

# RELEVANCE OF YAMAS AND NIYAMAS IN CLINICAL COUNSELING PRACTICE

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## **Abstract**

Yoga encompasses abilities far beyond the physical. Yoga has increased popularity in the West, largely in part of the mental health and wellness benefits it promises. Despite the significant promises it has in the field of mental health, little research explores the relevance of yoga's philosophical roots and counseling. This paper explores the first two limbs of yoga (Yamas and Niyamas) out of the 8-limbed fold ashtanga yoga path and their relevance to counseling practice, specifically in realm of counseling ethical principles.

## **Keywords**

Yoga, Mental Health, Counselling, Ethical Principles

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Spirituality has increasingly been recognized as an important tenant in the counseling process. Spirituality is a major element in the lives of many beings. In the United States, 75% of individuals identify as spiritual (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). The considerable percentage of those who identify as spiritual represents the importance of counselor's openness to discuss and explore spirituality of self and clients. There are various researchers who have examined the intersection between spirituality and counseling (Cobb, 2021; Jun, 2018; Matise, Ratcliff, & Mosci, 2018; Walsch et al., 2021). Although there is a growing demand regarding spirituality and counseling, there is little research on the consideration of yoga's philosophical roots as they relate to counseling. Yoga is culmination of personal development and social engagement, affecting how we interact with the world and with ourselves (Gautam & Droogan, 2018). Similarly, counseling teaches clients awareness and understanding of their own patterns so they can better relate with the world. Additionally, medical, biological, psychical, and spiritual concepts in counseling stem from historical roots to treat human distress (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2018). Yoga can connect the personal with the professional, focusing attention on self-knowledge and world understanding, something counseling practice and education would benefit vastly from. Yet, clinical counseling education has demands and expectations that focus on technique-driven conceptual skills, leaving scarce room for meaningful self-awareness and exploration.

The aim of this article is to explore the first two limbs of ashtanga yoga and their relevance to clinical counseling practice, particularly counseling ethical principles. Although there are connections between ethical principles and spiritual practices within the counseling realm, this paper argues the importance of extending beyond the American Counseling Association ethical codes to consider the knowledge of the Yamas and Niyamas. The commonalities between yoga and counseling ethics will be discussed. Followed by further exploration of enhancing existing counseling theory and practice with ashtanga yoga ethical limbs. An exploration of the ethical limbs of ashtanga yoga have yet to be explored exclusively from a counseling perspective. Thus, probable benefits for counseling theory, instruction, and thought are substantial.

## The Construction of Yoga

The interest in yoga continues to cultivate popularity in the Western countries due to its benefits. However, it is important to explore historical roots of yoga to understand demand of modern day. Research states that the exact historical origins of yoga are unknown, but we do know its origins were lost in the artifact of Central, Western, and South Asia (Ghurye & Sadhus, 1953). A big part of what is known is embedded in the Sanskrit cultural influence and the ongoing dialogue between three religious' traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism (De Michelis, 2005). Yoga can be defined as a living process. The Sanskrit word "yoga" derives from the root 'yug' which means to "yoke" or to "join" the mind, body, and spirit (Kramer, 1977; Werner, 1977). Additionally, the term "yoga" refers to the unification of discipline among the body, mind, and the self (Garfinkel & Schumacher, 2000).

Yoga stems from an oral tradition where teaching was delivered from teacher to student. An important Indian sage, Patanjali, also credited as the "Father of Yoga", assembled the oral traditions in his classical work *The Yoga Sutras* (Prasada, 1998). *The Yoga Sutras* is a 2,000-year-old composition of yogic philosophy where Patanjali describes yoga as thought restraints that can calm the mind (Prasada). Patanjali emphasizes the importance of ethics (yamas and niyamas) to purify the mind, body, and spirit and the eight-limb path. The eight-limb path, also known as "ashtanga" in Sanskrit, comprises a nonlinear path to human freeing by means of: yamas, niyamas, asana, pranayamas, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi (Bryant, 2015; Garfinkel & Schumacher, 2000; Stiles, 2021). The Sutras provide guidance on mind and emotion connection; whilst following the code of conduct of the human virtues discussed in the yamas and niyamas.

