

Yoga Philosophy – Yamas

The Universal Ethics of Yoga, known as the Yamas, were first documented by the sage Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras which was written around 200 BC. Patanjali presents the yamas as the moral virtues which, if attended to, purify human nature and contribute to health and happiness of society.

The world of Patanjali, in Northern India 300 years before Christ was a very different place from the Western world today. In this article we will consider how the yamas function in Australia today. Are they still being practiced after two and a half thousand years?

"Yama" has different meanings. It may mean "rein, curb, or bridle, discipline or restraints." The Yoga Sutra mentions five different yama, that is, disciplines and attitudes which result in behavior patterns of the individual in relation to the outside world.

The first three yamas, concerned with non-violence, truthfulness and non-stealing are upheld, in principle, by the laws and government. Whilst not necessarily followed at the deepest level, elements of these principles form a part of society's foundation.

Aspects of our society encourage the third and fourth principles of sense-control and resisting greed. However, the world of commerce and our economic structure rely on the population not following these principles. Our economy runs on the premise that people want more superficial, instant gratification and buy material goods that they do not actually need.

The Yamas in Society Today

The first yama is Ahimsa and is usually translated as non-violence or harmlessness. To practice ahimsa means not to injure or show cruelty to any creature or any person in any way whatsoever. It is clearly evident that many nations do not practice Ahimsa. Jon Kabat-Zinn tells us, in his latest book, *Coming to our Senses*, "We know that the 20th Century saw more organized killing in the name of peace and tranquillity and the end of war than all centuries past combined....And the 21st century is following on apace...."

Disregard for Human Rights is widespread, with governments turning a blind eye, or even initiating, torture, mutilation, humiliation, genocide and imprisonment. In Australia we are fortunate to live in a society where the government and the legal system provide a structure which minimises such blatant disregard for cruelty. Laws and regulations attempt to uphold Human Rights and prevent or reduce the instances of violent crimes, racial prejudice, sexual abuse, child abuse and self-abuse in the form of drug abuse.

Besides physical violence, there can be the violence of words or thoughts. What we think about ourselves or others can be as powerful as any physical attempt to harm. To practice Ahimsa also means being kind, friendly and giving thoughtful consideration to other people and things. It is good that we have laws covering many aspects of consideration for others, eg racial prejudice, sexual harassment, equal opportunities and wheelchair access. However, if we all truly practiced ahimsa there would be no need for these laws.

Our own self-talk and low self esteem, judgement of ourself and others are also examples of Himsa (violence). Many movies and popular television programs, advertising and women's magazines, present and encourage gossip, judgement, and ideals of how we should look if we are to be popular. Bullying in the school yard or at work, domestic arguments, cutting each other up on the road, graffiti, lack of patience and understanding for the disabled and elderly are unfortunately commonplace in our society.

Ahimsa also means non-violence and consideration for the environment. We are slowly becoming more aware and taking more responsibility for care of our earth. Slowly, more small steps, such as council support for recycling and composting, are being introduced. Whether we are doing too little too late remains to be seen.

Patanjali's second yama is Satya (Truthfulness). Satya is usually translated as "to speak the truth," Like ahimsa, this yama has many layers. The first and most obvious is not to intentionally lie, to be honest and tell the truth as best we can; to speak with the intention of being truthful. Two people can experience the same event and see it very differently depending on their background, their emotions and belief systems. What we call the "truth" is filtered through our own experience and beliefs about the world. When we speak with the intention of speaking from truth, we have a better chance of not harming others.

A major difficulty in today's society is that we often find it hard to know our own truth. There is pressure to conform to other people's ideas of what we should think and do, from what career we should chose, what a good relationship should look like, what we should wear, what constitutes being a good mother. We end up not really thinking for ourselves, but conforming to other people's standards.

Relationships break down and people get hurt because we do not communicate our needs, desires, expectations and feelings. So often we do not tell the truth to our spouse, boss, work colleagues, family and friends and ask for what we want, because we don't know what this is. We expect others to know what we want and get upset when they don't.

Even when we do know our own truth we find it hard to express it. If we didn't fear judgement and abuse we would be more likely to speak honestly. If we all practiced Ahimsa then it would be easier for people to practice Satya.

Honesty or telling the truth as best we can is an external practice. Integrity is an internal form of honesty. Honesty is what we do when others are around and

might judge our actions or words. To have integrity is to act in an honest manner when others are not around and will never know about our actions. Integrity is a deeper form of satya. If we look at the meaning of the word Satya in Sanskrit, we find that “Sat” means the eternal unchanging truth beyond all knowing. “Ya” means “do it”. Satya would then mean “actively expressing and being in harmony with the ultimate truth”. I suggest that each one of us has had moments when we have felt connected to this level of “truth”. However, In our fast-paced society, as Winston Churchill put it, “Men stumble over the truth from time to time, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened”.

The third yama is Asteya (Non-stealing). Steya means "to steal"; asteya is the opposite, i.e. to take nothing that does not belong to us.

