



Understanding the Ethics of Yoga for Teachers

“We are here on earth to do good for others.
What the others are here for, I don’t know.”

- W.H. Auden

Throughout your yoga education you’ve studied aspects of the 8 limbed path from Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. Like the 10 Commandments of Christianity, the 10 principles of Buddhism, and every other religion’s moral and ethical constructs, the 8 limbed path is fundamental to understanding the ethical precepts of yoga, which are essential to you as a practitioner, teacher and yoga professional. Yoga is not just exercise, it is a complete “program for living” and so all forms of yoga today use the 8 limbs as guidelines for getting through life toward enlightenment. Doing ‘good’ – or behaving in an ethical way - is essential to that goal.

For the purposes of understanding ethics, we focus on the first 2 limbs – the yamas (restraints) and niyamas (practices) - as they apply to your practice, your teaching and the business of yoga in the modern world.

An overview of the first 2 limbs: Yamas & Niyamas

Yamas are the guidelines for the way we relate to things and people outside of ourselves. They are broken out into are 5 moral restraints.

- **Ahimsa:** Be non-violent in thought, word, and deed.
- **Satya:** Be truthful in thought, word and deed.
- **Asteya:** Don’t steal.
- **Bramhacharya:** Practice abstinence and virtue.
- **Aparigraha:** Don’t be greedy.

Niyamas are guidelines for the way we relate to ourselves, internally and externally. There are also 5, generally referring to self-discipline and spiritual observances.

- **Saucha:** Practice purity and cleanliness of body, mind and speech.
- **Samtoshha:** Be content.
- **Tapas:** Be disciplined.
- **Svadyaya:** Study.
- **Ishvara-pranidhana:** Be devoted.

What are Ethics?

Abraham Lincoln had a simple definition that guided his moral and ethical behavior: “When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.”

Sounds pretty simple, yet Lincoln is also describing a strong sense of personal self-awareness. He 'listened to his body' to tell him the right action. Understanding the complexities of morality involves self-understanding. To fully grasp and evaluate moral concepts and theories, and the choices they lead to in our daily lives, we need to understand our own beliefs and practices in this area. Not everyone makes ethical choices from the same place, and there are 6 stages of moral development driving our decision processes.

The 6 Stages of Moral Development

1. Fear. We behave ethically to avoid punishment.
2. Need. We behave ethically to meet our own needs. "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."
3. Conformance. We behave ethically to fit in. "What will others think of me if I do X?"
4. Compliance. We behave ethically as an aspect of "doing one's duty," Without questioning, we uphold the defined social order or rule of law.
5. Consensus. We behave ethically as defined by the majority. In this stage, we balance the rights of the individual against the standards agreed to by the whole society. What is right for the individual applies only if it does no greater harm to the society.
6. Conscience and Free Will. We behave ethically as a matter of personal conscience, free choice, and personal responsibility for the consequences.

Ethics is not as simple as right versus wrong. Often, more than one thing can be right. At the sixth level of moral development, awareness and intention are applied to create an ethically balanced system among multiple "right" choices. As an ethical yoga teacher, your goal should be to apply integrity and principle to every choice you make, in your personal lives, and in your teaching and business practices. Good practice means good ethics, and it defines you as a leader. Yoga teachers and yoga businesses impact individuals, and while every teacher and yoga business is unique, ethics is a universal issue. With many right choices, leadership matters; so knowing why to do something is essential to knowing what to do.

Guidelines for Ethical Behavior in Yoga Businesses

1. Be consistent. Treat everyone as if they are special, or no one.
2. Be balanced. What is better for me? For you? For everyone else?
3. Be aware of what ethics is. It is not always obvious.
4. Identify ethical traps. Having multiple choices can be good; pick which one is best.

Here's an example. Something as simple as stretching yourself farther than you can safely go doesn't seem like an ethical decision. However, "I pushed myself a little too hard today," is saying you have committed violence to your body without purpose. "First, do no harm" is the primary rule of ethics in health care, so willingly harming your own body implies you may be willing to apply the same principle to your students. While your desire to help them achieve their fitness goals may be ethically "good" – harming them on the way to that goal is not in line with yoga ethics.

Five Traits to Develop your Higher Ethical Understanding

1. Integrity. Adhering to high moral and professional standards generates an environment where honesty, respect, trust and excellence can thrive and be consistently practiced.
2. Honesty. Be forthcoming and truthful when you interact with others and yourself. It ensures sincerity in your relationships both internally and externally.
3. Respect. Treat others with dignity and mutual consideration. It encourages others to relate openly and fulfill their potentials.
4. Trust. Be trustworthy. It yields the confident expectation that we can rely on each other and that others can rely on us.
5. Excellence. Strive to pursue and achieve exceptional quality. It inspires ethical practices in those we reach.

Putting the Ethical Principles of Yoga into your Yoga Teaching Practice

Ahimsa: Be non-violent in thought, word, and deed. (Non-harming)

1. In practice: cultivate in your own practice and the practice of your students the ethical skill of physical awareness. The mind is a comparative tool. When directed ethically and consciously the mind/body will rightly differentiate sensations of stretching vs compression, pain vs pleasure, and force vs effort.
2. In teaching: know your audience and adjust your class accordingly. Teach to the class in front of you, not the class you prepared for in advance. That doesn't mean coming to class without a plan. Be prepared, AND be prepared for change. Also, hands-on, physical, and verbal adjustments should come from conscious intent. Adjustments that come out of frustration, pride or distraction may cause harm and emotional discomfort for your students.
3. In business: avoid being rude or arrogant. Always give your students your full, positive attention, before, during and after class. Friendliness, politely answering questions, good instruction, and no dogma are examples of non-harming practice. Don't speak of other teachers or styles disrespectfully, discourage students from attending another teacher's class, or knowingly solicit another teacher's students. It harms the students and the practice.

