



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Spiritual Upliftment #4

Making Spiritual Progress in Life

By Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

Radiant health, emotional well-being and a clear mind are only part of what yoga promises you. While known as primarily a system of exercise, yoga brings the ancient process of spiritual upliftment into our modern age. Svaroopā® yoga's specialty is to begin with healing what ails you, then to reveal your inner potential to you.

Spiritual growth happens in predictable stages, perhaps already under way for you. Learning about the stages helps you understand them, even cooperate with them. For example, as you develop a yogic lifestyle, the "yamas" blossom in you spontaneously. Any tendencies you had towards causing harm, lying, stealing, sexual obsession and greed begin to loosen. Being proactive with the yamas means you restrain yourself from such self-defeating behaviors. Soon you are free from the compulsions that define other people's lives.

Next comes the "niyamas," described in one of yoga's ancient texts:

"Sauca-santo.sa-tapa.h-svaadhyaya"svara-pra.nidhaanaani niyamaa.h

The niyamas are purity, contentment, austerities, chanting/study of texts and surrender to God. — Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.32

While they may arise spontaneously, consciously working on the niyamas accelerates your process of inner upliftment. Graduating from yamas to niyamas shifts you from restraints to resolve. You've stopped dragging yourself down, so now you uplift yourself by embracing new behaviors and activities. The benefits Patanjali promises from the niyamas are remarkable and may inspire you to practice them:

Cheerful-Mindedness— when you master purity (shaucha)

Superlative Happiness — when you master contentment (santosha)

Perfection of your Body and Senses — when you master tenacity (tapas)

Communion with God — when you master the chanting & study of yoga's texts (svadhyaya)

Meditative Absorption — when you surrender to God (ishvara-pranidhana)

Imagine waking up cheerful every day. Every. Single. Day. To get there, you must clean up your act. Practicing shaucha (purity) not only gives you cheerful-mindedness, but also one-pointed focus, mastery of your senses and readiness for the experience of the Self. Your practice might begin with cleaning your possessions, like the inside of your handbag or briefcase, clearing out your closets, or deep cleaning your basement. When you clean a room, what does that do to your mind? It feels so different, so spacious. Shaucha is about the inner results, not simply having a clean environment, but the act of cleaning itself.

Your body probably also needs a cleanup. Try this daily trio for a week to create your own spring cleanse. You can learn the practices from your Svaroopā® yoga teacher:

Ujjayi Pranayama (Ocean Sounding Breath) – do it 20 minutes, twice daily

Vajrasana (Digestion Pose) – sitting in this pose immediately after every meal for 20 minutes (or after your biggest meal of the day)

Uddhiyana Bandha (Stomach Lifts) – before breakfast.

Patanjali warns, as you purify your body, you realize the body is disgusting. Your spring cleanse produces disgusting byproducts, stuff you are clearing out of your body. Even the flu brings coughing, sneezing and sweating. Copious body fluids flow for days. Ick. Purifying your body isn't about body-beautiful. Tapas gives you that (see below). Yet physical purity is important, both for your health and so your body can handle the high-level energies of the Self — the One, Pure, Eternal Reality that is you and is everything that exists, including the disgusting.

Mental purity is the more important shaucha practice, as it gives you "readiness for the experience of the Self." How do you purify your mind? In the yamas, you'd quit putting junk into it, so this niyama is where you begin emptying out the residue. Mantra repetition is the most powerful way to cultivate mental purity. Repeat your own mantra or go online to [get the mantra from Swamiji](#). Repeat it for five minutes every day, out loud or silently. You could even do it several times a day, maybe before lunch, before bed, after your poses, before you meditate or any other time that works for you. Silent mantra repetition will tend to take you into meditation, which gives you the experience of Self, unless your mind is still distracting you, in which case you need more mantra repetition.

Santosha: Contentment. Whenever you notice you're discontent, cultivate contentment. Last month you learned about cultivating the opposite, so you already have the ability to bring a feeling to the forefront of your awareness.

