

# The Significance of Niyamas in Sadhana

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**Abstract – The foundation for ethics is a pre-requisite for one's spiritual journey. Ethics is generally divided into dos and don'ts. Niyamas or rules of discipline as they are generally referred to is the second limb of the Eight-Fold Path of Yoga. The present paper seeks to examine the significance of niyamas in the sadhak's life.**

**The five Niyamas are discussed in detail with the possibility of exceptions of place, time and occasion. The paper also examines the methods of cultivation virtues and developing perspectives towards people in society while maintaining one's own strong moral character.**

**Key Words:**

**Niyama: Rules for discipline and ethical living**

**Sadhana: Spiritual practices undertaken for purification and elevation.**

**Sauca: Cleanliness both internal and external.**

**Santosa: Contentment.**

**Sattvic: Purity, lightness, brightness.**

**Guna: Attributes or traits.**

**Rajasika: Full of activity and action.**

**Tamasic: Dullness, staleness, inertia, sluggishness.**

**Tapas: Purification and austerity.**

**Vasanas: Deep-rooted desires and needs.**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Sauca – Santosa – Tapah – Svādhyāyēśvara –  
Prajñādhānāni niyamāḥ (II – 32)[1]*

**Sauca:** The first Niyama is Sauca or purity. According to yogic philosophy the whole universe is the manifestation of the Divine. From this perspective nothing can be impure. The word purity is used in a relative sense and in relation to our body. The body which consists of the physical mental and intellectual vehicles has to be made pure so that life can be expressed at a higher level of consciousness. Body and mental health and purity are interconnected terms. The body falls ill when it is impure and vice-versa. It is said that a strong body obeys and a weak body commands. Favourable health depends upon diet and eating habits and this in turn directly affects

the mind. The reason is easy to understand. Both body and mind are material by nature and as such they are products of food. The physical body is the gross body whereas the mind the subtle body of the person of the food we eat the grossest part goes to form excreta, the middle part goes to form blood and the finest part goes to form the mind. For example certain bypass of food create within us inertia and dullness (tamasic), others create excitement and passion (rajasik) and others calmness and tranquility (sattvic).

Regarding the influence of food over the mind the Chhandogya Upanishad says, "When the food is pure, the sattva element gets purified and memory becomes unwarering".[2] The Bhagwad Gita also supports the view. "Food that promotes longevity, vitality strength, health, pleasure, appetite and that

is succulent, oleaginous, substantial and agreeable is favoured by people endowed with sattva. Food that is excessively bitter, sour, salty, hot acrid dry and burning is liked by people endowed with rajas. It causes pain, grief and disease. And food that is ill cooked, tasteless, putrid, stale unclean and left over is favoured by people endowed with tamas".[3] The guna structure also influences one's personality traits, religious views and habits of dress. A tamasic person is careless and clumsy by nature, superstitious and narrow in religious views is uncouth and disproportionate in choice of dress. A rajasika person is unsteady and domineering by nature, is bigoted, aggressive and ostentatious in matters of religion and chooses dress that is gaudy, colourful and showy. A person of satvika mind is steady calm and thorough is universal and tolerant in understanding of religion and chooses dress that is clean, neat and modest.[4] By changing the food we can alter and control the moods of our mind. As Ramakrishna says, "Sattva preserves, rajas creates and tamas destroys"[5] The ideal is to be able to control the gunas according to our need and not be controlled by them. This is meant by self-control. Hence we can conclude that the health and purity of the body and mind are dependent upon the purity of food. The purity of food is thus vital in yoga for an aspirant.

Purity of food is considered from three points of view. Jati, nimitta and Ashraya. Jati is the nature or material purity of food. There are certain kinds of food that are considered impure by nature. These include all exiting food such as onion and garlic, food that is left over stale or foul smelling food of which natural juices have dried up and also items of food that have been procured by causing injury and cruelty to other living beings. Nimitta or qualitative impurity refers to those foods that have been contaminated by dirt, bacteria, saliva other secretions or that have been partially eaten by someone else. Impurity of ashraya or spiritual impurity is the aura or the person's influence left on the food. Food cooked handled or served by wicked, immoral or impure person will carry this impurity. Sri Ramakrishna warned his disciples from taking food related to shraddha ceremony or financial obsequies. In Sri Chaitanyas life we have a case where an ordinary man who happened to touch him in a state of ecstasy was overpowered by religious emotions. He was advised to take shraddha food and when taken put an end to that person's ecstatic moods.

