# EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION AND APPLICATION OF THE YAMAS AND NIYAMAS AMONG WESTERN YOGA PRACTITIONERS

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ABSTRACT

With a growing body of research describing the benefits of yoga on health and quality of life, more people are engaging with yoga in the West every year. However, as the practice becomes more globalized, there has been increased focus on the physical movement practice and its impacts on stress, and limited attention on the philosophical elements that complete the practice. The roots of yoga lie in South Asia and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, a defining text of the practice, describes its eight limbs as: *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (sensory withdrawal), *dhyana* (meditation), *dharana* (concentration), *yamas* (moral restraints), *niyamas* (moral observances), and *samadhi* (enlightenment). This study aims to understand whether Western yoga practitioners are integrating and applying the yamas and the niyamas into their daily lives. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using the validated Yama and Niyama Questionnaire to survey yoga practitioners in the Burlington, VT area. It was found that the practice of the yamas and niyamas was strongly correlated with the age of the practitioner, rather than frequency of practice or years of experience. These findings indicate that philosophical elements of yoga may be more embraced with life experience, and are not necessarily related to the amount of time practicing yoga as it is taught in the West. Further, these findings suggest that practitioners in the West may not be exposed to the philosophical aspects of yoga by yoga instructors or in their practice, as increased engagement with the practice was not found to correlate with adherence to the yamas and niyamas. These findings contribute to the body of research that describes the exclusion of the philosophical elements of yoga in its Western practice, and encourage more research to be conducted on the implications of excluding philosophical elements on the potential benefits of the practice.

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## Introduction

As of 2024, 1 in 6 adults in the United States practices yoga (Elgaddal & Weeks, 2024). Yoga is a multifaceted practice that seeps into every aspect of life; however, in Western contexts, practicing yoga can be described as a series of postures linked by the breath with the goal of fostering concentration, conscious presence, and relaxation. Extensive research on the practice suggests that its impacts on health and quality of life are profound, with benefits that include improved wellness habits, better sleep, and reduced stress and pain (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health [NCCIH], 2017). The roots of the practice lie in South Asia, where yoga began as a holistic spiritual discipline aimed at achieving self-realization and enlightenment (Desikachar, 1995). The term yoga comes from the Sanskrit word "*yuj,*" meaning "yoke" or "union," reflecting its purpose of uniting mind, body, and spirit (Feuerstein, 2001). The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, one of yoga's foundational texts, describes the eight limbs of classical yoga, which include *asana* (postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sensory withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (unity, the experience of connection, enlightenment.) (Iyengar, 1993).

Among these eight limbs are the yamas and niyamas: moral restraints and observances that guide one's conduct both socially and personally. These principles, although rooted in ancient South Asian traditions, are interpreted and applied differently across cultures and historical contexts. Table 1 presents the ten core yamas and niyamas, along with their commonly accepted meanings in Western contexts, as used in this study (Adele, 2009).

**Table 1**
Definition of key terms as used in this study.

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| Yamas | Moral restraints; guidelines to right living with others |
| Niyamas | Moral observances; guidelines to right living with our inner mind's thoughts |
| Ahimsa | Non-violence; refraining from acts of violence, harm, or unkindness to others, the earth, or oneself. |
| Satya | Truthfulness; refraining from lying with an additional emphasis on being more authentic and real. |
| Asteya | Non-stealing; refraining from taking what is not yours and refraining from taking more than you need from other people, the earth, or oneself. |
| Brahmacharya | "To walk with God," Non-excess; refraining from overindulgence with food, sleep, pleasure, and work. Cultivating a sense of sacredness in all that you do. |
| Aparigraha | Non-possessiveness; refraining from possessing, grasping, or clinging to any person, event, or thing. |
| Saucha | Purity; purification of bodies, thoughts, and words. Invitation to be purely available to each moment as it happens. |
| Santosha | Contentment; Active practice of gratitude and appreciation for what is. |
| Tapas | "Heat," Self-discipline; Effort toward personal goals and growth. |
| Svadhyaya | Self-study; the intentional seeking to know who you are. |
| Ishvara pranidhana | Surrender; Actively putting ourselves at the feet of something greater than we are. Giving up control. Trust. |
| West | Includes Europe and the United States, term used as a comparative category to South Asia, where the practice of yoga originated |

While these principles are interpreted differently amongst diverse yoga practitioners and spiritual leaders, it is clear how allowing these principles to guide one's life could correspond to an individual's choices and behaviors, which impact their health. Non-violence is associated with

not consuming meat to avoid harming other living beings to sustain the body. Non-excess and purity are associated with limited alcohol and drug consumption, and ethical sexual contact or abstaining from sexual engagement. Contentment and surrender are internal qualities, but can contribute to a more positive outlook on life and stress reduction, indicating a correspondence between an application of these principles and more positive mental well-being (Büssing et al., 2021).

