

Yoga Philosophy Basics: The 5 Yamas

BY ROLF SOVIK

The self-awareness you gain by practicing the five yamas can help you transform negative energy and cultivate a deep, abiding sense of peace. Here is a brief definition of each yama, along with some advice about how to start practicing them today.

1. Non-Harming (Ahimsa)

In Sanskrit the prefix a means “not,” while himsa means “harming, injuring, killing, or doing violence.” Ahimsa, the first of the yamas and the highest ranking among them, is the practice of non-harming or non-violence. This is the key, the sages tell us, to maintaining both harmonious relationships in the world and a tranquil inner life.

At a deeper level, ahimsa is less a conscious process than a natural consequence of yoga practice. As our journey unfolds, it leads to awareness of the peaceful and enduring core that is our true nature; the desire to prevent harm is a spontaneous expression of that awareness. We begin to realize that the inner self in others is identical to our own inner self, and we wish no harm to come to any being.

Practice Tip: Practice being more kind, accepting, and forgiving of yourself and others. According to the sages, when ahimsa is fully embraced, an inner confidence emerges that is deep seated and surprisingly powerful.

2. Truthfulness (Satya)

The word sat, in Sanskrit, means “that which exists, that which is.” Satya, in turn, means “truthfulness”—seeing and reporting things as they are rather than the way we would like them to be.

Practice Tip: Inwardly learn to recognize the cascade of fears and other negative emotions that prompt you to twist reality. Once you have understood and processed these fears, your thoughts, speech, and actions can be realigned with the truth, even as you look more deeply into your needs and desires. Outwardly, refrain from telling lies and speak with kindness, compassion, and clarity.

3. Non-Stealing (Asteya)

The word steya means “stealing.” When it is combined with the prefix a, it yields the third yama, asteya: non-stealing. We are most likely to associate stealing with tangible objects, but intangibles, such as information and emotional favors, are more likely to be the objects stolen in our world.

Practice Tip: Because the urge to steal arises from a sense of unhappiness, incompleteness, and envy, the solution is to practice giving any chance you get. Give food; give money; give time. Since wealth is ultimately a state of mind, you will feel increasingly wealthy; and through selfless giving, your sense of inner wealth may bring you outer wealth.

4. Moderating the Senses (Brahmacharya)

The literal translation of brahmacharya is “walking in God-consciousness.” Practically speaking, this means that brahmacharya turns the mind inward, balancing and supervising the senses, and leads to freedom from dependencies and cravings. And the sages tell us that when the mind is freed from domination by the senses, sensual pleasures are replaced by inner joy.

Practice Tip: Making wise choices about the books and magazines you read, the movies you see, and the company you keep will help you conserve energy and keep your mind focused and dynamic. Being moderate in all sensual activities so that you don’t dwell on them, staying committed and faithful to one partner in a relationship that is mutually supportive—this is the middle path of brahmacharya.

5. Non-Possessiveness (Aparigraha)

Graha means “to grasp” and pari means “things”: aparigraha means “not grasping things,” or non-possessiveness. It helps us achieve a balanced relationship with the things that we each call “mine.”

A yogic maxim says, “All the things of the world are yours to use, but not to own.” That is the essence of aparigraha. Whenever we become possessive, we are in turn possessed, anxiously holding onto our things and grasping for more. But when we make good use of the possessions that come to us and enjoy them without becoming emotionally dependent on them, then they neither wield power over us nor lead to false identities and expectations.

Practice Tip: Examine your own tendencies toward possessiveness. Do you take better care of an object in your possession than one belonging to someone else? Do you acquire more of something than you can use? Do you depend too much on others, give more in a relationship than is healthy for you, replace mutual give-and-take with the need for tight-fisted control, or attempt to increase your self-esteem by gaining someone else’s love? The practice of non-possessiveness helps us to examine our assumptions and guides us back to healthy relationships with others.