Quantity of food is also an important aspect. Swami Vivekananda said "The food must be simple & taken several times a day instead of once or twice. The food should be such as contains the greatest nutriment in the smallest compass and be at the same time quickly assimilated. Never get very hungry. He who eats too much cannot be a Yogi. If food is taken in large quantity then the whole day is required to digest it. If all the energy is spent only in digesting food what will there be left to do other works?"[6] General injunctions regarding moderation in food are one should fill half his stomach with food, one quarter with water and leave one quarter for the

movement of air. Or, Breakfast like a king, lunch like a commoner & dinner like a pauper or *Eat once bathe thrice (Ek baar khao, teen baar nahao)*. To summarize: Purity & moderation in food leads to pure & healthy body and mind. It aids the one having a spiritual longing.

**Santosha** : Santosha is a powerful injunction to destroy the domination of the demands of the senses. The senses organs are clamouring all the time & we set off to satisfy their demands. All our life is a series of tasks assigned by the sense organs & we go on fulfilling them. Psychologically we are in a state of identification with our sense organs. Patanjali says that one must break this identification with the senses & that is possible when we start denying the senses with a determined 'NO'. It is an understanding wherein one says 'I am sufficient as I am. I do not need to be a slave to the senses to make me feel complete. My happiness is complete by itself without the need of any addition through the avenue of the senses. This brings in the condition of equilibrium. Slowly the senses lose their power of impacting us. Activities of life become more controlled in the sense that one does not run after frivolous things, one is out of the rat race. This equanimity stops to a great extent the emotional attachment with the things outside & the corresponding disturbances inside. It is only when the desires are eliminated and the mind becomes perfectly calm that we know what true happiness is. This subtle & constant joy which comes from within is really a reflection of Ananda one of the three fundamental aspects of the self.

**Tapas**: Tapas is a very comprehensive term that includes purification, self-discipline & austerity. It stands for a class of various practices to purify & discipline the lower nature by the exercise of the will. The meaning of the word is probably derived from the process of subjecting crude gold to strong heating whereby the dross is burnt off & pure gold is left behind. Similarly one has to assert one's will which craves for comfort, indulgence & satisfaction by doing the very opposite that it craves for. Tapas is a direct confrontation & a determined counter attack against the habitual propensity of the senses to taste & achieve satisfaction. These include practices as fasting, observing vows of various kinds, Pranayama etc, for e.g. When one wants to eat sweets, discipline the tongue by eating bitter neem leaves for forty days, going without umbrella or shoes for a period of time. The systematic practice of Tapas begins with simple & easy exercises which require the exertion of will power & is continued by progressive stages with more difficult exercises, the object of which is to bring about the dissociation of the vehicle from consciousness, perfecting the sense organs by disciplining them & making the body ready for the higher practices of Yoga.

**Svadyaya**: Within the subconscious & unconscious mind of a human lies on the form of

various subtle impressions & latent tendencies called Samskaras & Vasanas. Normally when one is occupied with some work these tendencies do not create a problem. But the moment one is free the inner Samskaras & Vasanas start showing their hideous face. The mind runs riot goes into all sorts of sensual grooves & into various disturbing thoughts. To secure against this mental mischief one needs to create a certain mental background of thoughts in one's mind. So whenever the mind is idle it always refers to that mental background which is positive, elevating & spiritually resourceful. It is through Svadhyaya that the Vasanas are rooted out & a new mind is created which has new spiritual vasanas & Samskaras of the sacred scriptures. The process is called sravana. It provides a broad and general intellectual background giving one clarity what yoga is about & is it his cup of tea or not. As scriptural reading continues, the truths are reflected upon. One starts comparing one's own life with respect to the truths. This constant reflection prepares the mind for the reception of real knowledge from within. As Taimni observes "It produces a sort of a suctional action and draws the breath of intuition in the mind. One gets deeper insight & the cleaner the insight into the problems the keener becomes the desire for a real solution for gaining the transcendent knowledge in the light of which all doubts are completely resolved and the peace of the eternal is attained".[7] The process is called as Manan. Continual reflection leads to the percolation of the knowledge in the head to trickle into the heart. It is here that the transformative process takes place, a spiritual background of the mind is prepared and life takes an upward swing. The mind becomes increasingly & continually engrossed in brooding over the fundamental truths of life which now takes the form of meditation. The nature of object differs according to the temperament of the individual but the condition of the mind – a state of deep absorption remains the same. The process is called as Nidhidhyasana. Svadhyaya is preferred by this three stage process.

