

The YAMAS & NIYAMAS

Card Set (rev.2)

Print onto card stock or heavy paper and cut at crop marks. Study a card at the beginning of yoga practice or try a card draw anytime you seek focus or wish to set intention.



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The Yama **AHIMSA**, *non-violence*, beckons us to be mindful in what we say and do to ensure we are not harming people or other sentient beings in the world around us. Ahimsa considers harm not only as overt damage to the physical body but also as wounding the mind, emotion, or impairing another's growth.

Our potential to do harm, whether intentional or inadvertent, increases when we are out-of-balance, under stress, or functioning from a perspective of fear. When we feel powerless or helpless, we are more likely to grasp at control, which sometimes has the side effect of harming ourselves or others.

Compassion is the key to meeting the challenge Ahimsa propositions us with. It is difficult to do harm, even unintentional, when we hold kind-heartedness for other living beings, and faith they are doing their best.

But compassion, and its cousin acceptance, starts at home; we cannot truly bestow it on others until we grant it to ourselves. Deconstructing our personal rendering of the world is an essential step in developing that compassion to self and others.

The Yama **SATYA**, *truthfulness*, beckons us to avoid straying from a path of veracity in our words and our actions. Being truthful means attending to life as it is rather than denying, diminishing, or creating an alternate reality; it means not misrepresenting, exaggerating or deceiving; it means neither running from life's reality nor trying to micro-manage it.

Being truthful with others follows from being truthful with ourselves. It is helpful to pause, step out and look in because we can become adept at deceiving ourselves.

Being truthful is often not the more convenient option but our effort pays back tenfold when we do not need to go back and clean-up, apologize, or make right later on. And staying on the path of Satya allows us to rest our head with integrity at the end of the day, and when our days of mortal existence come to an end.

Satya must sometimes be weighed off against Ahimsa, but we should be cautious in thinking we are shielding others when really it may be ourselves we are protecting. We must also recognize that, paradoxically, truth can be fluid; what was the case at a given age or life stage may no longer be so now.

The Yama **ASTEYA**, *non-stealing*, beckons us to be sure we are taking only that which rightfully belongs to us.

Beyond just things, Asteya cautions us against taking others' time, space, energy, attention, and so on, that has not been freely offered, legitimately earned, or that we are not yet competent to possess.

When it comes to tangible objects of any type, we should be mindful that they are all impermanent; there can be no absolute ownership of any thing. We are merely temporary custodians or guardians.

When we notice ourselves engaged in the act of stealing, it can be useful to examine why it is we want that which we do not have. And we may try exercising more awareness and gratitude for all that we do have, tangible and not, rather than what we believe is lacking.

Engage in what is one's own rather than being distracted by that which is not. When we perceive our world from a perspective of personal abundance, rather than neediness, it is unlikely we will run afoul of Asteya's wise counsel.

The Yama **BRAHMACHARYA**, *right use of energy*, literally means walking with the supreme spirit, and beckons us to employ the energies of our desires in the service of sacredness rather than in the overindulgence of excess.

Excess, by its nature, precludes the expression of our true self, and may also be an indication that our sense of gratitude has gone astray. To understand where excess

begins, imagine a graph of vital energy function: a gently curved upward slope shows gradual increase in sacredness, then beyond the fulcrum a sudden drop and continual decline signifies a state of excess. The key to getting close but not over that peak lies in presence—in ruling our desires rather than being governed by them.

When we notice our vital energies and attention mired in excess there is good chance we are actually satisfying some other need than the originating desire. This is also how some addictions are born.

Sometimes Brahmacharya advocates a fast or abstention, though this should be done in such a way that it does not sublimate the natural vital energy fueling the desire.

The Yama **APARIGRAHA**, *non-possessiveness* or not grasping, beckons us to let go and give up clutching that which cannot be held onto. Attachment—to things, to moments, to actions and their resultant feelings, to people in particular, to whatever—is often evident when we find ourselves expecting the same fulfillment the second, third, tenth, or hundredth time.

When we hold on to something, sometimes in an effort to create constancy in an ever-changing world, we may come to find that it was in fact holding on to us, and therefore we are not free. The more we grasp, and stronger we clutch, the less free we are.

Clutter, whether physical, mental or emotional, may be a symptom of grasping as we attempt to maintain control and evade impermanence. The distraction that clutter brings obfuscates our presence, and yet it is only in the present moment that we fully experience life.