Satya: Be truthful in thought, word and deed. (Truth)

1. In practice: practice with authenticity. Teaching yoga is tiring, but you still have to have your own regular yoga practice. Yoga is a way of living. If you can't find the energy to spend time on your practice, you can't authentically teach it to others.
2. In teaching: study, practice, prepare. There is no end to yoga, and an ethical teacher is not stagnant, but constantly adding knowledge and experience. Learn to identify body types that need alternate positioning and alignment. Don't mislead students by assuming all bodies have the same capacity for range of motion, or make any claims about yoga's powers beyond your knowledge and experience. Know, honor, and respect true range of motion.
3. In business: answer questions you know and be truthful about the questions you don't know. Don't make bigger promises or claims about yoga's benefits than you can fulfill. If you don't know the answer – don't guess or pretend. Tell your students you will get them an answer and then follow through.

Asteya: Don't steal. (Non-stealing)

1. In practice: keep the proper muscles strong and engaged to create stability and balance. Avoid sacrificing stability or correct alignment in order to "cheat" your way into a pose.
2. In teaching: avoid stealing from the body by attempting to do poses without the proper preparation or counter balance, being unbalanced in your sequence or in your timing from side to side. Practice clear, concise cueing so that your students enter postures with proper alignment and with a mind for proper intent. This means sacrificing your need to preach, tell a story, or create a theme for good sequencing, timing and instruction. It means not teaching advanced poses until you have mastered teaching basics poses, and not teaching poses that you can't experience or explain.
3. In business: avoid stealing from your students by drawing energy to yourself, making you the focus of your class. Give your energy and attention to your students. Don't bring your personal dramas and bad moods into the yoga room – you are there for them, not for yourself. And obviously, it is unethical to solicit another teacher's students or discourage students from attending another teacher's class. Studio owners and teachers should practice ethical marketing – all forms of yoga are good, there is a teacher or practice for everyone, and it is worth looking for the right one. Promote yourself – yes. Disparage another – no.

Bramhacharya: Practice abstinence and virtue. (Connection to spirit)

1. In practice: move with the breath, as an expression of connection to source. Practice specific meditations, such as metta (lovingkindness) to relieve physical and emotional suffering. Take proper care of your body.

2. In teaching: maintain devotion and focus on your own practice and your teaching of the postures, to inspire the physical practice in others, and make their effort more enjoyable.
3. In business: demonstrate these principles to your students: calmness, centeredness, compassion. In the yoga room, be respectful and quiet. Encourage the students to be respectful and quiet. Create a “safe” environment for all students to unwind and connect.

Aparigraha: Don't be greedy. (Non-attachment)

1. In practice: let go of your attachment to ideas of perfection or completion. Yoga is never ending, your yoga education is also – embrace the opportunity to continually better yourself.
2. In teaching: avoid being greedy to overcome injuries and physical limitations. Work with students slowly, in a manner that will not create new or further injuries. Yoga should not hurt. Don't strain in a pose or force the shape of a pose onto your own body, or a student's body.
3. In business: don't be attached to ego or outcomes for yourself or your students; stress physical and emotional wellbeing. Charge and pay fairly.

Saucha: Practice purity and cleanliness of body, mind and speech. (Clarity)

1. In practice: understand the postures. What specific actions support the pose? How can you strengthen and express those actions, and let unnecessary tension dissolve? How can the foundation of a pose create a clear base of support? Move intentionally into the pose.
2. In teaching: clearly and directly express your knowledge and experience. Understanding anatomy, alignment, the posture, and your physical experience of it, you can create a "clear" experience of a pose - what is the purpose of this pose, and what do I do to express it?
3. In business: speak clearly and use simple language, free of dogma and archaic speech. Speak from your own experience, and allow students to come to a deeper understanding through their own bodies and practice.

Samtoshha: Be content. (Contentment)

1. In practice: practice asana, meditation, or breath awareness as a way to experience contentment with the present moment.
2. In teaching: enjoy what you are doing. Sharing your love of yoga with your students will generate more effort to achieve their goals. Calming preparation rituals before teaching bring compassion and focus to your students.
3. In business: create a positive and healthful class experience, regardless of circumstances.

Tapas: Be disciplined. (Commitment)

1. In practice: progress with balance, strength, and endurance: you have to attempt something a little bit outside your comfort zone to experience change.
2. In teaching: practice makes perfect. Dedicated teaching with clear language, personal knowledge and experience, makes a challenging pose or major life goals possible.
3. In business: be present, be dedicated to giving your students your best effort. A clean, pleasant environment, smiling and helpful instructors – these demonstrate a commitment to good ethical practice.

Svadyaya: Study. (Self-understanding)

1. In practice: yoga never ends. Be open to wherever it will take you.
2. In teaching: challenge your students to stay focused in the room through the entire class, and at the same time be observant but non judgmental of their practice.
3. In business: ongoing education is critical to running a successful business, both as a means to retain loyalty from your students, and to ensure the quality and dedication of your teaching practice. But also, know what you want from your yoga teaching “business” - whether it is part time or career path, understanding your needs helps you create them.

Ishvara-pranidhana: Be devoted. (Surrender)

1. In practice: practice. Yoga is a program for living – ongoing practice, without expectation and judgment, demonstrates devotion. Cultivate a full, deep breath without strain, struggle, or restriction - this reflects both a willingness to fully experience life (through the inhalation) and to fully let go (through the exhalation).
2. In teaching: encourage physical release through restorative breath and resting postures, through to final savasana. Sit in gratitude and stillness to help your students fully let go. “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” (Cicero)
3. In business: participate in the growth of the whole yoga community around you. What is best for your students or your teachers is best for you. Be thankful toward your students and colleagues.