## The Yamas and Niyamas

The Yamas and Niyamas are foundational to all yogic philosophy. Yoga's sophisticated system is designed to bring more awareness of body and thought. The Yamas and Niyamas can be seen as guidelines, and ethical disciplines to facilitate ownership and fulfillment of life (Adele, 2009). As such, yamas, the first limb of the ashtanga ethical principles of *The Yoga Sutras*, introduces: Ahimsa (nonviolence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (non-excess), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) (Stiles, 2021). The term "yamas" in Sanskrit language translates to "restraints". The second limb, niyamas, or observances in Sanskrit are: Saucha (purity), Santosha (contentment), Tapas (self-discipline), Svadhyaya (self-study), Ishvara Pranidhana (surrender). While the ethical principles of Yamas and Niyamas may seem unrelated, belonging to ancient times, they represent essential learnings for living as humans today. Furthermore, the purpose of this paper is the relevance of awareness of body and thought in yamas and niyamas and how they can be effective in counseling practice and theory.

The professional core values of counseling are foundational to understanding human behaviors and relationships. As defined by the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014), the premise of professional counseling is to enhance the quality of life and advance the profession of counseling by means of practicing respect for human dignity and diversity. Exploration of the yamas and niyamas provides an opportunity to experience ethics and engage in counseling ethical practice rather than simply memorizing the ethical code.

### Counseling Ethics

The field of counseling ethics is represented by ethics, laws, and professional standards. MacKinnon and Fiala (2014) define ethics as a part of philosophy in which basic questions are asked to determine what is better or worse, and whether we know what is objectively right or wrong. According to the statement, it seems morality plays a role in choosing what is right or wrong in ethics. Ramley and Herlihy (2014), define morality as an individual's values based on their cultural world and having to choose the right conduct seems to be fundamental in daily living activities. On a macro level of living, ethics exists in personal, familial, communal, and societal aspects. Furthermore, professional ethics govern standards of greed-upon rules, standards, and principles that are deemed acceptable in mental health professions (Capuzzi & Gross, 2013). As a professional member, one attests adhering to ethical standards established by the groups. Some of the groups in mental health professions include the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA).

The mission of the American Counseling Association (2014) is to enhance the quality of life and advance the profession of counseling by means of practicing respect for human dignity and diversity. Moreover, fundamental principles of professional ethical behavior provide a conceptual basis for human interactions (ACA, 2014). Ethics in counseling involve assessment of human behaviors. Similar ethical codes are discussed in the Yamas and Niyamas, which yogic philosophical roots extend to counseling practice. The Yamas are ethical restraints used to interact with the world and the Niyamas are practices to interact with self (Adele, 2009). Cultivation of ACA ethical principles and the Yamas and Niyamas highlights the need for counseling professionals to foster and teach a combination of personal development and social engagement.

### ***Effective Counseling***

The process of developing effective counseling professionals is worthy of attention of the ethical standards in counseling and yogic philosophical roots. Effective counseling is the ability to know your worldview which is based on values, beliefs, and biases in effort to understand the client's worldview (Jun, 2018). Self-assessment of one's own worldview is a challenging and mindful practice.

As professional counselors, ethical principles outlined in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) encompass areas of self-growth and wellness with Self and other individuals. The fundamental ethical principles of counselors' behavior are autonomy (fostering the right to control direction of one's life), nonmaleficence (do no harm), beneficence (working for the good of the individual), justice (treating others equitably), fidelity (honoring commitments), and veracity (dealing truthfully) (ACA, 2014). Counselor educators are tasked with safeguarding counselors-in-training are equipped with dealing with clients ethically and honorably. Research has explored the Yamas and Niyamas when treating mental disorders and results show effective mind-body connections facilitate treatment and recovery (Mora, 2016). In effort to provide effective counseling, it is worth exploring the combination of mind and body practices and its guiding principles.

