

BECOMING AN UN-DISTURBABLE PERSON

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US & THE DIVINE ENDS WHEN THE DISTURBANCE STOPS & OUR MINDS CAN REST



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In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali defined yoga as the cessation of the “whirlings” of the mind. In other words, the distance between us and the Divine is measured in terms of disturbance and ends when the disturbance stops and the mind can rest. Patanjali is asking us to restrain ourselves from any thoughts or acts that make us a disturbing, disturbable, or disturbed person in order to find a permanent resting place in harmony and happiness.

How do we disentangle ourselves from disturbance in all its gross and subtle forms? Patanjali answered this question with an 8-step path. It is a plan that slowly weans the mind off its constant, chaotic restlessness into a stable, tranquil, resting place. Much like training the taste buds to prefer vegetables to sugary treats, the path laid out by Patanjali trains the mind to prefer harmony over disturbance. The first two steps of this 8-step path consist of yoga’s ethical system comprising the yamas, or restraints, and the niyamas, or observances.

Why is it that yoga’s path to awakening begins with an ethical system? Why is there so much interest in postures, breath, and meditation and yoga’s ethical system gets glossed over? (Compare the number of books written on postures, breath, and meditation to the number of books written on the yamas and niyamas.) What was Patanjali trying to tell us? These questions merit our contemplation.

I don’t have all the answers, but for me, the yamas and niyamas are about laying the ground rules for our journey towards union, harmony, and wholeness. They are the

foundational guide to our practice both on and off the mat. They are about living in right relationship with others, the earth, and ourselves.

What could be a better or more needed place to practice harmony than in our interactions with others and ourselves? I know that if I choose to fight with my husband for instance, the “me” that shows up on the mat for postures or on the cushion for meditation is a “me” in disturbance. I am either replaying the story of the fight and still being mad, or I am replaying the story of the fight and being cruel to myself for not being kinder to my husband. Either way, harmony cannot find me; I am too consumed to experience the deeper recesses of my being or hear the call of my soul.

In a simple way, I have begun to think of the yamas and niyamas as a flashlight, shining light on the places of my life where consciously or unconsciously I am out of harmony or right relationship. In this sense, they have become a true friend ready and willing to take me ever deeper into my pursuit of integrity and wholeness.

The daily, mindful practice of these ethical guidelines begins to make us people who are not only more skilled at living and making thoughtful choices, but who are also becoming harmonious, quiet, and undisturbed. Are the yamas and niyamas easy? No. They ask us to dig deep and find the best that is in us. And they ask nothing less than to be engaged in a continual conversation that is both personal and communal. Perhaps Patanjali was telling us that we can’t short cut our relationships with others, the environment, or ourselves on our way to the mat or the cushion.