As yoga has spread to the West, there has been a shift away from the ethical and spiritual principles described in the Yoga Sutras (Singleton, 2010). As yoga has been marketed and practiced in the West, it is often perceived as a form of physical activity to increase strength, flexibility, and reduce stress. Limiting the practice to asana, pranayama, and pratyahara has led to reduced exposure to yoga's foundational philosophical principles (Smith & Brown, 2019). The Western emphasis on yoga as a physical practice impacts its effectiveness in health promotion, chronic disease management, quality of life, accessibility, and cultural authenticity (Singleton, 2010; NCCIH, 2017). A randomized controlled trial published in the International Journal of Yoga found that practicing all eight limbs of yoga, known as Ashtanga ("eight limbs") yoga, significantly improved social and physical quality of life in participants, compared to a regimen focused solely on asana and pranayama (Mewada et al., 2022). The study underscores how integrating yoga's philosophical elements may positively impact health behaviors and outcomes, particularly for individuals managing chronic conditions. Given this finding, this study aims to investigate Western yoga practitioners' knowledge and integration of the yamas and niyamas into their lives due to the implications of excluding philosophical elements of yoga on health promotion.

## Review of Literature

### Modern Postural Yoga

An interplay of historical, cultural, and ideological influences has shaped the evolution of yoga into a modern postural practice. During British colonial rule in India, traditional yoga practices were reframed through Western notions of physical fitness. This reinterpretation, influenced by European gymnastics and calisthenics, emphasized physicality over spirituality and ethics (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). British officials, through organizations such as the Indian branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), promoted physical education regimes that aligned with their broader colonial agendas. These programs adopted traditional asanas, blending them with Western exercise methods to create a practice that appealed to both colonial administrators and Indian practitioners. Despite this focus on physical fitness, these practices retained elements of mind-body connection, a fundamental aspect of meditation and achieving enlightenment, which helped sustain their local appeal. The development of *surya namaskar* (sun salutations), a series of standing and grounded postures linked with a push-up, reflects this synthesis and is a widely practiced element of Western yoga today. Indian wrestling and bodybuilding practices, themselves influenced by Western ideals of strength and discipline, contributed to the emergence of these sequences, bridging traditional and colonial fitness regimens (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, yoga became a symbol of resistance during Hindu nationalist movements. Figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Tirumalai Krishnamacharya redefined yoga, emphasizing its physical and spiritual aspects as a unified practice. Vivekananda, in particular, popularized yoga in the West by presenting it as a rational,

scientific discipline compatible with modern values of physical health (Singleton, 2010). This framing made yoga more accessible to global audiences, particularly as Western interest in health, wellness, and alternative medicine grew in the 20th century. By the mid-20th century, postural yoga had gained significant traction in the West, aligning with rising consumer demand for practices that promote stress relief and physical fitness. The fitness and wellness industries amplified this shift, promoting yoga as a lifestyle choice associated with beauty, health, and class privilege. Media representations of yoga increasingly focus on its physical benefits, often targeting affluent, predominantly white demographics (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). These portrayals frequently excluded yoga's philosophical dimensions, presenting it instead as an aspirational activity centered on aesthetics and physical transformation.

This commercial emphasis has had profound impacts on the perceptions of yoga as a physical, individualistic practice in the West. While the narrow focus on asana and pranayama has expanded yoga's popularity, it has also failed to spread awareness of its ethical and spiritual roots, such as the yamas and niyamas. These foundational principles promote practices like non-violence, truthfulness, and self-discipline, which are critical to yoga's original intent as a holistic discipline in achieving spiritual liberation and guiding others to do so. By excluding these elements, Western yoga often risks reducing the practice to a commodified form of exercise, detaching it from its cultural and philosophical origins and intent. The Westernization of yoga has thus created a dual narrative: on one hand, it has made yoga widely accessible, allowing millions to benefit from its physical and mental health advantages; on the other, it has fostered a secular, commercialized version of the practice that often excludes its deeper ethical and spiritual dimensions. These trends raise critical questions about cultural appropriation, authenticity, and the potential loss of yoga's transformative potential or original purpose.

Mindfulness is a principle in traditional and modern yoga but has become more prominent in modern practices due to growing interest in mental health and stress management (Woodyard, 2011). Mindfulness is taught as a method for increasing awareness, reducing stress, and promoting mental clarity. In Western yoga, breathwork is used as an anchor to enter a mindful or meditative state along with the movement of the body through a series of postures (Woodyard, 2011). Mindfulness practices align with contemporary wellness trends but still have roots in asana, pranayama, and meditation. While traditional yoga's primary aim was spiritual liberation, modern yoga frequently frames itself within the context of holistic health, considering mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness. Modern yoga emphasizes asana as a tool for improving flexibility and strength and is framed as a foundation for accessing the benefits of stress relief and mindfulness (De Michelis, 2004). However, in the absence of these principles within standard yoga instruction, practitioners are often left to independently seek out and study the philosophical foundations of the practice. While modern yoga is often more secular and focused on promoting physical and mental health, many practitioners and teachers still draw from traditional yoga principles, including meditation and mindfulness, adapting them to contemporary concerns such as mental wellness, inclusivity, and social justice.