## **Methods**

A critical exploration of the yamas and niyamas ethical principles and their virtue of human development will be discussed in relevance to counseling ethical practice and thought.

### **Yamas- Ethical restraints (relationship with the world)**

#### ***Ahimsa (Nonviolence)***

Ahimsa is seen as the foundational tenet to the other guidelines and is grounded in nonviolence (Adele, 2009). The premise of nonviolence is to build relationships with self and others that do not cause harm or suffering. Nonviolence comes with subtle implications that require active practices of courage, balance, love and compassion for self and others.

Yet, there also exists a firm similarity between ahimsa (nonviolence) and the ACA's ethical principle nonmaleficence which means "do no harm". The understanding of nonmaleficence is rooted in the moral intent to refrain from causing harm to others (ACA, 2014). However, the notion of nonmaleficence goes beyond physical harm, it also includes psychological harm in both the ACA and yamas and niyamas. Applying the concept of ahimsa to counseling ethics can aid in the development of counselor's practice of self-awareness.

Underpinned by the principle of nonmaleficence, counselors are to abide to professional norms and standards. An example of causing harm in counseling practice can be the failure to recognize own counseling limitations and competence. The failure to recognize own counseling limitations can promote poor judgement and risk harming the client. Research has showed a plethora of harmful counselor supervision (Ammirati & Kaslow, 2017; Beddoe, 2017; Ellis, 2017; Falender, 2018; Reiser & Milne, 2017) where abuse of power is disregarding. Further, Ammirati and Kaslow (2017) argue that anyone is capable of harmful supervision, exemplifying the need for counseling supervisors and professionals to be mindful and self-reflective of their interactions.

Yoga philosophy emphasizes the importance of mind connection when following the yamas and niyamas. Applying the yamas and niyamas's to one's life can help achieve true liberation to thought, word, and action. Adele (2009) further explains we are intense toward others when we think we know what is best for them or when we attempt to fix people. If counselors believe their job is to fix their clients, then they are causing harm. On the contrary, counseling is about supporting. Counseling theorist, Carl Rogers, stresses the importance of supporting clients through a state of congruence between self and experience (Rogers, 1959). Rogers (1959) believed the gift of active listening and empathy are foundational for therapeutic relationships. Ahimsa also stresses that one must listen and offer compassion to others (Adele, 2009).

#### ***Satya (Truthfulness)***

The importance of satya is connected to ahimsa because non-adherence to dealing truthfully can lead to suffering pain, or harm. Truth demands integrity to life and is a moral principle. Carl Jung (Shelburne, 1988) shares a poignant message, he asks one to question what is so dangerous about the truth that one chooses to lie. Lying is typically defined as intentional behavior where people lie for a reason. As such, counseling's principle of veracity aligns with satya because it asks counselors to deal truthfully with others, especially their clients (ACA, 2014). Amer (2019) defines veracity as habitual truthfulness and accuracy to facts.

A key concept for counselor effectiveness lies in the truthfulness of the counselor. Rogers (1995) discusses a core condition for therapeutic change as congruence. Congruence refers to being honest and truthful with one's experience and with the client. The practice of congruence is only effective when the counselor fosters truthful self-awareness. As such, the practice of satya can enhance the authenticity of the practitioner.

Counselors can find themselves working in systems that cannot promise clients overall support due to mandates and specific agency purviews. For example, the case of a homeless shelter who has a strict policy on how

long a person can stay. In some instances, a client may exceed the nights allowed and the counselor could be asked how long the client has stayed and if there are any new beds available for others. If the counselor can ensure there are extra beds and the client who has exceeded their stay is not disturbing the flow of the agency, the counselor may stretch beyond the policies and serve a higher purpose to benefit the good of humanity. This example shows the principle of satya and Rogers' core tenants of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence.

