

Yoga Philosophy – Niyamas

In the Yoga Sutras, written around 200BC, the sage Patanjali, documented the Yamas, outlining actions and attitudes we ought to avoid, and the Niyamas, which describe actions and attitudes we should cultivate.

Patanjali states that the niyamas are to be practiced within oneself in order to live free from the attachments which cause suffering and separation from the Whole.

Present Perfect is a business which expresses who I am and what really matters to me. What is at the core of who I am, what does really matter to me? This is a question I constantly ponder and the best answer to date is “The joy of heart to heart connection with others and a feeling of being at one with the universe”.

At this fundamental level there is a close alignment of purpose and intention.

The five niyamas are: purity (saucha), contentment (santosha), austerity (tapas), self-study (svadhyaya), and devotion to the Lord (isvara pranidana)

The first niyama, **saucha**, is interpreted as **purity and cleanliness**.

I understand Patanjali to be advocating purity of body, cleanliness, good health habits, a clear and orderly environment; clarity of thought and purity of intention

Two challenges I put to my clients very early in our coach-client partnership are “Practicing extreme self Care” and “Simplifying Your Life”

When I ask questions of my clients and they start to really understand what is truly important to them, not surprisingly, their continuing good health is very high on the list. It is rare to find anyone actually taking the actions required to nourish and maintain their body in a state of total wellness. “Practicing Extreme Self Care” means treating both your mind and your body with love and attention and includes developing habits for exercise, having health checks and adopting healthy eating habits. So often, people, especially people who are kind and considerate by nature, treat others with more care and love than they do themselves. The challenge that most of my clients seem to face with extreme self care is to overcome the feeling that looking after themselves, is selfish. The truth is that it is only by looking after ourselves that we can become truly available and effective in helping others. As the air hostess tells us when we board a plane, “Should oxygen masks be needed, fit your own mask before attending to others’.”

“Simplifying your life” means identifying everything that is superfluous or doesn’t support your values and gradually eliminating it from your life. This can be seen as a process of purification. The space and vacuum that this creates is then available to focus on what truly matters to you and attract more of what you truly supports you. Simplifying your environment, by throwing away and giving away

things which you do not use or do not truly enjoy, starts the process of organising and purifying your environment. This then leads on to discarding belief systems and habits and no longer doing things because other people think you should, or because the media or your sub-culture tells you that you should. You begin to live more in integrity with your true self. With simplification comes more space, stillness of the mind, clarity and focus.

Sauca also means clarity of thought and purity of intention. Patanjali suggests that if you embrace impurity in thought, word or deed, you, and possibly others, will suffer. This suffering has more to do with your thoughts than your actions. If we are coming from selfishness our intention does not have its origin in purity; when we act from compassion then our actions are pure, even if just for that moment. A major function of a life coach is to ask questions and listen without judgement. This enables the client to gain more clarity of thought and make more conscious choices. "What is the intention of my action?" is one of the key questions I ask my clients to consider regularly. For example, "Am I speaking in order to provide useful information and support, or do I just want to look good, or am I really just looking for acknowledgement". Knowing the intention, our desired outcome, often means that we change what we were going to do or say. It always means that we have taken the opportunity to check the purity of our intention.

The second niyama is "**santosha**", **interpreted as contentment**. Santosha is an experience which has nothing to do with the external circumstances. Contentment requires the willingness to enjoy whatever you have been given today, knowing that it will change. When we enjoy the life we have today, this very moment, we are practicing santosha.

This practice of santosha, which requires living in the present, is at the core of the philosophy of Present Perfect. I focus with my clients on what is good in their life. Every client meeting begins with the questions, What are your wins this week, and What are you grateful for? We end with the question, What do you want to attract into your life this week? I encourage my clients to keep a gratitude journal, to create Strategic Attraction Plans, which identify the characteristics and attributes of what is perfect for them, to "tune in" to the good in people, including themselves, understanding that there are different ways of seeing things and that they can choose to be happy. I encourage my clients to use their past as a guidepost, not a hitching post, to give up their attachment to their personal history and see the present moment for what it really is. To plan for the future, but not to worry about it. To enjoy the present moment, knowing it is a gift.

It is easier, of course, to enjoy the beautiful moments, the joyous experiences of life. Patanjali is asking us to be equally willing to embrace the difficult moments. I believe that the present is perfect, even when it clearly isn't! If something is a struggle, and we are feeling pain and distress, then something is out of alignment, this is our opportunity to step back for a moment, look at the big

picture and see what the lesson is for us to learn. There are, of course, degrees of pain and distress. To be feeling upset because you feel unappreciated, overworked and underpaid in your corporate job is very different from, suddenly becoming quadriplegic in an accident, or being imprisoned and tortured. In my work I am grateful to be talking with clients at the former end of the scale. I work with them to see how they are contributing to the issue, to see how and what they can change to influence the situation. Sometimes there is nothing we can do to change what is happening. What we can do is change our thoughts and attitude; to fully accept what is. Acceptance is not giving up or condoning and is far from passive. Acceptance is seeing clearly what IS and moving on from there without resentment, struggle, anger and other emotions which keep us focussed on unhappiness. The principle is simple, but not always easy. How many of us could respond like Viktor Frankel and come through the experience of a concentration camp with the compassion and understanding and love of life he expresses? If we can learn to practice it automatically with minor irritations like the neighbour's barking dog we hope to build the ability and strength to practice it when faced with bigger issues in our life.

