“Ashtanga Yoga: Yama”

The first limb of Ashtanga Yoga
as taught by Maharishi Patanjali

Shriram Sarvotham
Yama: The first limb of Ashtanga Yoga

Anything that is powerful can be used either constructively or destructively. For example, a surgeon uses instruments like specialized knifes to perform surgery and promote healing. However, in the hands of a person intending to hurt another, a knife can be used to inflict harm. Another example – intelligence can be used to solve problems and uplift mankind; on the other hand the same intelligence can be used to plot destructive activities.

Yama and Niyama – the first two limbs of Ashtanga Yoga – lay the inner foundation so that the Yoga Siddhis (powers) are used responsibly; so that they are used for constructive purposes.

The first limb, Yama, enables one to live in harmony with other beings. Maharishi Patanjali lists 5 Yamas:

II.30 अहिंसासत्यास्तेयाभ्रामचार्यायपरिग्रहाः यमाः

*ahimsā-satyāsteyā-brahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ*

The 5 Yamas listed by Maharishi Patanjali are:

1. Ahimsa, non-violence
2. Satya, truth
3. Asteya, non-stealing,
4. Brahmacharya, moving in Brahman
5. Aparigraha, non-accumulation.

**Ahimsa** is not just in action, but expressed in thoughts and words as well. While ahimsa is certainly beneficial to the person to whom it is directed, the primary beneficiary of Ahimsa (or any Yama / Niyama) is oneself. We’ll see shortly what is the benefit Patanjali describes.
**Satya** or truth is much more than expressing truth (in speech and action). Satya is to be established in the truth of who we really are. Our true identity is divinity (recall from our session on Iswara Pranidhana, talk 003_IshwaraPranidhana.pdf). Any thought, word or action that leads to an experience or expression of divine qualities is Satya. For example, when we are loving, kind, compassionate, we are expressing Satya, or the truth of who we really are. On the other hand, when we are frustrated and grumpy, we are expressing the opposite of divinity, and so we are not living Satya.

**Asteya** is non-stealing. It is recognition of the truth that the universe has enough resources for every one & every being to experience abundance. It is the recognition of truth that our way to happiness is not by snatching away the happiness / possessions of another. This is a win-win universe, where everyone can thrive in happiness and abundance.

**Brahmacharya** literally means moving in the Brahman. It is choosing to be in the space of divinity in every moment. We choose to move in divinity in the journey of life. Brahmacharya has also been translated as celibacy.

**Aparigraha** is non-accumulating. It involves having faith that the divine provides the resources (skill, intelligence, physical resources) at every moment in our lives to fulfill our needs at that moment. Fear of uncertainty in the future drives one towards accumulation. Aparigraha happens when one is at peace with the uncertainty of the future, and faith that we will be taken care of.

II.31 एते जातिद्विभक्तयथसमयानवच्छिन्नः सार्वभिः महात्रतम्

*ete jāti-deśa-kāla-samayānavaçchinnāḥ sārva-bhaumā mahāvratam*
The 5 great vows (Mahavrata) of Yama are universal in application – they can be applied fruitfully regardless of the family we are born (Jati), place (desa), and time (kala). Another interpretation of the same Sutra is that Yamas should be applied universally, not just towards those who we feel convenient!

In the next Sutra, Patanjali describes how we can cultivate these vows:

II.33 वितर्क्वाधोने प्रतिपक्षाभवनम्

vitarka-bādhane pratipakṣa-bhāvanam

If we observe an opposite tendency, then give your attention to the opposite of that. For example, if we notice the tendency in us to harm others (himsa), then, rather than trying to get rid of himsa, take the awareness to the opposite, namely ahimsa and invite it into our experience.

This truth is based on the principle that whatever we give our attention to, grows in our life. It does not matter why we give our attention to it – whether it is to get rid of something (say himsa) or want something (ahimsa). If we keep trying to obliterate something from our mind, it lodges more securely in our mind. Try this experiment – don’t think of a pink elephant! The more we try to push it away, the more vividly we see a plump pink elephant in our mind’s eye! The trick that Patanjali gives is to think of the opposite and therefore attract it towards us.

II.34 वितर्कुः हिमसात्याः कुन्तकारितानुनोदिता लोभोऽनुपाप्तिको भद्द-शान्तिमात्रा दुःहाजानानन्तक्ष्त्रं इति प्रतिपक्षाभवनम्

vitarkā himsādayah kṛta-kārītānumoditā lobha-anupātikā mudā-madhyādhimātrā
duḥkhaśājānanāntaka-phalā iti pratipakṣa-bhāvanam

Conflicting (to Yama and Niyama) actions such as himsa, can be offered in 3 ways. They (himsa etc) can be done by us, or we can direct somebody else to do it, or assist in somebody else doing it. If
we find ourselves in one of these 3 situations (where we are violating Yama), recognize that it is sponsored by thoughts of greed, anger, or desire. It could be mild, medium or intense thoughts. When we know that the result of such actions is endless misery and ignorance, our awareness automatically guides us towards Yama and Niyama.

What are the true benefits of the 5 Yamas?

II.35 अहिंसाप्रतिष्ठायां तत्सत्विभू वैरन्त्यागः:
\[ \text{ahimsā-pratiṣṭhāyāṁ tat-sattviva vaiṛa-tyāgaḥ} \]
In the presence of a person who is established in non-violence, all beings drop their violent tendencies. In other words, Ahimsa creates a field of non-violence around the person who is established in it.

II.36 सत्यप्रतिष्ठायां क्रियाफलश्रयत्वम्
\[ \text{satya-pratiṣṭhāyāṁ kriyā-phalaśrayatvam} \]
For a person who is established in Satya, all his intentions come true. In other words, the universe makes the intentions true by manifesting them.

II.37 अस्तेयप्रतिष्ठायां सर्वरत्नोपस्थानाम्
\[ \text{asteya-pratiṣṭhāyāṁ sarvā-ratnopasthānam} \]
A person established in Asteya has access to all the gems and precious stones. In other words, Asteya opens the door to abundance.

II.38 ब्रह्मचार्यप्रतिष्ठायां कीर्तिलाभः:
\[ \text{brahmacarya-pratiṣṭhāyāṁ vīrya-lābhaḥ} \]
A person who is established in Brahmacharya experiences true power.

II.39 अपरिग्रहस्तैर्यं जन्मकथांतासबोधः
aparigraha-sthairye janma-kathantā-sambodhah
A person established in Aparigraha has access to the knowledge of his/her past lives. In other words, when we drop the craving to accumulate, the experience we accumulated in various past lives are opened to us.
Let us conclude with a Prayer on Maharishi Patanjali:

Meaning:
“I offer reverence to the eminent sage Patañjali, who removed the impurities of the mind through yoga, of speech through grammar, and of the body through medicine.”

“The upper body of human shape, holding a conch (divine sound), discuss (wheel of time) and sword (discrimination), I bow down to the white (pure) thousand-headed (elevated awareness), I respectfully bow to Patanjali.”