Satya can be explored in relevance to remaining honest with oneself and our clients. Adhering to a principle such as honesty can encourage counselors to identify moments of impairment such as burnout. Many counselors experience burnout at some point during their practice and education (Richardson et al., 2020; Fye et al., 2022). Counselors have described burnout as stress, fatigue, body tension, frustration, and exhaustion (Carrola et al., 2022). Burnout among counselors can lead to serious foreseeable harm to clients due to impairment. The ACA code of ethics (ACA, 2014) asks counselors to monitor themselves for signs of impairment from emotional, mental, and physical problems, whilst refraining from offering services to clients while impaired. In such instances, the use of satya can support the importance of communicating impairment with oneself and with clients. The custom of honesty with self and others can be an on-going practice during challenging times.

### ***Asteya (Non-stealing)***

Asteya means not to steal. The term can be defined as not taking the property of another without their consent (Jadeja, 2022), and not only does it imply theft, but it also includes not taking advantage of power differences in a counseling relationship. Adele (2019) refers to stealing from others when we become unavailable or make a conversation about us and not the person who is speaking. An important counseling skill is personal power, where the counselor practices humility in what they know and confidence in their skills (Corey et al., 2017). It does not mean the counselor acts as superior to their client. Rather, the counselor uses their power to build the therapeutic relationship with the client. In this context, asteya has purposeful application to the counseling therapeutic relationship with respect to honoring the clients time and welfare.

Asteya can further be applied to building our sense of confidence and competency. It is keen for professional counselors to build and grow their own qualities, values, and lived experiences. Corey et al., 2017 urges counselors-in-training to remain genuine and practice at their level of competency. It is also imperative to note that building competency takes time and continued practice.

### ***Brahmacharya (Nonexcess)***

Brahmacharya is historically known as wise use of sexual energy, which is related to counseling ethics by means of refraining from sexual relationships with their clients. However, brahmacharya can also be interpreted to mean abstinence; to refrain from overindulgence. Further, Adele (2019) shares prime examples of how people in the United States live in excess: we overdo food, we overdo material possessions, and overdo sex. The key is moderation in all sensual pleasures.

An important aspect for professional counselors regarding Brahmacharya is a deep awareness of sexual energy. After learning that Brahmacharya is often translated as sexual restraint, it would deem wise to explore this yamas using the example of sexual diversity. The practice of Brahmacharya can provide an awareness of sexual diversity and sexual orientations. Jun (2018) discusses sexism and the importance of counselor's awareness of their views on sexism and strategies to best assist their clients. Understanding sexual energy can help counselors mitigate the social constructs that shape and label people.

### ***Aparigraha (Nonpossessiveness)***

The concept of Aparigraha can also be interpreted as nongreed, nonattachment, nongrasping, and nonclinging (Adele, 2019). The essential message of Aparigraha is to let go and enjoy the journey of life. This idea can aid counselors in their therapeutic relationships and their career trajectory. Counselors have demands and expectations that make them susceptible to stress, burnout, and anxiety. Counselors must balance acquiring new knowledge, professional development, client's needs, and social/emotional demands of the counseling profession. However, the task of balancing all demands is challenging (Harrichand et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2018). The practice of Aparigraha can assist counselors by allowing space for growth and learning. Counselors are asked to practice presence with clients and Aparigraha allows one to let go of all other agreements and just be with the client.

## **Niyamas- Observances (relationship with ourselves)**

### ***Saucha (Purity)***

The importance of Saucha through yogic philosophy is to practice purity in our thoughts, words, and actions (Adele, 2019). The practice of Saucha also has a relational quality. This means the practices of Saucha helps purify the self from heaviness or toxins and to gain clarity of each moment with integrity. The most important tenant of purity is the invitation to slow down and do one thing at a time. This thought of being mindful of doing one thing at a time can be profound in counseling for various reasons. For example, counselors could refrain from multitasking while in a session. Imagine a session where the counselor was answering emails and checking their social media

accounts whilst listening to their client. Although hurrying, multitasking, and busyness are seen as symbols of success, they are detrimental for the counseling relationship and for the purity of the profession.