## Implications of Excluding Yoga's Philosophical Dimensions

The exclusion of yoga's philosophical elements, particularly the yamas and niyamas, is believed to inhibit the practice's potential to foster holistic well-being, despite this being a motivating factor for most Western practitioners, which is how the practice is advertised amongst Western practitioners. Scholars suggest that the yamas and niyamas, as defined in Table 1, are integral to yoga's transformative capacity, guiding practitioners toward ethical living, self-awareness, and spiritual growth (Desikachar, 1995; Feuerstein, 2001). The omission of

ethical elements in modern postural yoga results in a fragmented practice, where physical and mental benefits are prioritized at the expense of yoga's more profound, integrative purpose (Singleton, 2010; Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021).

This shift has implications for both individual and collective well-being. For example, the yama of non-possessiveness encourages detachment from materialism, offering tools to navigate consumerist pressures that dominate contemporary life. Similarly, the niyama of self-study cultivates introspection and self-regulation, qualities linked to improved mental health and resilience (Woodyard, 2011). Moreover, scholars like De Michelis (2004) argue that the absence of these ethical dimensions perpetuates exclusivity in modern yoga spaces. Framed predominantly within consumerist paradigms, yoga often emphasizes aesthetics, athleticism, and marketability, sidelining the inclusive, introspective, and spiritual aspects that make it universally accessible. This narrow framing can alienate those who do not conform to these ideals, particularly marginalized communities, thereby limiting yoga's potential as a tool for social justice and equity (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). Without these philosophical roots, modern yoga often fails to deliver its transformative potential as a practice that fosters personal growth, authentic living, and social harmony (Mewada et al., 2022).

## Emerging Trends and Counter-Movements

Modern yoga has witnessed the rise of counter-movements to address the exclusion of traditional ethical principles and the commodification of the practice. A prominent trend is incorporating social justice ethics, often aligned with non-violence and the goal of universal liberation. Many yoga teachers and organizations now address critical issues such as body diversity, financial and physical accessibility, and anti-racism, working to make yoga more

inclusive and welcoming to marginalized groups (De Michelis, 2004; Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). For instance, some yoga schools have restructured their teacher training programs and class formats to promote trauma-informed and non-judgmental environments, fostering spaces that are both physically and emotionally accessible to practitioners from varied backgrounds. Another emerging trend is integrating environmental consciousness, reflecting the yama of non-violence as it relates to sustainability. Modern practitioners increasingly advocate for eco-friendly practices, such as using sustainable materials for yoga mats and props or minimizing the carbon footprint of yoga studios (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). This alignment with environmental activism extends yoga's ethical principles beyond the individual to encompass planetary well-being, illustrating the relevance of its philosophical foundations in contemporary contexts.

Despite these efforts, the commercialization of yoga remains a significant ethical concern. The transformation of yoga into a consumer-driven product often perpetuates fitness culture ideals, prioritizing appearance over holistic well-being (Singleton, 2010). Critics argue that this focus distorts the philosophical roots of yoga, reducing its rich spiritual and ethical traditions to mere commodities. Practices such as asana and pranayama are frequently stripped of their deeper contextual meanings and marketed as tools for achieving a particular body image or lifestyle. This commodification can alienate individuals who are unable to meet these narrow standards or who seek a more authentic engagement with yoga's spiritual dimensions. In response, some modern practitioners advocate returning to yoga's traditional ethical and spiritual roots as a countermeasure to commercialization. These efforts include teaching frameworks that explicitly integrate the yamas and niyamas into practice, fostering a balanced approach encompassing physical, mental, and ethical dimensions (Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). Some resist by offering free or donation-based classes, and offering mats and props to borrow at no cost. These

countermovements seek to preserve yoga's integrity and reclaim its role as a transformative practice that addresses individual and societal challenges.

## Gaps in the Literature

Despite significant research into yoga's physical and psychological benefits, critical gaps still need to be addressed regarding the impact of its philosophical dimensions on specific health outcomes. Much of the existing literature focuses on asana and pranayama as standalone practices, often excluding the yamas, niyamas, and other limbs of yoga. Studies that integrate these ethical and philosophical principles into interventions are limited, leaving questions about their potential effects on health outcomes such as stress reduction, emotional regulation, and long-term behavioral change largely unexplored. For instance, while practices like non-violence or self-study may influence self-awareness and interpersonal relationships, empirical studies assessing these impacts are rare. Another gap lies in exploring cultural dynamics as yoga is practiced and reinterpreted in Western contexts. Scholars note that yoga's adaptation to Western values, including its emphasis on physical fitness and individualism, has resulted in significant shifts in its philosophical and cultural essence (Singleton, 2010; Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). However, little research examines the lived experiences of practitioners navigating these cultural tensions or how different communities integrate or resist these changes.

Finally, there is a need for more nuanced research on cultural appropriation in modern yoga. While scholars like De Michelis (2004) and Singleton (2010) critique the commodification and Westernization of yoga, limited empirical work investigates how cultural appropriation affects perceptions of yoga's authenticity, accessibility, and cultural significance. Questions such as who has the authority to teach yoga, how cultural symbols are commercialized, and how these

dynamics affect South Asian communities remain unresolved. Moreover, the ethical implications of these practices, particularly concerning the potential erasure or misrepresentation of yoga's roots, are currently unexamined. Addressing these gaps is critical for developing a more comprehensive understanding of yoga as both a traditional spiritual practice and a modern global phenomenon. Future research should explore the integration of yoga's philosophical elements in health interventions, the diverse experiences of practitioners, and the ethical complexities of its globalization (Yatham, 2023).

