

The ideas that have lighted my way have been kindness, beauty and truth.

—Albert Einstein



Applying yoga philosophy to relationships

So far we have discussed some of the limbs of royal yoga piece by piece, but here is an overview of all eight, so that you have a clearer picture of this practice. There are numerous texts out there that describe these limbs in detail, but we wanted to give you a basic primer on them, so you can draw some connection between the physical practice and the psychological practice of yoga. To study these in depth, pick up a translation of the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* with commentary.

In order, here are the eight limbs, or components, of royal yoga:

- *Yamas*: These are restraints, or the things we should not do in our day-to-day life.
- *Niyamas*: These are actions (literally, “not inactions”), or the things we should do in our day-to-day life.
- *Asana*: This tells us to find a comfortable seat, but yoga practitioners consider all kinds of odd positions to be comfortable seats, providing us with various yoga poses.
- *Pranayama*: Technically this means mastery of life force, but we generally take it to mean practicing various breathing exercises to regulate the flow of oxygen in the body.
- *Pratyahara*: This is withdrawal from the senses, which means bringing your focus inward, and not staying distracted by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations around you.
- *Dharana*: You can interpret this as concentration and focus, such as the concentration you use during the visualization practice. Many people practice this by repeating a mantra, or staring at an image.
- *Dhyana*: This means meditation, or the absence of distracting thoughts. The path to meditation usually leads first through withdrawal from the senses, then through focus.
- *Samadhi*: This is a state of unadulterated and unqualified bliss. Many people see this as a permanent state you reach after years of working on your yoga practice. Instead, we see it more as moments in pure bliss, and hopefully you can find more of these moments and learn to extend them.

The first two limbs—restraints and actions—deal with lifestyle and behavior, which makes them very accessible to us. There are five restraints and five actions that serve as guidelines.

Yogis believe that the teacher inside your own mind is the best teacher around, and that if you stop and listen to your own internal wisdom, you will learn a great deal. Some people refer to the restraints and actions as the Ten Commandments, but they are not so set in stone. Think of them more as ten golden rules, and remember that it's your job to give each of these some thought, and interpret them for yourself.

When contemplating the restraints and actions, keep the word moderation in your brain. Yoga texts often refer to “the middle path” whereby you walk evenly between two extremes. As you read these, imagine yourself finding that balance, or moderation.

You can find more discussion of these guidelines in various books, magazines, and Web forums. We hope to give you an introduction to how these apply to the realm of relationships. We hope that as you read our interpretations of the restraints and actions that you spend some time thinking about what they mean to you, and that these guidelines help you refine your own moral code. We strongly recommend discussing these with your partner as well, as you can often gain more insight by listening to how someone else interprets these guidelines.

Restraints

There are five restraints that serve as lifestyle guidelines. While these are considered the “don'ts” of yoga, we also like to look at the opposites, giving you some positive action to take.

Non-violence (*Ahimsa*)

In its most basic form, non-violence means refraining from physical violence, preventing others from being the victim of violence, and not allowing yourself to be the victim of violence. On a more subtle level, it means regarding and speaking to others with kindness, standing up for others, and treating yourself with respect.

We see two critical steps in applying the principle of non-violence to your existing relationships.

Overcoming obstacles

Yoga philosophers say there are five obstacles (*kleshas*) that we must overcome to attain liberation. These obstacles are also obstacles to having healthy, fulfilling, and yes, liberating relationships. We will briefly illustrate how you can examine your own behavior and recognize any of these behavior patterns. Becoming aware of a behavior pattern is the biggest step towards growth.

Ignorance (*Avidya*)

Know thyself. Through yoga, we work towards being free from the shackles of painful memories; this of course can take years. The first step towards healthy relationships is being cognizant when we repeat certain behaviors or when we transfer the blame of past injustices onto our current circle of loved ones. Many scars of childhood issues, along with friendship or romantic partnership breakups, can cloud our current judgment.

When you find yourself extraordinarily upset at a situation, stop and ask yourself, “Does this remind me of anything?” Scan your consciousness to remember the last time you felt that way. Quite often a very minor incident can evoke the pain of major one and we find ourselves overreacting. If you take the time to stop and recognize that something still haunts you, you can begin to address it. By becoming aware of your behavior and your reactions, you can discern the present from the past. This enables you to overcome your ignorance of what causes you to react in certain ways and allows you to deal with the present situation of your relationships.

By seeing your mate or your friends and the current issue for what they really are, rather than what memories they might evoke, you will find your communication far less defensive and hostile and far more positive and supportive.

