

RANJANA YOGA CLASS

Yamas and Niyamas

A Beginner's Guide to Yoga Ethics

The ten ethical guidelines of yoga in plain language, with simple daily practices

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General education only. Not medical advice. Speak with your doctor before starting any new practice.

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1. What the yamas and niyamas are

The yamas and niyamas are the first two of the eight limbs of yoga described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. They are a set of ethical guidelines: five about how we deal with the world (yamas) and five about how we deal with ourselves (niyamas).

They are not commandments or rules for passing a test. Most teachers present them as areas to reflect on and practise gently over a lifetime.

The short answer

The yamas are five restraints for how we act toward others and the world. The niyamas are five observances for how we care for ourselves. Together they are the ethical foundation of yoga, before any pose or breathing practice.

2. The five yamas

Yama	Meaning	A simple practice
Ahimsa	Non-harming, in action, speech and thought	Notice one unkind thought today and let it go. Treat your body kindly in practice.
Satya	Truthfulness	Say what you mean, kindly. Avoid small exaggerations.
Asteya	Non-stealing	Be on time. Do not take credit or time that is not yours.
Brahmacharya	Moderation of energy	Notice where you overspend energy: late nights, endless scrolling.
Aparigraha	Non-grasping	Let go of one thing you do not need.

3. The five niyamas

Niyama	Meaning	A simple practice
Saucha	Cleanliness, inner and outer	Tidy your practice space. Reduce clutter in one drawer.
Santosha	Contentment	Write three things that are fine today.
Tapas	Steady effort, discipline	Keep a small daily habit for one week.
Svadyaya	Self-study	Keep a short journal of what you notice.
Ishvara pranidhana	Surrender, humility	Finish a practice by letting go of the outcome.

4. Ahimsa in more detail

Ahimsa is usually placed first because the others build on it. It does not mean being passive. It means avoiding needless harm, and that includes harm to yourself.

- In practice on the mat: stop when something hurts. Pushing through pain is not ahimsa.
- In food and habits: make choices that do not harm you or others, as far as you reasonably can.
- In speech: pause before saying something sharp.
- In thought: notice self-criticism. You can disagree with yourself without cruelty.

5. Satya in more detail

Satya means truthfulness, but traditional teachers add that truth should be spoken with kindness. Honesty without care can hurt. Care without honesty can mislead. The practice is balancing both.

6. How to start: one pair at a time

Trying all ten at once is hard. Choose one yama and one niyama to focus on for a week. Reflect briefly each evening. Notice where it was easy and where it was not.

Week	Focus	Daily reflection
1	Ahimsa + Saucha	Where was I kind to myself and others? Where was I not?
2	Satya + Santosha	Was I honest? What was I grateful for?
3	Asteya + Tapas	Did I respect others' time? Did I keep my habit?
4	Aparigraha + Svadhyaya	What did I let go of? What did I learn about myself?

7. Common misunderstandings

Idea	A better way to see it
"Yoga means being perfect"	These are directions to move toward, not a score.
"I must be vegetarian to follow ahimsa"	Traditions differ. Think about what you can do within your own circumstances and values.
"Contentment means never wanting to improve"	Santosha is accepting what is while still making wise efforts.
"These are religious rules"	They come from a spiritual tradition, but many people use them as simple ethics regardless of belief.

8. Applying the yamas in everyday life

The yamas are easiest to understand through ordinary situations. Ahimsa shows up when you decide not to reply sharply to a tiring message. Satya shows up when you admit you are not sure of something instead of pretending. Asteya appears when you return a borrowed item on time, or give a colleague credit. Brahmacharya, often translated as moderation of energy, can be as simple as noticing when you are using your energy on things that leave you empty. Aparigraha shows up when you notice you are holding on to an old grievance, a possession or an expectation you no longer need.

None of this needs special clothing or a quiet room. The yamas are practised in a queue, at work, on the phone and at the dinner table. Many teachers suggest simply noticing, without judgement, when you act in line with a yama and when you do not. Noticing is the practice.

9. Applying the niyamas in everyday life

Saucha, usually translated as cleanliness, can be physical (a tidy space, clean body, simple food) and mental (less mental clutter). Santosha, contentment, does not mean having no ambitions. It means being able to find some ease in the present moment while still making sensible plans. Tapas, steady effort, is the quiet habit of showing up: ten minutes of practice even on a flat day. Svadhyaya, self-study, can be a short journal entry, or reading one verse from a text and thinking about it. Ishvara pranidhana, surrender or humility, is the practice of doing your best and then letting go of the outcome.

10. A short evening reflection

A simple routine makes these ideas stick. Before bed, spend three minutes with a notebook. You might write one answer to each of these questions.

- Where did I act kindly today, to myself or someone else?
- Was there a moment I was not fully honest, with myself or others?
- Did I take more than I needed, or give more than I could?
- What small effort did I make today that I am glad of?
- What am I holding on to that I could put down?

Do not use the answers to criticise yourself. The idea is to see patterns. Over a few weeks you may notice which yama or niyama keeps coming up, and that is a good one to focus on.

11. Troubleshooting

Situation	What to try
I feel guilty when I notice I fell short	Treat it as information, not a verdict. Ahimsa applies to how you treat yourself too.
I do not know where to start	Pick ahimsa and one small action, such as not criticising yourself for a day.
The ideas feel too big	Reduce them to one sentence on a card and keep it on your desk.
Others around me do not share these values	These are personal guidelines. You do not need to impose them on anyone.

12. Questions people ask

Do I need to follow all ten?

They are guidelines to explore, not an exam. Choose what is useful.

Are the yamas and niyamas only for advanced students?

No. They come first in the eight limbs because they are the foundation, and anyone can start.

How do they relate to poses and breathing?

They are the ethical context. Many teachers say the way you practise, with patience and non-harming, matters as much as the pose.

13. Glossary

Term	Plain meaning
Yama	Ethical restraint toward the world.
Niyama	Personal observance.
Ahimsa	Non-harming.
Svadyaya	Self-study.
Sutra	A short verse or thread of teaching.

Reminder

This guide is general education and not medical advice. It does not diagnose, treat or cure any condition. If you have a health concern, speak with your doctor before starting a new practice.

Practice log

Print this page and keep a short record. Notes help you see patterns over time.

Day	Minutes	Daily reflection	How it felt	Notes
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
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