## Methods

### Design

The application and integration of the yamas and niyamas were evaluated in adult yoga practitioners using a cross-sectional study design. A 42-item survey was administered, which included study information and consent, 24 Likert-scale items derived from the validated Yama and Niyama Questionnaire (Büssing et al., 2021), additional questions about exposure to all eight limbs of yoga, demographic items, and one open-ended question about participants' motivations for practicing yoga. The full survey instrument is provided in Appendix A. Each Likert-scale item corresponds to a specific yama or niyama and was grouped accordingly to assess adherence; details of this grouping are outlined in Appendix B.

### Subjects

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling. Posters containing a QR code linked to the Qualtrics survey were displayed at a Sangha Studio in Burlington, VT, as well as at the University of Vermont student center. The QR code allowed yoga practitioners to scan and access the survey on their smartphones. Refer to Appendix C for the recruitment poster. To participate, individuals had to be 18 years or older, actively practice yoga, and complete both the Yamas and Niyamas questionnaire and the demographic information section. There were no restrictions based on the style or duration of yoga practice. Participants completed the survey anonymously, and informed consent was obtained after reading the information sheet and agreeing to continue. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

This study was conducted following ethical guidelines outlined by the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of Vermont. Participation was voluntary, and participants

were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No identifying information was collected to maintain confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

Spearman's rank correlation was used to assess relationships between the participant's application of the yamas and niyamas and other variables such as participant age, frequency of yoga practice, and years of experience. This analysis was selected because the data included ordinal, rank-based information from the Likert-scale questions. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to conduct Spearman's rank correlation coefficients for each variable and the sum of the variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. To analyze the qualitative data, participant responses to the open-ended question were reviewed, and key categories and themes were identified. This categorization was used to explore how participants perceive their yoga practice and how these experiences may relate to the inclusion or exclusion of philosophical elements.

## Results

### Participants

A total of 18 individuals participated in the study. An additional 11 responses were recorded in Qualtrics but were excluded from analysis, as these participants only confirmed being over the age of 18 and did not complete the remainder of the survey. One participant omitted responses to three items; therefore, the sample size was N=18 for all yamas and niyamas, except for non-possessiveness and non-stealing, where N=17. The majority of participants (61%) were between the ages of 18 and 24 years. The remaining participants were distributed across the following age groups: 25–34 years (11%), 35–44 years (17%), and 55–64 years (11%).

Regarding gender identity, 89% identified as female, 6% as male, and 6% as non-binary. The sample was predominantly White/Caucasian (83%), with 11% identifying as Asian and 6% Hispanic/LatinX. Household income levels varied among participants, with the largest proportions reporting incomes of $0-$9,999 (28%) and $150,000+ (28%). Education levels were diverse, with 33% having completed some college, 28% holding a four-year degree, and 22% having obtained a professional degree. Additionally, 11% of participants had earned a doctorate.

Participants had varying levels of yoga experience, with 42% reporting more than five years of practice, 26% having 3-4 years of experience, 21% practicing for 1-2 years, and 11% practicing for less than a year. The frequency of yoga practice per week also varied, with 32% practicing once per week, 21% practicing twice per week, and 21% practicing three times per week. A small percentage (5%) practiced daily.

In terms of practice location, the majority (74%) practiced at a studio, while 21% practiced from home and 5% at a gym. The most common method of yoga practice was

attending in-person instructor-led classes (84%), followed by self-guided practice (63%), online video instruction (32%), and live-streamed classes (16%).

These demographic characteristics provide context for the study's findings, particularly in relation to how yoga experience, practice habits, and demographic factors may influence adherence to ethical principles within yoga philosophy. See Table 2 for complete demographic information.

**Table 2.**
Demographics and practice characteristics of participants.

| **Variable** | | **Count (%)** |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 18-24 | 11 (61%) |
| | 25 - 34 | 2 (11%) |
| | 35-44 | 3 (17%) |
| | 45-54 | 0 (0%) |
| | 55-64 | 2 (11%) |
| | 65 or older | 0 (0%) |
| Sex Assigned at Birth | | |
| | Male | 1 (6%) |
| | Female | 17 (94%) |
| Gender Identity | | |
| | Male | 1 (6%) |
| | Female | 16 (89%) |
| | Non-binary | 1 (6%) |
| Ethnicity | | |
| | White/Caucasian | 15 (83%) |
| | Asian | 2 (11%) |
| | Hispanic/LatinX | 1 (6%) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Household Income | | |
| | $0-$9,999 | 5 (28%) |
| | $10,000-$24,999 | 1 (6%) |
| | $25,000-$49,999 | 2 (11%) |
| | $50,000-$74,999 | 3 (17%) |
| | $75,000-$99,999 | 2 (11%) |
| | $150,000+ | 5 (28%) |
| Highest Level of Education | | |
| | Less than high school | 0 (0%) |
| | High school graduate | 0 (0%) |
| | Some college | 6 (33%) |
| | 2-year degree | 1 (6%) |
| | 4-year degree | 5 (28%) |
| | Professional degree | 4 (22%) |
| | Doctorate | 2 (11%) |
| Years Practicing Yoga | | |
| | Less than 1 year | 2 (11%) |
| | 1-2 years | 4 (21%0 |
| | 3-4 years | 5 (21%) |
| | More than 5 years | 8 (42%) |
| Days of Yoga Practice per Week | | |
| | 1 day | 6 (32%) |
| | 2 days | 4 (21%) |
| | 3 days | 4 (21%) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 4 days | 3 (16%) |
| | 5 days | 1 (5%) |
| | 6 days | 0 (0%) |
| | 7 days | 1 (5%) |
| Primary Location of Practice | | |
| | From home | 4 (21%) |
| | At a studio | 14 (74%) |
| | At a gym | 1 (5%) |
| Method of Yoga Practice | | |
| | In-person instructor | 16 (84%) |
| | Online video | 6 (32%) |
| | Live stream class | 3 (16%) |
| | Self-guided | 12 (63%) |