Our legal system attempts to discourage stealing. Similarly, in our schools, children are taught not to take other people’s possessions. This doesn’t mean that people do not steal; in fact, I would suggest that each one of us has, at sometime in our life, taken something which does not belong to us. In order to steal, one has to devalue and dehumanise the person who will suffer from the theft. Many people, who would never even consider stealing from their neighbour, hold the view that it is OK to steal from the tax man.

Asteya does not apply just to possessions. Stealing someone’s ideas, taking the credit for something that someone else has done, “stealing someone’s thunder”, stealing a child’s innocence, stealing a nation’s livelihood are all examples of taking from others. Asteya also means that if we are in a situation where someone entrusts something to us or confides in us we do not use this to take advantage of them. We see many examples of these types of stealing occurring unchecked in society today.

While commonly understood as not taking what is not yours, it can also mean not taking more than you need. Here we see the connection between Asteya and Aparigraha, (non-greed), the fifth yama. In today’s society we are encouraged by advertising and the world of commerce to take more than we need. Fancy packaging is just one example where we each take more than we need in the form of cardboard and paper and plastic which goes straight into the rubbish or recycling bin.

Brahmacharya (Sense-control): The classical translation is that this yama means sense-control, specifically control of sexual appetite, and is often said to mean that we must practice celibacy. One interpretation is that to practice brahmacharya in this era is simply to remain faithful within a monogamous relationship. Another suggestion is to enjoy sexual intimacy while it is happening, but not to dwell on it at other times. This interpretation means remaining in the present and focusing on what is happening right now without obsession.

“Brahma” comes from the name of the deity Brahma; “char” means to walk and “ya” means actively. Thus Brahmacharya means “walking with God”. Viewed from this perspective we could say that Brahmacharya is a movement toward the essential truth. It is the approach of using one’s sexual energy, like all life energies, in a way that moves us closer to this essential truth and enables us to “walk with God”, ie live in such a way that enables us to understand, respect, honour and express our own divinity and that of all we encounter. We can experience a deep connection with another human being when we respect ourselves and our sexual partner and this cannot be found if we have sex mindlessly.

Our society today does a very poor job of promoting Brahmacharya. The use of sex in advertising, women’s magazines articles on how to make yourself more sexually attractive, many movies, television programs and even cartoons and computer games designed for young teenagers, often portray and promote casual and disrespectful sex . One could argue that it would be more in the spirit of Brahmacharya for a movie to show an explicit sexual act between two committed loving partners, than to show the “James Bond” type of hero jumping from the arms of one woman to the next. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate the criteria for classifying what is suitable for our children to watch.

The final yama in Patanjali’s list is “aparigraha”, or non-greed. Parigraha means "to take" or "to seize," and aparigraha can be translated as neutralising the desire to acquire and hoard wealth.

This is a very difficult one to practice because we are surrounded by stimulants to our greed all the time. In some ways our society’s economic system is based on greed. We are constantly being bombarded with advertisements which attempt to stimulate our desire for more. By promoting an attitude of greed, our society attempts to ensure that we will never be satisfied and always want to be someone else, be somewhere else and have something more.

Whilst in England, and in other countries, such as India, there is a class system based on breeding, in Australia and America the class system seems to be based on where one lives and how much one earns. “The more one has the more respected one is”. Alongside this we have the “Tall-poppy syndrome” which sees society resenting the wealthy. This leaves us both resenting the wealthy and aspiring to become wealthy. No wonder we all tend to have confusion around money and greed.

Material goods and monetary wealth are not, in themselves, evil, and those who own and earn are not necessarily greedy. After all, we cannot help the poor by becoming one of them. Many wealthy people provide employment for many others and use their wealth to help and support others. Greed becomes a problem when we allow our desire for more to allow us to act in opposition to the

other Yamas, when we are unkind to others, steal from others, disrespect others and use our energies solely for the pursuit of “more”.

It should be noted that greed is not just confined to material goods. We may hunger after acknowledgement, promotion, fame, enlightenment, difficult asanas, spiritual powers or perfect bliss. Just because one is non-materialistic it does not mean that one is necessarily practicing aparigraha.

It would seem that the way to follow aparigraha is to be truly and constantly grateful for, and happy with, what you have; whether it be a lot or a little. To want more of something and gratefully receive it when it is given is very different from being so attached to a specific outcome that one fails to appreciate what one already has.

"The bird of paradise alights only upon the hand that does not grasp." -- John Berry

Conclusion

Patanjali's Yamas are just as relevant in today's society as they were when first documented around three thousand years ago. Whilst the discussion shows us that the Yamas are not easily nor universally practiced, I believe that there is hope and that we are seeing an upward trend in the general Level of Consciousness in the world. I chose to end this essay with a quote from Jon Kabat-Zin, and a message of hope. “..Thirty years ago it was virtually inconceivable that meditation and yoga would find any legitimate role, no less widespread acceptance, in academic medical centres and hospitals. Now it is considered normal. It is not even thought of as alternative medicine, just good medicine...”

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