Ego (*Asmita*)

Many things upset our ego, such as not being chosen as the maid of honor or best man at our friend’s wedding, or recognizing that your spouse really does want to spend Saturday night with some friends. Our ego wants to think that we are the entire universe to all those in our orbit. At some point, all of us have gotten upset about unintended slights because of our ego. By identifying when your pride

as been hurt, you can better separate the trivial slights from real injustices.

Practicing yoga and meditation can help us tame the egotistical beast. The more we learn that we have the power to be happy, regardless of circumstance, the more we develop a sense of self-security. This sense of self allows us to view the world, not through the lens of an ego that needs a constant stream of external validation to survive, but rather through the eyes of someone with a solid foundation of who they are, one that is timeless and one that cannot be injured by minor slights. Other people perceive us in their own way, but their perception is influenced by all of their past memories; by acknowledging this fact, we can recognize that what they see is not truly who we are. Our ego is concerned with what they see, but through practicing yoga, particularly meditation, we will see ourselves for who we really are.

Attachment to pleasure (*Raga*)

We love to feel good, but relationships require constant tending. Sometimes you need to have difficult talks with your loved ones to honestly face issues together. These talks are not fun, which is why some of us take what we believe to be the easier path of denial. Some people have an unrealistic expectation that if two people are meant to be together they will never disagree or argue. While you can discuss situations in a rational, loving and empathetic way, recognize that no two people have lived the exact same life, so you will inevitably interpret certain things differently.

So instead of denial, you can work on a strategy for how to disagree, and come up with some mutually-defined rules of engagement so that you can solve your problems as a team, rather than as opponents.

Attachment to pleasure can also manifest in avoidance of work. Everyone wants to spend their weekends relaxing and doing things they enjoy but, as many mothers have put it, “Trash does not take itself out.” Instead of finding work a struggle, you can organize a schedule and responsibilities, so that you do not spring chores upon someone who has just started to read a book, practice yoga, etc. Allow some flexibility for when your housemates really do need a break. If you find yourself the one who avoids chores, see them as a way to truly practice your yoga. Stay present and mindful as you work and notice all the sensations involved in household work. This attention to detail,

even on a task you do not find pleasurable, is an exercise in concentration, which is one of the limbs of yoga.

Aversion to pain (*Dvesa*)

Fear of rejection holds so many of us back. Fear of rejection is of course tied in with our ego. The more we view ourselves as having an essence that transcends both pleasure and pain, and that we share this same essence with everyone else, the more we can see rejection as a very superficial thing. They are not rejecting you—they are only rejecting their perception of you at this one moment in time. Who you are, and what they perceive you to be, may not be the same thing.

You will face rejection at many points in your life, but rejection simply means you tried something. The moment you stop trying is the moment your aversion to pain has conquered you. We believe that hockey player Wayne Gretsky said it best: when asked how many shots on goal he regretted, he said that he regretted 100 percent of the shots that he didn't take.

Even when people are in a relationship, fear of rejection plays a role. Sometimes people will keep their ideas, ambitions and fantasies to themselves out of fear they will be rejected by a partner. This often leads to resentment.

If you experience this, try one day to ask your mate about something fun he or she has always wanted to do, then share your idea. Perhaps you can reach some sort of agreement. For example, we made a deal that we would take tango dance lessons together in exchange for going on backpack trips (Todd was leery about dance lessons, and Kimberlee was leery about sleeping in the woods). Though we had initial moments of displeasure and some setbacks, Kimberlee ended up enjoying backpacking and Todd ended up enjoying tango. If the compromise tactic does not work, then you can either try your new activity alone or with a friend while reassuring your partner that you are not taking a step away from your relationship, but rather a step towards simply learning something new.

Fear of death (*Abhinivesah*)

How fear of death holds us back from healthy relationships is not so much a fear of our own death, but rather a fear of loss. Some people avoid getting close to someone, because they fear the time when they will lose that person. This is a very powerful feeling and quite a

rational fear because we can see the pain of a lost spouse or child on the news regularly.

Fear of death is perhaps the most difficult of all obstacles. Yogic philosophy talks about our true essence as being eternal, and not bound to our physical body. You can interpret this to mean that at some level, you will always be connected to the people you love in spirit. This may provide comfort, but there are other yoga teachings that can help as well.

Yoga teaches us to embrace every moment, and realize that we cannot control the future, nor can we reconstruct the past. All we can do is live in the here and now. You can also view it by looking back to your childhood friends, whom at the time you thought were essential to your existence. As you aged, you slowly drifted apart from some of them, but you know that at the time, you were glad to know them. We can only trust that when the time comes to separate from our loved ones that we will feel true gratitude for the time they devoted to us. If anything, our fear of death can be a lesson to live in the present, and neither dwell upon the past nor fret about the future.