To practice non-attachment is scary, and only the profoundly brave and deeply faithful can let go of everything, because without anything our ego is nothing. But the more we can let go of, the lighter we will fly and the higher we soar.

The Niyama **SAUCHA**, *purity or cleanliness*, counsels us to keep ourselves clean and healthful, inside and out, on the premise that the more pure we are the less will be in the way clouding our practice and our path.

The clarity that pureness cultivates helps us to see and experience things as they truly are—just as crystal clear water allows the sharpest view of what is in it, and what lies beyond it. The more pure our essence, the more vibrant our yogic experience and the less there will be impeding our flow along the path.

Pure does not necessarily mean pious but we do need to be vigilant of what we are feeding our body and mind. Our inputs, inevitably, will not only impact what goes on within us but also impact our outputs as we interact with the world around us and the greater cosmos within which it exists.

Beyond just healthy food and drink, we should be mindful of the words, images, notions, and energies we allow into our being for they will affect our inner and outer essence both in direct ways we can sense and indirect ways we may not realize.

The Niyama **SANTOSHA**, *contentment*, counsels us to focus our attention on what is rather than on what we believe should be, or on how we would prefer things to be, and thus grant ourselves freedom from desires.

When we spend large amounts of time and effort in the service of getting what we want, expect or “need”, the result more often than not is ending up distracted from what we actually do have, which can squander our energy and destabilizes our foundation.

A simple antidote to such discontentment is to adjust our expectations and preferences. The quickest and least expensive “upgrade” is gratitude.

Contentment does not necessarily equate to happiness or satisfaction, nor does it signify complacency. Instead, it is the ability to accept what is and do whatever we do, wherever and however we do it, with joy.

True contentment arises from gratitude and acceptance experienced in presence of the moment, and with it comes a graceful calmness and peace.

The Niyama **TAPAS**, *self-discipline*, counsels us to shed unsupportive habits, and to wholeheartedly embrace the practices and routines that will most effectively engage our development and growth.

Tapas literally means heat, which offers an incisive metaphor for the burning enthusiasm advocated by this Niyama. Heat can hurt, and we are naturally inclined to avoid something that feels too hot. But heat can also change, renew, transform. So our challenge is to skillfully employ self-discipline to the degree it is most effectual without going too far as to be detrimental.

It is easier to keep a fire burning than to relight an extinguished one, and it is more difficult to douse a strongly burning fire than a meagre one. Fire needs a continual supply of fuel and air or else it will die down.

So our challenge is to build momentum by good practices. Even if your fire cannot always burn brightly, avoid letting it get too low or else it could go out.

Intense heat is strong enough to change the core structure of objects, even rocks. The powerful nature of heat can be scary but we must not let it frighten us from embracing the practices which have the potential to transform our inner essence.

The Niyama **SVADHYAYA**, *self-study*, counsels us to develop and nurture a state of reflective self-awareness, so that we may come to see our core essence exclusive of the layers in which we package ourselves to deal with day-to-day life.

Each of these layers, which together constitute our ego, is the consolidated result of experience and conditioning. Examining ourselves will help identify and separate our layers. Paying attention to how we see others and interpret the world around us will also offer great insight as it reveals projections of ourselves.

We do not necessarily have to understand, or mend, what we find. We need only be able to step back and watch it, rather than identify with it. With repeated and successively deeper observation we will come to see how who we are can transcend our layers.

Penetrating self-scrutiny will not always yield pleasant results; it can be tempting to shut out, but to do so may only result in the layer growing thicker instead of peeling back. If our eyes and hearts are open with self-compassion we can know our inner essence and love ourselves deeply, and thus love the greater divine cosmos we embody.

The Niyama **ISHVARA PRANIDHANA**, *surrender to the divine*, counsels us to relinquish the illusion of being in charge, and yield to the way of the greater cosmos and our higher purpose.

When we let go of what we cannot control or change in the world around us—and one way or the other we always will have to—it allows us to better engage with the reality of life because our effort and energy is no longer spent swimming against the current. When we are moving with the flow of our world we are more likely to see the spiritual in it.

To cede control to anyone or anything demands various degrees of trust and faith, but it does not mean giving up all say in our lives. A capable sailor does not just let the wind blow the boat anywhere, but adjusts the sails and steers the rudder to work in harmony with prevailing conditions. Surrendering to the divine is about living skillfully and reflectively within the context of both circumstance and purpose.

This is perhaps the most difficult Yama or Niyama to apply, and yet it is also the most simple and easy:
Don't fight with life; dance with it, beautifully.

Some Suggested Uses for this Card Set