

Raja Yoga

II. Niyama: Better Options Instead

When wisdom is awakened, one makes better choices and chooses the good as a response to every situation in life which naturally increase external and internal purity, health and well-being.

Austerity is both a simple life and a life lived simply—without inner complexity. Contentment naturally brings the avoidance of the unnecessary and the mind is free to pursue the truth. The many practices in yoga are pursuit of truth through different means.

In the quest to know, one confronts one's conditioning or the force of habit and prayer and dynamic self-surrender becomes natural.

1. Saucha, Inner and Outer Cleanliness

Saucha or cleanliness is everything in its right place at the right time. The practice of brahmacharya or a life of conservation requires saucha or total cleanliness in all things.

Fasting is a powerful means to examine, exhaust and get over strong urges by not giving into the urge and instead, facing it squarely to see the urge for what it is. Fasting is not just of the stomach but of the mind too and augments one's will power tremendously by understanding and transcending passion. There are also specific means of increasing physical and mental cleanliness which will be examined later.

2. Santosha, Contentment or the Absence of Passion

We have already looked into contentment as necessary to avoid the force of habit. Contentment is not a state of passivity in life, one is fully engaged in what needs to be done without the action or resulting fruit being the trigger and sustainer of action.

Can we do what needs to be done or necessary without being driven by any personal thought, agenda or result? It is only when we have the clarity and willingness to do 'what needs to be done' that we learn how to separate thought from action. This brings about a significant reduction in thought and energy is immediately available for other things.

3. Tapas, External and Internal Purification

We tend to take very good care of something that belongs to others or something we have borrowed, if we take care of all material things as if they are not ours, we will lessen our attachment to them. Taking care of things we have will also keep them in better condition and lessen desires for newer or better things—increasing contentment.

If we take care of the body and mind as 'not ours', we will be careful in their care. The body will be better taken care without increasing body-consciousness or attachment to the body—because it ages naturally and because it is not ours.

The practice of pranayama (which we shall discuss later), cleanses the energy pathways of blockages and regulates energy flow.

Similarly, if we take care of the mind carefully, we will not harbor separation, self-centeredness and selfishness as though circumstances come and go—the effects register on the mind and are very difficult to clean. We will be careful about the company we keep and naturally seek that promotes overall well-being without any aversion.

On a deeper level, when the inner intelligence watches the mind and directly observes all that goes on outside; existing conditioning starts to exhaust itself. There is a certain amount of residual energy infused into impressions gathered—this is what gives conditioning its strength. We have infused this energy by our careless positive and negative disposition and the inner intelligence must now engage all that appears within and without for this energy to be diffused. The release of energy is the release of inner tensions which are the hidden springs of action we call conditioning. There is no suppression or manipulation—the uncolored intelligence sees and acts directly, bypassing the promptings of conditioning which weaken by disuse. This psychological burning is also called tapas by Patanjali as this vigilance purifies the mind.

4. Swadhyaya or Self-Study

Swadhyaya is not just study of scriptures but self-study through scriptures, teachings and life in general. The seeker is always attentive and 'the mundane' does not exist for him. Life is a flowing, ever-changing, every renewing stream. Being part of life's stream, we are also continually changing and evolving. With the new moving in the new—how can anything be mundane?

When we are not attentive, habit responds to life and what we call 'mundane' is being caught-up in the cycle of habitual perception and response or mechanical living. Swadhyaya being self-study, requires unbroken observation of the mind and the fire of observation keeps conditioning or habit from perception and action. The inner intelligence sees what is actually in

front of it from moment to moment and does what is needed. The energy of conditioning lessens by disuse as the inner intelligence responds to life.

Life, us included is experienced as ever new—life by its flow of events and ourselves by the inner flow of evolution. Every moment is an opportunity for swadhyaya or self-study in life's study-hall.

Spiritual sadhana or practices such as study of scriptures, japa and kirtan are focused activity of the mind and heart where we learn through practice to do something positive without the interference of the mind. When we study, we see what is already known interpreting what is being read and learn to read each line afresh. In japa and kirtan, the mind is observed and we discover the way to keep the attention on the mantra or kirtan while witnessing the rise and fall of thought.

5. Ishwar-Pranidhana or Self-Surrender

Patanjali uses the term Ishwar-pranidhana, where Ishwar is 'That which is' or the one omnipresent reality called God and pranidhana is a dynamic, whole-souled surrender. Self-surrender is not a cliché or giving-up but the feeling that guides all action when every cell in one's being feels the divine omnipresence is the only reality. It is this divine omnipresence Patanjali calls Ishwar or God.

Naturally, if I truly feel God alone is, every thought, feeling, word and action would testify to this deep feeling. The idea of otherness would not exist and my life would be a living proof of this feeling. All limitations would drop as I would feel I am always in God's presence and self-centeredness would be impossible.

This is why we have Ishwar-pranidhana as the last of the niyamas or better options, not so it is done last but that we keep whole-souled effort till it is possible. All yamas or avoidances and niyamas or better options instead are designed to shape understanding to this end where there one feels the need for self-surrender through life.

"The 'I' cannot surrender—the 'I' is what has to be surrendered" writes Swami Venkatesananda. Just how to do this? There is no office or form to fill in, no application or clerk or middle-man to speak to. There may never be any feedback at all signifying surrender has happened and you may never know as 'the you' would not be there to know. When the heart is filled with the feeling of God's omnipresence as the only reality—every action that proceeds from it is testimony to the feeling. Life becomes a stream of opportunity for the heart to express this—not in some emotional song, poem or word but in every blessed thing you do.

Every act is a spiritual act and a different kind of gracefulness floods the heart. Nothing is just tossed away, not even the garbage. One does not tread carelessly and one becomes careful in

every dealing—whether it be to a human, an insect or a plant. The heart that has been gripped by this feeling cannot hurt others, be selfish and all the yamas and niyamas become natural to it in their very best form. Each moment is a moment to demonstrate to God and every action the demonstration.

Karma yoga becomes a way of life and bhakti yoga or the way of love becomes the language of the soul. There is unbroken vigilance because one recognizes that the only thing allowed to be called ours is our foolishness and since one is ever in the presence of God—this should not be possible. One's life becomes living meditation and every act a masterpiece. Life is lived masterfully and there is order in the mind. Discipline becomes natural and do's and don'ts are not necessary.

These yamas and niyamas are not imposed upon you as rules but suggested by Patanjali as necessary for a life to be lived without conflict. Nothing imposed upon you will be accepted by the heart fully, there will always be selectivity and resistance.

Yoga is an exact science, very beautifully laid out as a prescription for a life without pain or sorrow. The mind that makes this possible can later inquire into itself as it is at perfect peace with things outside and within itself. The mind must be healed of all tears and division for pain and sorrow are the results of division. Let us look at the other limbs of raja yoga next.

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