Now you've also practiced the previous *niyama*, *shaucha*, so you have a new strength of focus, empowering you to focus on a higher level feeling — contentment. Now your “opposite,” for any upset, is contentment.

Your partner is late for dinner, so it's all dried out and you're mad. Then you see him or her walk in the door, exhausted, so you feel compassion. Don't wait for the compassion to strike you. When you're mad, cultivate contentment.

Your grandchild makes you a mud pie, dripping a trail of dirt and water through the house to bring it to you. You could feel exasperated, but instead you choose contentment and genuinely thank them.

Rukmini says, “I'm adopted. My parents explained to me that other parents don't get to pick who is born to them, but my parents picked me. Most parents love the baby that comes to them. But my parents chose me to love.” They taught me how to be content with my family.

You can simply remember an experience of contentment in order to begin to feel it — that's the power of choosing what you focus on. This is not the same as lying to yourself or pretending it's different than it is. It's about making a choice to feel differently. By making that choice again and again and again, you are cultivating contentment, which brings you superlative happiness. What is superlative happiness? Genuine unending happiness that is independent of events, continuing in every moment for no reason.

Now that you're already happy, and happy all the time, what will you do with yourself? Most people do things in order to get happy, so when you're already happy, you've lost your reason for doing things. You're also far enough along on the path that you can see the difference between merely happy and enlightened. You can see that you still need to work on yourself. It's time to buckle down to do the hard stuff. Yoga calls this “*tapas*.”

Often translated as “austerities,” *tapas* actually means “heat,” the friction that comes from your ego rubbing up against God. You do the hard stuff you usually put off or don't feel like doing. You are the only one who knows what is hard for you to do. It could be getting up earlier for daily yoga or meditation, or it might be making healthful changes to your diet.

You do hard stuff to get through school, keep a job, raise children, commit to a relationship, and master a sport or musical instrument. Now you apply your efforts to spiritual development, so you are making spiritual progress, plus, as Patanjali says, your body and sense organs can be perfected. Many yogis want to build a beautiful body. While the ancient sages would consider this a superficial goal, through *tapas* it's possible. More importantly, your purified body has a greater capacity to embody bliss, and your purified senses give you access to subtle inner experiences in deep meditation.

The next *niyama* turns the corner from *tapas* to bliss, attainable by chanting and studying yoga's texts. Until now, the *yamas* and *niyamas* have been deprogramming your mind, but chanting yoga's texts begins the reprogramming of your mind, leading to communion with God. A marvelous promise, much greater than mere faith or prayer, even greater than hearing or seeing God. Communion does not mean a ceremony with bread and wine, but an ecstatic experience of being one with God. It's an experience that makes you want to chant more.

Many yogic texts are available online, including Shree Guru Gita on our website. Swami Nirmalananda has recorded each verse individually, including a pronunciation lesson as well as slow and regular-speed chanting. Study one verse a day to learn the whole text in six months. Swamiji says, “My Baba steeped us in the ancient texts by having us chant several hours daily, including Shree Guru Gita, Shree Rudram, Vishnu Sahasranam, Shiva Mahimna and others. They are all readily available now.”

The *niyamas* build upon one another, culminating in *ishvara-pranidhana*, surrender to God. When you've already experienced communion with God, your next step is surrender. If you've not yet experienced that communion, you might wonder who God is, as well as how to surrender. That's why this step is the culmination of the preceding ones, so your purity, happiness and hard work lay the groundwork for your progress ever higher.

Profound meditative absorption, called “*samadhi*,” comes from surrender to God. Your mind will no longer harass you, not while you're meditating nor in the midst of your life, because your mind is now God's mind. Except “God” is not outside — God is inside, which is your own Self. You'll live a Divinely Inspired life. It's the way you've always wanted to live.

Patanjali is not telling you what you should do for your spiritual development. He's describing what happens as you grow into your Self. This is especially true once you've received *Shaktipat*. Cooperate with the glorious inner blossoming into your own Divinity that is your birthright. Do more *Svaroopa*® yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON “SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT,” OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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