There seems to be a general acceptance that we cannot truly be content and grateful for what we have unless we experience some crisis which threatens to take those things away; that we cannot have the "ups" without the "downs". Does this really have to be the case? Surely there is enough suffering in the world without us each, individually, having to suffer personally, before we grasp the reality of how perfect and miraculous life can be. What if we could make contentment the path we walk on every day and joy, the trampoline?

By giving us the practice of santosha, Patanjali requires that we clearly observe our values and choices in life. This is essentially what Life Coaching is all about, providing a sounding board and support for individuals to clarify their values and make conscious choices.

The third Niyama is "tapas". Tapas comes from the Sanskrit verb "tap" which means "to burn". The traditional interpretation of tapas is that it is **"fiery discipline", burning away impurities or Austerity.**

Unfortunately tapas is usually interpreted to mean that anything which is difficult must be discipline and therefore must be helpful to spiritual unfoldment. Good things are sometimes difficult, but not all difficult things are good. The ego is drawn to difficulty and busy-ness. We like to look busy and be seen as the hero as we solve a problem or overcome an obstacle. This can lead us off our path and find us spending time on activities which are not important. It can see us miss out on spending time with our loved ones, it can see us keeping our desk untidy, "I am too busy (ie too important) to tidy it, and, anyway, a tidy desk means you do not have enough to do". We can find ourselves, albeit subconsciously, creating crises at work and setting and agreeing to tight deadlines. These provide us with the energy of adrenaline and feeling of power

or “righteousness” which comes with succeeding at something difficult. It is in this area that we can also see how our biggest strengths can also become our biggest weakness. Because we are good at something we discipline ourselves to stay in a job or career that does not nourish us and we squash our dreams and miss our true purpose.

The Oxford dictionary definition of Austerity is morally strict; severely simple. Severely simple gives us a clue as to how we might explore further. Making our life severely simple, burning away what is superfluous provides us with the space and time to focus on what is truly of importance to us, what I call our Values. The process of “Simplifying our Life” and removing the impurities was discussed earlier in the context of saucha.

Another way to understand tapas is to think of it as consistency. I often discuss with my clients, the concept that discipline is the gateway to freedom. Once we have decided on our true values, what is truly important to us, then we need to make a commitment to our dreams and goals and choose to support them with love. This may be through big shifts in thinking and leaps (sometimes of faith) but more often we make progress through consistent baby-steps. We set our direction and take small steps every day, trusting that it will take us where we need to go.

Ideally, we would like to be consistently mindful and present; for each of our thoughts and actions to be the result of conscious choice. In practice, we know that a large percentage of what we do and how we think is habit. If we had to consciously decide to clean our teeth, to put on our seat belt or to glance in the rear view mirror while driving, it would become very difficult to live in today’s fast paced world.

Knowing that we are “creatures of habit”, I work with my clients to help them craft new habits. These habits are designed to enable my client to reach their goals and dreams “automatically”, through steadily becoming the person they want to be (in fact, the Self that they authentically already are). Once these new activities become habits we work on crafting further habits, and so on. Whilst it requires discipline and consistency to develop new habits, this need not be difficult if we remember to support our efforts with love. To remain inspired (pulled forward) rather than relying on motivation (pushed forward), we need to honour and enjoy the process and loosen our attachment to the outcome.

If we have a commitment, born of love, to our consistent practice, and we keep going, even when the going gets tough, we are practicing the niyama of tapas.

The **fourth niyama is “svadhyaya”**. “Sva” means one’s Self, meaning the soul, the atman, or the Higher Self.(as opposed to the ego). “Dhy” is related to the word “dhyana” which means meditation and “ya” is an activating suffix. Thus

svadhyaya means “**actively meditating on or studying the nature of the Self**”.

The study of the Self leads to the deep acknowledgment of the oneness of Self with all that is. “[The joy of heart to heart connection with others and a feeling of being at one with the universe](#)“. To practice svadhyaya is to find God in ourself, the trees, and the person in the queue in front of us at the supermarket. We come to know that we are all divine beings, and as Wayne Dyer puts it “God doesn’t make junk”. Knowing this brings us to a deeper sense of respect for ourselves and all sentient beings. We see that all violence, stealing, lying and greed are crimes against ourselves and we find ourselves more easily practicing the Yamas and Niyamas. Through study of the Self we come to see that we have the seeds of all possibilities within us and that given different circumstances we, too, could be the terrorist or the rapist, leads to compassion and understanding.

