

Preface

I have a favorite mug that sits on my office desk filled with pens and pencils. This mug was given to me by one of my brothers many years ago, and I still look at it daily and chuckle. The mug says:

Things to do today:

1. Stop the Arms Race
2. Floss

I mention the mug because not only does it keep me tuned to both the lofty ideals of my life as well as the practical components, but it also speaks to the essence of the *Yamas & Niyamas*. These ten guidelines sit as both a vision of the possibilities of human existence, as well as providing the practical guidance to make skillful moment to moment choices in our daily lives.

We all want to live well. Let's face it, at the end of the day, it's not how much you have or how much you have accomplished that counts. What matters is how well you have participated in your own life, both the ordinary routines and the extraordinary surprises. It's how you feel inside when you lay your head on the pillow. Does a feeling of joy and well-being accompany you to bed? Or does your head touch the pillow with thoughts of anger, bitterness, helplessness, frustration, self-disappointment, or whiny complaints?

Being human is a complicated thing. We live within myriad confusing choices and contradictions. As human beings living among other life forms, we need to navigate our own personal needs within those of the community. As

Spirit hanging out in a human body, we need to live within the potential of our limitless dreams and our limited physical reality. In the midst of our indecision and confusion, these guidelines are like helping hands moving us deeper into our own authenticity and into a life that is richer and fuller than we could ever imagine, simply because we are living with more skill and awareness.

This may sound easy, but it is not. How do we gain mastery over our choices when life seems to toss us around with its ups and downs, many demands, and many voices telling us what we need and what is wrong with us? How do we gain skill when we find ourselves continuing to do what we promised ourselves we would never do again? How do we gain skill when we just screamed at our child or our partner and now we feel lousy? How do we gain skill when we feel stuck in a dead end job that is sucking us dry? How do we gain skill when we just dug into the chocolate and now we are beating ourselves up with messages of self-loathing?

Gaining the skill to choose our attitude, to choose what we think, and to choose what we do, may be the grandest adventure we can take as a human being. In the film *Last Holiday* Georgia Byrd, shocked by discovering she has only three weeks to live, decides to make her dream life of possibilities into reality. In an amazing shift of character from a timid woman stuck in her perceived realities of life, she suddenly bursts forth boldly and claims the life she has always wanted for herself.

It doesn't need to take a death sentence for us to change. We have the choice to burst forth boldly and claim our lives in this very moment, and yoga's ten guidelines, the *Yamas*



THE YAMAS & NIYAMAS

Niyamas, can support that very leap into the life that we seek. Under their guidance, the turbulence and drama that are often a familiar part of our life begin to disappear.

The result of a skillfully lived life is nothing less than joy. Not the kind that comes when things are going our way and disappears just as quickly, but the kind that bubbles up from within. The kind of joy that comes from our own sense of mastery in life that no matter what life brings, we are ready. Maybe there is nothing to figure out ahead of time, there is only a life to live well...or not. Which are you choosing for yourself? ☪



What are the Yamas & Niyamas?

The *Yamas & Niyamas* are foundational to all yogic thought. Yoga is a sophisticated system that extends far beyond doing yoga postures; it is literally a way of living. Yoga is designed to bring you more and more awareness of not only your body but also your thoughts. The teachings are a practical, step-by-step methodology that bring understanding to your experiences, while at the same time pointing the way to the next experience. They are like a detailed map, telling you where you are and how to look for the next landmark. They facilitate taking ownership of your life and directing it towards the fulfillment that you seek.

The *Yamas & Niyamas* may be thought of as guidelines, tenets, ethical disciplines, precepts, or restraints and observances. I often think of them as jewels, because they are the rare gems of wisdom that give direction to a well-lived and joyful life. In yogic philosophy, these jewels sit as the first two limbs of the 8-fold path.*

The first five jewels are referred to as *Yamas*, a Sanskrit word which translates literally into the word “restraints” and includes nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, nonexcess,

*The 8-fold path, or Astanga Yoga, comes from the Yoga Sutras of Pantanjali. Pantanjali, curious about what held true for all the different kinds of yoga, codified these basic tenets of all yoga in writings called the Yoga Sutras. Our word suture comes from the same word; think of these truths as weaving your life together in much the same way a medical suture would thread your torn body together. The writings of the Yoga Sutras form a basic text for classical yoga. The other six limbs of the 8-fold path are *Asana*, or postures; *Pranayama*, or breath control, *Pratyahara*, or sense withdrawal; *Dharana*, or concentration; *Dhyana* or meditation; and *Samadhi*, a state of unity.



and nonpossessiveness. The last five jewels are referred to as the *Niyamas*, or “observances,” and include purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender. Many guides to ethical conduct may leave us feeling overwhelmed with concepts, or boxed in by rule sets. Yoga’s guidelines do not limit us from living life, but rather they begin to open life up to us more and more fully, and they flow easily into one another in ways that are practical and easy to grasp.