*Isvara Pranidhana* : In simple language Isvara Pranidhana means surrender to the Divine. A person is in one position and in surrender the changes one's position & puts oneself into another position. The mental framework is something like this "I give myself up and place myself in the Divine for the Divine to do whatever It wishes with me". Let us understand the psychological implications of this injunction.

Unconsciously & consciously the human individual is always engaged in trying to make things just as he wants them & in no other way. If obstacles come in his way he will try to remove them & somehow or the other see that the things are as he wants them to be. Now the world has a will of its own. It also wants things in its own way and there is always a variance between the way in which we want things for ourselves and the way in which the world is prepared to give things to us. In clinging to one's selfish desires

lies the seeds of all quarrels, all disharmony, all desire, all conflicts, all clash, all hatred, all vengefulness, all desires to retaliate, & all sorrow & suffering. Within the framework of society the dictum would be "Adapt, adjust, accommodate" But within the framework of spiritual life when we talk of surrender it is bowing to the will of God. It is the question of giving up the 'I' & 'Mine' and saying to God. "You will be the one to lay down the rule not I, you will be the one to pilot the ship not I. Thy will be done not mine" It is surrendering the turbulent urges to the sense appetites, the demanding desire nature of the mind & the inveterate urges of the ego at the feet of God & then behaving & living happily in whatever condition He may keep us.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa explained this spiritual state of surrender by citing an analogy of the cat & the kittens. The cat lays the little ones & then the life of the kittens is completely in the hands of the cat. The cat somehow shifts the kitten seven or eight times in a month or two. The little kitten just curls itself up and allows itself to be picked up by the scruff of the neck and taken wherever the mother cat deems fit. Sri Ramakrishna says that this is the nature & condition if the devotee does not want to have any say in any matter. He allows the Lord to do what he wants with his life.[8]

Here a problem arises. Theoretically one may say "O God I put myself into your hands" But God does not seem to have any direct communication with us. One does not know him nor has one seen him. He does not appear to us & say "Okay I am very pleased that you have put yourself in my control now from hence forward do this do that". He does not say that He is still a remote factor, a concept. One only has a feeling about God, a sentiment that is neither well defined nor vivid just vague. Our scriptures abound in directions in this regard. The Vedas are regarded as the word of God. They are an expression of the will of God. How God wants us to live our life, how he wants us to know, think, feel & act is repeatedly expressed in the scriptures. Therefore one must surrender all our egoistical inclinations and urges & desires & live our life in conjunctions with the Vedas or Shruti's. This is one of the meaning of Isvarapranidhana. Though God is intangible but the Guru is tangible so one see the guru as the representative of God as says "I have put myself in discipline at the lotus feet of this Guru and whatever he says is, to me equal to God telling me. So I put myself to complete faith whatever he may tell me". Here too the main objective is to free ones personality from the vice like grip of the ego. That is the main objective of Ishvarapranidhana. Swami Sivananda used to say "Military discipline is very good Yogic discipline where you swallow your pride, your ego, your own desire, your fancy and whatever the order you have to obey whether you like it, want it

or wish it? For a soldier the dictum is “Yours is not to question why Yours is but to do or die” Therefore a trained soldier is better fitted for yoga than even an erudite scholar”.[9]

The ‘I’ OR ‘EGO’ is a product of Prakrti therefore it is always aware of the evolute of Prakrti & seeks identification with it. So our entire awareness of ourselves is in the context of the external universe of name, place, animal, thing, with occurrences, events, incidents, situations, environment, with my wife, my children, my factory, my job, my house & so on. Hence in lies the fundamental mistake because all these are temporary, changing and perishable. Any identification with them will only bring pain, sorrow & suffering. It is when one identifies oneself with GOD which is imperishable & everlasting substratum of the universe that one can have everlasting peace & happiness. Isvarapranidhana when perfected leads to the state of superconscious or Samadhi. It is also the essence of Bhakti yoga. Indian culture has laid down various practices of obedience to parents, elders, saints & guru for the development of Isvarapranidhana.