Spearman's Rank Analysis

Overall, both the yamas and niyamas demonstrated significant positive correlations with age, as seen in Table 3. Of the ten tenets of the yamas and niyamas, surrender, self-study, purity, non-excess, non-stealing, and truthfulness showed strong and significant associations with age.

Certain ethical principles did not show significant correlations with participant age or other variables. Non-violence did not exhibit any significant associations, nor did contentment or non-violence. Years of yoga experience did not significantly correlate with any yamas or niyamas. Weak positive correlations were observed with non-excess and truthfulness, neither was statistically significant. Interestingly, contentment displayed a weak negative correlation with years of experience, though it was not significant. Days per week of yoga practice did not show significant correlations with most yamas and niyamas. The strongest, and only significant, correlation was with self-study.

**Table 3**
Correlations between age, experience, and frequency of yoga practice with selected Yama and Niyama principles.

| Categories | Age | | Experience | | Frequency | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $r_s$ | $p$ | $r_s$ | $p$ | $r_s$ | $p$ |
| **Niyamas** | | | | | | |
| Ishvara Pranidhana (Surrender) | 0.567 | .014* | .231 | .356 | 0.101 | .691 |
| Svadhyaya (Self-study) | 0.533 | .023* | .230 | .359 | 0.568 | .014* |
| Santosha (Contentment) | 0.132 | 0.60 | -0.331 | .180 | -0.200 | .426 |
| Saucha (Purity) | 0.494 | 0.037* | .163 | .518 | .162 | .520 |
| Tapas (Discipline) | 0.435 | 0.071 | .105 | .678 | -.309 | .212 |
| **Yamas** | | | | | | |
| Brahmacharya (Non-excess) | 0.576 | .012* | 0.294 | .236 | -.055 | .829 |
| Asteya (Non-stealing) | 0.530 | .029* | -.033 | .901 | -.175 | .503 |
| Satya (Truthfulness) | 0.541 | 0.02* | 0.370 | .131 | -.124 | .624 |
| Ahimsa (Non-violence) | 0.248 | 0.32 | .329 | .182 | -0.382 | .118 |
| Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness) | 0.408 | 0.104 | .243 | .347 | -0.332 | .193 |
| **Aggregate Scores** | | | | | | |
| Yamas (Total) | 0.572 | .016* | .166 | .523 | -.075 | .774 |
| Niyamas (Total) | 0.605 | .008** | .183 | .466 | .169 | .503 |

Note: $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **

Several ethical principles showed strong interrelationships. Within niyamas, surrender and self-study, as well as purity and self-discipline, showed strong associations. Within yamas, truthfulness was significantly correlated with non-possessiveness, and truthfulness also showed

strong associations with non-stealing and non-excess. A strong correlation was found between yamas and niyamas overall. Table 4 demonstrates all intercorrelation data.

**Table 4**
Interrelationships among yama and niyama principles.

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Ishvara pranidhana (Surrender) | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Svadhyaya (Self-study) | .75** | — | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Santosha (Contentment) | .58* | .27 | — | | | | | | | |
| 4. Saucha (Purity) | .65** | .71** | .43 | — | | | | | | |
| 5. Tapas (Discipline) | .64** | .22 | .47 | .59** | — | | | | | |
| 6. Brahmacharya (Non-excess) | .86** | .54* | .41 | .54* | .58* | — | | | | |
| 7. Satya (Truthfulness) | .66** | .34 | .29 | .56* | .82** | .65** | — | | | |
| 8. Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness) | .55* | .41 | .21 | .49* | .56* | .66** | .61** | — | | |
| 9. Ahimsa (Non-violence) | .20 | -.09 | .12 | -.03 | .11 | .32 | .30 | .45 | — | |
| 10. Asteya (Non-stealing) | .71** | .47 | .61** | .60* | .54* | .57* | .59* | .53* | .53* | — |

Note: $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **

Qualitative Analysis

Participants' responses to the open-ended question, “How and why did you start practicing yoga? What keeps you coming back?” revealed a range of motivations and

experiences. Responses were categorized into four main themes: mental and emotional well-being, physical benefits, spiritual and personal growth, and community. Within the physical benefits theme, participants cited reasons such as flexibility and gentle movement. One participant shared, “To gain flexibility, improve gut health, stay physically active, and for stress relief,” while another noted, “I found a power vinyasa that I really liked and got really fit doing, which I enjoyed a lot.” In the mental and emotional well-being theme, participants emphasized yoga’s role in stress relief, self-care, and generally feeling “good” after practicing.