Nonviolence, the first jewel, sits as the foundation to the other guidelines, which in turn enhance the meaning and flesh out the richness of nonviolence. Nonviolence is a stance of right relationship with others and with self that is neither self-sacrifice nor self-aggrandizement. This tenet guides us to live together, share the goods and do what we want – without causing harm to others or ourselves.

Truthfulness, the second jewel, is partnered with nonviolence. The marriage of these two guidelines creates a powerful dance between two seeming opposites. We can appreciate this statement when we begin to practice speaking our truth without causing harm to others. As partners, truthfulness keeps nonviolence from being a wimpy cop-out, while nonviolence keeps truthfulness from being a brutal weapon. When they are dancing perfectly together, they create a spectacular sight. Their union is nothing short of profound love in its fullest expression. And when there is cause for disharmony or confusion between the two, truthfulness bows to nonviolence. First and foremost, do no harm.

Nonstealing, the third jewel, guides our attempts and tendencies to look outward for satisfaction. Often, our dissatisfaction with ourselves and our lives leads us to this

outward gaze, with a tendency to steal what is not rightfully ours. We steal from the earth, we steal from others, and we steal from ourselves. We steal from our own opportunity to grow ourselves into the person who has the right to have the life they want.

Nonexcess, the fourth jewel, has been interpreted by many to mean celibacy or abstinence. Although this could certainly be one interpretation of nonexcess, its literal meaning is “walking with God.” Whatever your beliefs about the Divine, this tenet implies an awareness of sacredness in all our actions and an attentiveness to each moment that moves us into a stance of holiness. From this place of sacredness, the boundary is set to leave excess behind and live within the limits of enough. If we have been practicing nonstealing, we will automatically find ourselves primed to practice this guideline.

Nonpossessiveness, the fifth jewel and last of the guidelines known as the *Yamas*, liberates us from greed. It reminds us that clinging to people and material objects only weighs us down and makes life a heavy and disappointing experience. When we practice letting go, we move ourselves towards freedom and an enjoyment of life that is expansive and fresh.

If we have begun to live the first five jewels well, we may notice that our time is freeing up and there is more breathing space in our lives. The days begin to feel a little lighter and easier. Work is more enjoyable and our relationships with others are a little smoother. We like ourselves a little more; there is a lighter gait to our step; we realize that we need less than we previously thought; we are having more fun. As we begin our study of the final five jewels or *Niyamas*, we move



into a more subtle realm and into an interior resting place, a place that becomes like Sabbath for us.

Purity, the sixth jewel, is an invitation to cleanse our bodies, our attitudes, and our actions. It asks us to clean up our act so we can be more available to the qualities in life that we are seeking. This precept also invites us to purify how we relate to what is uppermost in the moment. It is the quality of being aligned in our relationship with others, with the task at hand, and with ourselves.

Contentment, the seventh jewel, cannot be sought. All the things we do to bring fulfillment to ourselves actually interfere with our own satisfaction and well-being. Contentment can only be found in acceptance and appreciation of what is in the moment. The more we learn to leave “what is” alone, the more contentment will quietly and steadily find us.

Self-discipline, the eighth jewel, literally means “heat” and can also be translated as catharsis or austerities. It is anything which impacts us to change. Change makes us spiritual heavyweights in the game of life; it is preparation for our own greatness. We all know how easy it is to be a person of high character when things are going our way, but what about those times life deals us a dark card? Who are you in those moments? This guideline is an invitation to purposefully seek out refining your own strength of character and it asks, “Can you trust the heat? Can you trust the path of change itself?”

Self-study, the ninth jewel, is a pursuit of knowing ourselves, studying what drives us and what shapes us because these things literally are the cause of the lives we are living. Self-study asks us to look at the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and realize that these stories create the reality of our

lives. Ultimately, this tenet invites us to release the false and limiting self-perception our ego has imposed on us and know the truth of our Divine Self.

Surrender, the tenth jewel, reminds us that life knows what to do better than we do. Through devotion, trust, and active engagement, we can receive each moment with an open heart. Rather than paddling upstream, surrender is an invitation to go with the underlying current, enjoy the ride, and take in the view.

In this book, each *Yama* & *Niyama* has been given its own chapter in which the philosophy of the guideline is woven with practical examples and stories. At the end of the chapter, I've included a list of questions as a guide for reflection. I encourage you to journal and/or form a study group to help deepen your commitment to your learning and to yourself. ❧