Superficially examined both Yama & Niyama both have a common purpose –the transmutation of the lower nature for a higher life. But a closer look at the various vows & injunctions under the two heads will reveal the difference in the general nature of the practices enjoined for bringing about the changes in the psyche & transforms the character. The purpose of Yama is to stop the downward slide, to stop the animality and to make one human. Without Yama one gets more & more entangled in the clutches of Prakrti, living in illusion & in perpetual pain & suffering. It is yama that breaks the entrapment, clears one’s vision and makes one ready. The Niyamas are inculcated for a positive definite & upward direction to one’s life. Without Niyama one would just be human and the possibility of the downward slide would always be there. While Yama is productive and moral the Niyamas are constructive & disciplinal. Yama is for changing the animal into man. Niyama is for preparing the man in to God.

In the practice of Yamas & Niyamas there are occasions where doubts arise whether it is flexible or advisable to practice that particular virtue in a particular situation which has arisen. Considerations of class, place, time & occasion may be involved in situation when decisions have to be taken for example.

Class: Should a soldier Kshtriya who aspires to be a Yogi relate his vow for Ahimsa or kill in battle?

Place: One is lost in the jungle and needs to survive. We find an old blind person with food, shall we steal the food from him?

Time: Today’s practical life suggests that these are times of uncertainty so make money when there is

time opportunity. Shall one relax the vow of Aparigraha?

Occasion: Your friend has cheated on his wife, knowing that you are truthful his wife comes and asks you. Shall one speak the truth & let our friends marriage fall apart?

Human life is always confronted with unique situations where there is a doubt whether the ethical code is to be practiced strictly or exceptions can be made under special circumstances. *Jāṭideśa – kāla – samayānavacchinnāḥ sārvaḥaḥmā mahā vrataḥ (II – 31)[10]*

The sutra makes it clear that no exceptions can be made in the practice of the ethical code. One may put to great inconvenience & may have to pay great penalties but there can be no holidays. Besides a Yogi knows that the universe is governed by a moral law and as such no harm can come to a person who tries to do right. Thirdly the universality of the vow leaves no scope for argument so there is ease of deciding & no room for moral struggle. The sutra provides universality, clarity & strictness in observing the ethical code. The practice of the ethical code is easier said than done. Anyone who consciously makes an attempt to follow Yama & Niyama faces the strong tendencies & force of habit from previous lives & this life which strongly resist the ideals & compel one to think, feel and act otherwise.

In sutra 33 Patanjali gives one of the most important laws of character building, a law which even modern psychology recognizes and recommends in dealing with the subject of self-culture.

*Vitarka – bādhane pratipakṣa – bhāvanam (I – 33)*

An undesirable tendency can be changed only by replacing it by a mental habit of an exactly opposite kind-hatred by love, stealing by giving & so on. New & desirable mental channels are created by new thoughts in which mental energy begins to flow in ever increasing measure. The force of the undesirable tendencies gradually becomes weaker & that of the ideal stronger. The amount of mental energy required & the time taken will depend upon the strength of the undesirable habit, the will power & the intensity to succeed. Just as Pratipakṣabhāvanam is a method to ward off the negative, immoral & evil tendencies similarly *Maitrī – karuṇā – muditupekṣāṇam sukhaduḥkha – puṇyāpuṇya – viṣayāṇam bhāvanātaś citta – prasādanam (I – 33)[11]* gives direction to inculcate the correct attitude of a would be yogi in the various kinds of situations that may arise in his relationship with those amongst whom he lives. One of the greatest source of disturbance to our mind is our uncontrolled reactions to our human environment to what people do around us



& to the pleasant or unpleasant conditions in which one gets involved. If one interacts with people according to one's whims & fancies then one will either be reactive creating an upsurge of violent emotions or will become passive not react & become cold & hard hearted outside with violent emotions churning inside. In one case it is violence expressed & in other violence suppressed. Further stages of yoga are not possible with this kind of a mental attitude. Also social problems will continue & in such a conflicting environment one gets pulled into vyavahara again & again consuming precious time & energy. Herein lies the importance of the sutra. By keeping friendliness towards the happy, compassion for the suffering, goodwill towards the virtuous & disinterest in the sinful one is able to develop harmonious social relationship which otherwise as seen can be a big, unwanted hurdle. Though yoga deals with personal ethics it gives due importance to social ethics since majority of Sadhakas are doing their sadhana living in society. Once social disturbances are minimum one can whole heartedly plunge into one's sadhana. Again cultivating these virtues keeps in mind glad & happy which is a requirement for further practices.

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