The spiritual and personal growth theme included key words describing transformation, challenging oneself, and grounding. One participant stated, “each time I step onto my mat I feel transformed.” The community theme applied to all the participants who started to practice yoga due to exposure from their families and friends, or once they started, found a community in their practice. One participant described yoga as “a safe haven.” These themes illustrate the multifaceted reasons participants engage with yoga, and the quotes show that motivations often span more than one category, reflecting social, personal, and spiritual dimensions of the practice. Refer to Table 5 to see how themes were extracted from each participant's narrative.

Overall, 35% of respondents described mental and emotional well-being to be their motivating factor to start and continue their yoga practice, followed by 27% that cited physical benefits, 22% described a sense of community, and 16% were motivated by spiritual and personal growth. This indicates that within this sample, participants are motivated to practice due to the positive impacts it has on mental health and stress, perhaps more so than the physical or spiritual engagement. For a complete summary of qualitative themes, categories, and direct quotes, see Appendix D.

**Table 5**
Excerpts from participant narratives to the questions, “How and why did you start practicing yoga? What keeps you coming back?”

| Question | Categories | Themes | Direct Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| How and why did you start practicing yoga? What keeps you coming back? | Flexibility, Physically active, Stress relief | Physical, Mental and Emotional Well-Being | "To gain flexibility , improve gut health, stay physically active and for stress relief" |
| | Stress Relief | Mental and Emotional Well-Being, Community | "it relaxes me, i also love the instructor when i go to yoga at uvm!" |
| | Self-Care | Mental and Emotional Well-Being | "Once I started grad school, I started to shift away from fitness yoga and more to using it as a practice of self-care when stressed from school." |
| | Transformative, Feels good | Mental and Emotional Well-Being, Spiritual and Personal Growth | "What keeps me coming back is how good I feel on and off my mat. Each time I step onto my mat I feel transformed." |
| | Grounding, Strength Body/mind | Spiritual and Personal Growth, Physical Benefits, Mental and Emotional Benefits | "The practice is truly grounding and strengthening for body/mind." |

**Discussion**

The findings suggest increased age is a significant predictor of adherence to the yamas and niyamas, potentially reflecting a deeper engagement with yoga's philosophical dimensions over time. However, the number of years someone had practiced yoga did not strongly predict

the application of these principles. This suggests that personal motivation to dive deeper into the ethical principles, life experience, or the way yoga is taught may be more influential than time spent practicing due to the lack of integration of these principles in its Western practice.

While practicing yoga more frequently was linked to greater engagement with self-study, it did not significantly correlate with any other ethical principles. This may highlight a broader trend in Western contexts, where yoga is often a segmented practice. Few philosophical elements persist through practicing alone without the integration of philosophical teachings. Instructors may encourage self-reflection during class, but whether individuals recognize and engage with it as an ethical or philosophical exercise is highly personal.

Büssing and colleagues (2021) observed that practitioners who perceive yoga as a spiritual path reported greater alignment with ethical values than those whose focus was primarily physical. They found that integration of the yamas and niyamas was more strongly predicted by viewing yoga as a lifestyle or spiritual practice than by how often or how long someone practiced, or by their age. However, they did find statistically significant correlations between adherence to most yamas and niyamas, age, and years of yoga practice. These findings align with the findings of this study, as it was found that age corresponds to greater integration and application of the yamas and niyamas. However, this study did not find significant relationships between years of experience practicing yoga with the yamas and niyamas. Further, the qualitative findings from this study suggest that participants were primarily motivated by the mental, emotional, social, and physical benefits of yoga, rather than its spiritual or philosophical aspects. This supports the idea that the ethical foundations of yoga are often underemphasized in Western teaching and provides some explanation for the lack of correlation between duration of yoga practice and observance of the yamas and niyamas. Practitioners may not engage with these

philosophical elements because they are not emphasized by instructors or because they are not personally seeking a spiritual dimension in their practice, even though such engagement may offer additional mental, emotional, and social benefits.

The positive correlation between age and ethical engagement may indicate that values such as truthfulness, non-excess, and purity are more likely to be embraced with maturity and life experience. This finding could also indicate that the older participants simply engage more with the spiritual aspects of the practice than simply the postures. Future research could explore whether these principles are simply adopted more readily with age, if older individuals are more interested in engaging with a spiritual practice, or if it depends on the participants' perceptions of the practice as holistic or spiritual.

The strong correlations found between different ethical principles also suggest that these values may support and reinforce one another. For example, truthfulness and non-stealing were closely linked, as were self-reflection and surrender. This interconnectedness may mean that embracing one principle naturally encourages the practice of others, which has meaningful implications for how yoga philosophy might be introduced or taught in Western settings.