Working with Present Perfect gives my clients the environment, opportunity and encouragement to practice svadyhyaya. Our fast-paced lifestyle and the general push towards “doing” rather than “being”, means that we do not make the time to really think about who we are and why we are here, what life is all about. Taking a bit of “quiet time” to reflect is seen as a self indulgent activity.

Unfortunately the world today does not seem to understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone. Anything else will be accepted as a better excuse. If one sets time aside for a shopping expedition, the time is accepted as inviolable; but if one says, “I cannot come because it is my hour to be alone,” one is considered rude, egotistical, or strange.

— Anne Morrow Lindbergh

I encourage my clients to consider that, far from being a self-centred, selfish practice, the study of Self leads us to see that we are all connected, we are all one. It leads to understanding and compassion for others and healthier relationships. Through encouraging the practice of journaling, dream books, gratitude journals, meditation and yoga, I provide my clients with tools and structure and “validity” or “justification” for study of themselves which leads to study of the Self. Through regular conversations, where I question and listen non- judgementally, coaching provides the opportunity to think out loud and come to insights and new awareness.

Employing “the watcher”, i.e. becoming the non-judgemental “watcher” of your own thoughts is a technique which I introduce to my clients to help with a greater awareness of their thoughts. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests using something like a ringing telephone, or a red traffic light as a trigger or “Bell of Mindfulness” to remind us to check in with “the watcher”. My clients find that this works well to help them become more aware and mindful. Taking a look inside our minds and becoming aware of our self-talk and pre-occupations is quite a revelation for most of us. We get to discover what I call “the Itty Bitty Shitty Committee”, which takes delight in berating us and telling us what we should and should not do and is often at war with our true integrity. We see how we create our own suffering by

holding onto resentments from the past and fears for our future, and how we can co-create a more fulfilling life by changing our thoughts and literally coming to our senses.

The final nyama is “isvara pranidanah”. Patanjali defines isvara as “Lord”. The word “pranidanah” conveys the sense of “throwing down” or giving up. Thus “isvara pranidanah” can be translated as giving up the fruits of all practice to God; ie, giving our best efforts, and then relinquishing all attachment to the outcome of our actions.

Work joyfully and peacefully, knowing that right thoughts and right efforts inevitably bring about right results. --- James Allen

Doing the best you can with the resources you have available and then surrendering control is a key message which I share with my clients. We work with the Law of Attraction, understanding that we are not “in control” but we are influencing what happens in our lives; our role is to co-create with the universe. We do not always understand when things do not turn out as we had hoped. It is important to trust the universe, and know that later we will be able to look back and see that the outcome was for the greater good. Later, we will be able to look back and “join up the dots”.

"My major disappointments have turned out to be blessings in disguise. So whenever anything bad does happen to me, I kind of sit back and feel, well, if I give this enough time, it will turn out that this was good, so I shan't worry about it too much." --William Gaines

This is often referred to as going with the flow, as opposed to drifting aimlessly or struggling upstream. Drifting can be likened to giving up responsibility for what is happening in our lives and how we respond to events. Struggling upstream is where we refuse to see the lesson and insist on doing it our way, do not take the time to step back and look for the easier, more natural way, or see the bigger picture. Knowing that the Law of Attraction will bring us what we are focussing on and that what is showing up in our life mirrors what is going on inside us leads us to a understanding that all we need to do is the best we can and then be open to gratefully receive, whatever the outcome.

Practicing isvara pranidanah encourages us to enjoy the process, rather than focusing solely on the outcome. It is another way we can remain in the present moment. I often work with my clients to help them re-define their definition of success, to honour the process not just the end product. For example, a Real Estate agent may have a goal to get 4 listings a week, and have an action to make 20 prospecting phone calls per day. If they believe it is worth doing and will eventually result in getting listings, then the fact that they have made the phone calls IS success, regardless of the outcome. The art workshops I run are another

example of this. I specifically do not teach **how** to paint; our objective is solely to have fun and enjoy the process.

Practicing isvara pranidhanah is also a great way to reduce the stressful habit of worrying. One of the symptoms of inner peace, suggested by Wayne Dyer, is an inability to worry. If you have control over something then you do not need to worry, because you can take action. If you do not have control over something then worrying is going to make no difference to the outcome. Or as my teenage son so eloquently put it, "I don't worry Mum, it doesn't do any good and anyway it isn't any fun".

Strength and surrender in balance create an asana. A steady place from which we can drink deeply of the present moment. knowing that we have done all that we need to do.

Conclusion

The environment that we live in today is very different from that of Patanjali. Also, we live a very privileged lifestyle compared with the vast majority of the world's population. Despite this and all that has happened over the last two and a half thousand years, Patanjali's teaching are still very relevant to us today. The essence of the Niyamas forms the foundation of many self-development programmes, success programmes and spiritual practices.

I believe that the work I do provides my clients with the environment, structures and practical tools and techniques which support them to develop themselves in ways that are in alignment with the essence of the Nyamas, so that they live a more peaceful, joyful and fulfilled life, in the perfect present.

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