Researchers have found stress levels to be high among graduate students in helping disciplines, particularly in mental health fields (Brickham et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2018; Mousavi et al., 2018). Unfortunately, high stress levels can impede counselors overall performance of acquired skills and decision making (Dye et al., 2020). In effort to keep counselors attune to their social and emotional well-being to help clients, counselor educators must prepare them by teaching the importance of wellness. Saucha is part of wellness, and it can be implemented in counseling curriculum. A counselor educator can best prepare future counselors when they take the time to be present with their students.

### ***Santosha (Contentment)***

Santosha aims at securing a sense of equanimity or contentment in all the intricacies of life (Chougule & Shinde, 2019). Santosha also infers we are the authors of our own lives, and we are responsible for our choices. This is much like choice therapy, where the guiding principle is that humans have choices and those choices guide said life (Wubbolding, 2015). In a direct practice context with clients, santosha can be instrumental in assisting clients in recognizing and accepting where they are in life.

Santosha principle also mirrors the counseling principle of autonomy: fostering the right to control's one direction in life. In any ethical dilemma, it is important to uphold the autonomy principle to best serve the client.

### ***Tapas (Self-Discipline)***

The literal definition of Tapas is heat, and can be interpreted as catharsis, change, transformation, and self-discipline (Adele, 2019). One of the most influential aspects in counseling is catharsis (Tonnaer et al., 2020; Zhan et al., 2021). Catharsis is known as the process of releasing strong or repressed emotions; whilst providing relief (Oxford Dictionary). However, it must be noted that catharsis is not the goal nor the intent of counseling. Yet, catharsis offers an opportunity for growth within the individual. Researchers explore the dangers and the possibilities of catharsis and have concluded there are two choices when facing catharsis, to break down or to break open (Rizal et al., 2020; Tonnaer et al., 2020).

Tapas is foundational in developing strengths of perseverance (Adele, 2019) which can be of great benefit to counselors as they navigate the innumerable intricacies in clinical counseling practice. The culmination of tapas can aid in facing challenges and changes and support build counselor competence.

### ***Svadhyaya (Self-study)***

The direct meaning of Svadhyaya is self-study and the focus is geared around coming to know your true identity (Adele, 2019). This process can be practiced by self-awareness, self-exploration, and intrapersonal work. The practice of Svadhyaya is seen in counseling programs and clinical practice by the virtue of asking the counselor to know their worldview first. Jun (2018) states the importance of self-assessment of one's own worldview is essential for effective counseling. Moreover, Jun (2018) incorporates a transformative conceptual framework of learning and invites readers (e.g., students and educators) to raise their coconscious of their perception of reality by cognitively and emotionally processing their identity. This transformative learning process is unequivocal for clinical counseling practitioners' self-study.

### ***Ishvara Pranidhana (Surrender)***

Ishvara Pranidhana is understood as surrender for many yogis and the goal is to surrender to the divine within each one of us (Bhargav et al., 2021; Schmid et al., 2021). Adele (2019) defines Ishvara Pranidhana in more secular terms, as "the surrender of the ego to a higher purpose" (p.173). This definition makes it more palatable and comprehensible to modern societies. In this sense, counselors do not need to adhere to a structured religion nor believe in a God or a Supreme Being to practice Ishvara Pranidhana. An example of surrendering to a higher purpose can be seen in Twelve Step Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) where participants are asked to surrender to a higher power over their addictions. Dylan and Muncaster (2021) state that Ishvara Pranidhana can ultimately be practiced by any commitment to an activity that focuses past the limits of egoic performing.