Yoga teachers and studios might consider incorporating more explicit discussions of the yamas and niyamas into their classes in digestible ways. Doing so could help bridge the gap between physical practice and the deeper values embedded in the tradition, making it more accessible to practitioners of all levels and ages. Using mindfulness as a path to introduce the philosophical principles of yoga can be effective, as indicated by Büssing and colleagues (2021) who found that conscious presence was the best predictor of adherence to all yamas and niyamas.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was small (N = 18), which limits the ability to generalize findings and detect subtle patterns. The use of convenience sampling, drawing from only two local yoga studios, also limits the diversity of perspectives included. Additionally, the demographic makeup of the sample lacked racial, regional, and cultural diversity, meaning the results may not reflect broader or more diverse yoga communities. All responses were self-reported, which introduces the possibility of bias, such as participants overestimating their engagement with ethical principles. Ethical terms like “humble trust” or “devotion to the divine” may have been interpreted differently by participants, depending on their exposure to or understanding of yoga philosophy. Future research should consider providing more context or examples when asking about these values. Finally, while themes were categorized based on key terms, concepts like “grounding” and “transformative” could be interpreted as mental, physical, or spiritual motivations for practicing. Therefore, conducting interviews with participants in future studies to better understand how they perceive their practice could be more enlightening and allow for the identification of correlations between perceptions of yoga practice and adherence to the yamas and niyamas.

To build on these findings, future studies should aim to include more diverse and larger samples, encompassing a wider range of geographic regions, yoga styles, and cultural backgrounds. It may also be useful to compare how specific teaching approaches, such as Ashtanga and vinyasa styled classes, affect participants’ understanding and adoption of these principles. Qualitative research could further explore why individuals connect with these ethical ideas, and what role personal experiences play in shaping their perceptions of the practice.

Investigating how and why values like truthfulness, non-excess, or non-stealing are practiced over time could offer valuable insights into how yoga philosophy is lived in real-world practice.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate Western yoga practitioners' application and integration of the yamas and niyamas into their lives, with particular attention to the implications of excluding philosophical elements of yoga in the context of health promotion. This study contributes to growing evidence that while yoga is widely practiced in the West for its physical and mental health benefits, its ethical and philosophical dimensions are often overlooked, which may limit the potential impacts of the practice.

The findings highlight a positive correlation between age and engagement with ethical principles, suggesting that life experience may foster greater openness to or resonance with the reflective and moral dimensions of yoga. In contrast, years of experience and frequency of practice were not strongly associated with adherence to the yamas and niyamas. This distinction demonstrates that simply spending more time practicing yoga in the West does not necessarily lead to deeper ethical integration.

The strong interrelationships among ethical principles suggest they may develop collectively rather than in isolation. Certain values, such as non-violence and contentment, did not show strong correlations with age or practice frequency, indicating that additional factors, such as personal motivation and curiosity, cultural context, or exposure to philosophical teachings, may influence ethical engagement.

Qualitative responses reinforced these findings. While many participants cited physical or mental health motivations for beginning yoga, some described spiritual growth, emotional grounding, and transformation through continued practice. These narratives suggest that when

philosophical elements are encountered, they can become deeply meaningful and influential, pointing to a need for more structured opportunities for reflection and discussion of philosophical principles within Western yoga spaces.

The findings of this study suggest more research must be conducted on the motivating factors for engaging with spiritual and philosophical dimensions of ther yoga practice to understand if exposure to the yamas and niyamas in Western yoga settings would increase the integration and application of these principles relative to frequency and duration of practice, or if the application of these principles is unrelated to yoga practice and more related to life experience and cultural context. Further research could reveal how integrating and applying the yamas and niyamas can impact the effects of yoga on health and well-being.

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## Appendix A

Qualtrics Survey Instrument and Study Information Sheet


Research Study Information Sheet
Title of Study: Exploring the Integration and Application of the Yamas and Niyamas Among Western Yoga Practitioners: A Study of Knowledge, Practice, and Daily Life Alignment
Principal Investigator: Alexandra Gresham
Faculty Advisors: Carissa Wengrovius, Jeremy Sibold

**Introduction:** My name is Alexandra Gresham and I am a student at the University of Vermont in the Health Sciences Department conducting my Honors College thesis. I am inviting you to participate in a research study called "Exploring the Integration and Application of the Yamas and Niyamas Among Western Yoga Practitioners: A Study of Knowledge, Practice, and Daily Life Alignment" because you are 18 years or older and a current practitioner of yoga.
**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate yoga practitioners' knowledge of the Yamas and Niyamas and whether they integrate them into their lives.
**Study Procedures:** If you would like to take part in this study, you will complete this online survey. This survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes to complete.
**Benefits:** While this study offers no direct benefits to participants, your answers may enhance your understanding of the impact of your yoga practice on your daily life. Your participation may contribute to results that may inform yoga instruction.
**Risks:** Participation in this study is expected to present minimal risk to you. You may skip any questions you feel uncomfortable answering.
**Costs:** There will be no cost to you for participation in this research study.
**Confidentiality:** All information collected in this survey is anonymous and confidential. No identifiers linked to you will be collected. If you email me, please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email could be read by a third party. Only the researcher and her faculty advisors will have access to the data. All of your survey responses will be recorded via Qualtrics and then exported to Microsoft Excel for coding into raw data files, which will be stored in an encrypted server of the University of Vermont. Raw data and/or results may be disclosed to other researchers if relevant to collaborative projects.
**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:** Taking part in this survey is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study. Since your data is de-identified at the time of collection, once you have submitted your survey responses, you will not be able to withdraw the data at a later date.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me, Alexandra Gresham, at the following email alexandra.gresham@uvm.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at (802) 656-5040.

