self-Purification (Shaucha)

Shaucha means “purification; cleanliness.” It includes a number of techniques for cleansing the body as well as the mind, and it has even been called the aim of the entire system of yoga. The sages say that shaucha is not only the foundation for bodily health, it is also the doorway to deeper and more tranquil states of meditation.

**Practice Tip:** Select wisely from the many choices of food, emotions, and thoughts waiting to come into your body and mind. As the body becomes purified you will experience radiant health; as the mind becomes purified you will feel increasingly clear, friendly, and cheerful.

## 2. Contentment (Santosha)

The word santosha means “contentment” as well as “delight, happiness, joy.” It comes from an experience of acceptance—of life, of ourselves, and of whatever life has brought us. When we are content, we are happy. Thus—and here is the key to this niyama—through the power of contentment, happiness becomes our choice.

**Practice Tip:** Let go of the past. Do not condemn yourself for not being wiser, wealthier, or more successful than you are. Free your mind of expectations. Then you will see life in a larger context and be able to ride its ups and downs with equanimity.

How do you achieve contentment when inwardly you are disappointed and striving for change and improvement? Create it. Try to keep in mind the yogic premise that whatever you have in the present moment is enough. Once you do this, happiness will find an enduring place in your life; whatever aspirations you have for the future will simply add to your joy.

## 3. Self-Discipline (Tapas)

The literal definition of tapas is “heat,” in this case the heat that builds during periods of determined effort. Tapas accompanies any discipline that is willingly and gladly accepted in order to bring about a change of some kind—whether it be improved health, a new habit, better concentration, or a different direction in life. Tapas focuses energy, creates fervor, and increases strength and confidence. The practice of asanas is a form of tapas for the body; meditation is a tapas that purifies and focuses the mind.

**Practice Tip:** Remember that tapas can go hand in hand with any task—even something as mundane as cleaning the bathroom floor. Whenever we perform our actions with full determination and effort, they are performed with tapas. Through the ardor of tapas, choose to make healthy changes in your life—but focus on only one or two changes at a time. Take small steps that can be accomplished successfully, and find replacements for habits that are unproductive.

#### **4. Self-Study (Svadyaya)**

Svadyaya means, literally, “to recollect (to remember, to contemplate, to meditate on) the Self.” It is the effort to know the Self that shines as the innermost core of your being.

**Practice Tip:** Begin with the study of writings that inspire you to feel the presence of the indwelling spirit. Then begin to apply svadyaya in your daily life by practicing the yamas and niyamas, the asanas, breath awareness, and meditation, and learn to recognize when you are acting in harmony with your goals and when you are unconsciously acting counter to them.

#### **5. Self-Surrender (Ishvara Pranidhana)**

Ishvara refers to all-pervading consciousness; pranidhana means “to surrender.” Together, these words may be translated as “trustful surrender to God,” the last and most important of the niyamas, and perhaps the most difficult for students to embrace. Self-surrender is not a process of defeat or of mindlessly submitting to another’s will. It is the act of giving ourselves to a higher purpose.

**Practice Tip:** When you practice meditation, observe the thoughts and desires that distract your concentration, and instead, rest your attention in the center of your being. At such times you may be able to transcend the limitations of your attachments and sense the presence of inner stillness.

In whatever form it presents itself, that experience, the sages tell us, guides us toward wholeness and the fulfillment of our inward quest.