Counselors knowledge and understanding of Freudian psychoanalytic theory helps explore identity development. According to Freud's theory, the psyche is structured into three parts (the id, the ego, and superego). The function of the id is the instinctive component of personality. The ego known as the reality principle and the superego is based on morality (Cramer, 1999; Lapsey, 2011). The focus and relevance to Freud's ego concept rests on the idea of surrendering the ego as stated earlier. The intent with this guideline is to challenge the ego and surrender to higher practices.

## Implications for Clinical Counseling Practice

Counselors are faced with an array of challenges and ethical dilemmas as they navigate the complexities of working with a culturally diverse population. It is important for counselors to adhere to their counseling code of ethics. However, the teachings of the Yamas and Niyamas serve a great value to the creative approaches in counseling. The guidelines in yoga's ethical practice can build on the existing counselor ethical understandings by mindfully engaging in humanistic core values that can extend past the classroom and therapy realms. The competence of a counselor is something that is developed through years and deliberate practice. The support of the Yamas and Niyamas can foster the growth of a strong ethical foundation for counselors.

There is ample research supporting the influence in teaching old values of Yamas and Niyamas as part of value education to school children (Swapna, 2023) and to enhance pedagogy in learning models for education (Singh, 2016). The Yamas and Niyamas can help counselors in their various roles as advocates, collaborators, educators, healers, and therapists whose primary responsibility is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients (ACA, 2014). The mission of counseling is also to promote respect for human dignity and diversity (ACA, 2014) and the Yamas and Niyamas could provide a sound ethical container where counselors can engage in diversity. Moreover, the considerable percentage of those who identify as spiritual represents the importance of counselor's openness to discuss and explore spirituality of self and clients.

The process of developing effective counseling professionals is worthy of attention of the ethical standards in counseling and yogic philosophical roots. Effective counseling is the ability to know your worldview which is based on values, beliefs, and biases in effort to understand the client's worldview (Jun, 2018). Self-assessment of one's own worldview is a challenging and mindful practice. Moreover, the application of yoga practice such as the Yamas and Niyamas can enhance counselor wellness and effectiveness (Maurya, 2021). There is a lot of similarity between the ethical codes and guidelines in counseling and yoga. Thus, the yamas and niyamas are an excellent way for counselors to examine ethical issues and raise their awareness and competence in multicultural encounters.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the first two limbs of ashtanga yoga and their relevance to clinical counseling practice, particularly counseling ethical principles. Although there are connections between ethical principles and spiritual practices within the counseling realm, this paper argues the importance of extending beyond the American Counseling Association ethical codes to consider the knowledge of the Yamas and Niyamas. The commonalities between yoga and counseling ethics were discussed. The examination of the Yamas and Niyamas is an opportunity to practice ethics rather than to solely have knowledge of code of ethics. This paper has demonstrated the first two ethical limbs of ashtanga yoga have considerable relevance in counseling, especially with respect to encompassing counseling ethics, theory, and practice. While there is some research on the yamas and niyamas in other areas, there is no exploration in the counseling field. This paper can be viewed as a cornerstone to developing a foundational ethical application in counseling curriculum where there is room for meaningful self-awareness and exploration. Yoga's guidelines can support counselors-in-training as they gain the skills necessary for awareness to help themselves and others reclaim their life.

**Table 1. ACA Ethical Principles and Yamas and Niyamas Principles**

ACA Ethical Principle	Definition
Autonomy	Fostering the right to control the direction of one's life
Nonmaleficence	Do not harm
Beneficence	Working for the good of the individual
Justice	Fairness and equality
Fidelity	Honoring commitments
Veracity	Dealing truthfully with individuals
Yamas Ethical Principles	Definition
Ahimsa	Nonviolence
Satya	Truthfulness
Asteya	Nonstealing
Brahmacharya	Nonexcess
Aparigraha	Nonpossessiveness
Niyamas Ethical Principles	Definition
Saucha	Purity
Santosha	Contentment
Tapas	Self-Discipline
Svadyaya	Self-Study
Ishvara Pranidhana	Surrender

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