- I have read the information sheet and consent to participate in this study

How long have you been practicing yoga for?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- More than 5 years

How many days do you practice per week on average?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7

Where do you practice primarily?

- From home
- At a studio
- At a gym
- Other (please specify)

How do you practice?

- ☐ Guided by an in-person instructor
- ☐ Online video (ex. YouTube)
- ☐ Live stream class (ex. Zoom)
- ☐ Self-guided

How and why did you start practicing yoga? What keeps you coming back? (Tell your story!)

Yama and Niyama Questionnaire (Bussing et al., 2021)
The Yamas and Niyamas are 2 of the 8 limbs of yoga which serve as guidelines to one's relationship with others and oneself. Please answer honestly and accurately to how these principles inform your daily life.

| I manage to | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Develop humble trust | o | o | o | o | o |
| Devote myself entirely to the divine | o | o | o | o | o |
| Accept all that is a challenge for me | o | o | o | o | o |
| Gain deep insight into the motives of my actions | o | o | o | o | o |
| Reflect on myself regularly and gain new impulses for my life | o | o | o | o | o |
| Achieve inner satisfaction | o | o | o | o | o |
| Take things and situations as they are | o | o | o | o | o |
| Read the Yoga Sutras and inspirational writings | o | o | o | o | o |
| Achieve inner purity and clarity | o | o | o | o | o |
| Consciously interact with the environment and creatures | o | o | o | o | o |
| Be truthful and honest in all my doing | o | o | o | o | o |
| Keep all my actions free from questionable external influence | o | o | o | o | o |
| Be moderate in all situations | o | o | o | o | o |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Be careful with the time and resources of others | o | o | o | o | o |
| Be aware of the effects of my words and deeds | o | o | o | o | o |
| Consciously keep order in my environment | o | o | o | o | o |
| Live my sexuality ethically and appropriately | o | o | o | o | o |
| Live in great self-discipline | o | o | o | o | o |
| Live undemandingly and frugally | o | o | o | o | o |
| Engage with great commitment in everything I do | o | o | o | o | o |
| Be satisfied with little material possessions | o | o | o | o | o |
| Injure or shame others in no way | o | o | o | o | o |
| Not speak ill of others, even when I disagree with them | o | o | o | o | o |
| Not acquire things in any way that do not belong to me | o | o | o | o | o |
| Consciously choose healthy foods | o | o | o | o | o |

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

| | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Do your yoga instructor(s) include Sanskrit language in class? (ex. ujjayi) | o | o | o | o | o |
| Do your yoga instructor(s) invite you to chant Om in class? | o | o | o | o | o |
| Do your yoga instructors invite you to bow at the end of class? | o | o | o | o | o |
| Do your yoga instructor(s) include meditation practice in class? | o | o | o | o | o |
| Do your yoga instructors invite you to close your eyes in class? | o | o | o | o | o |

Demographic Information

How old are you?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

What is your sex assigned at birth?

- Male
- Female
- Intersex

What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

- Transgender female
- Transgender male
- Gender queer
- Other

What is your ethnicity?

- White/Caucasian
- Black or African American
- American or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/LatinX
- Middle Eastern
- Other

What is your household income?

- $0-$9,999
- $10,000-$24,999
- $25,000-$49,999
- $50,000-$74,999
- $75,000-$99,999
- $100,000-$149,999
- $150,000+

What is your highest level of education?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2 year degree
- 4 year degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

**Appendix B**
Breakdown of Survey Questions into Yama and Niyama categories from validated Yama and Niyama Questionnaire

Niyamas

1. Ishvara pranidhana (surrender)
    a. Q7 Develop humble trust
    b. Q8 Devote myself entirely to the divine
    c. Q9 Accept all that is a challenge for me
2. Svadhyaya (Self-study)
    a. Q11 Reflect on myself regularly and gain new impulses for my life
    b. Q14 Read the Yoga Sutras and inspirational writings
    c. Q10 Gain a deep insight into the motives of my actions
3. Santosha (contentment)
    a. Q12 Achieve inner satisfaction
    b. Q13 Take things and situations as they are
4. Saucha (purity)
    a. Q15 Achieve inner purity and clarity
    b. Q22 Consciously keep order in my environment
    c. Q31 Consciously choose healthy foods
5. Tapas (discipline)
    a. Q24 Live in great self-discipline
    b. Q26 Engage with great commitment in everything I do

Yamas

1. Brahmacharya (restraint/non-excess)
    a. Q16 Consciously interact with the environment and creatures
    b. Q23 Live my sexuality ethically and appropriately
2. Satya (truthfulness)
    a. Q17 Be truthful and honest in all my doing
    b. Q21 Be aware of the effects of my words and deeds
3. Aparigraha (non-possessiveness)
    a. Q18 Keep all my actions free from questionable external influence
    b. Q27 Be satisfied with little material possessions
    c. Q25 Live undemandingly and frugally
4. Ahimsa (non-violence)
    a. Q28 Injure or shame others in no way
    b. Q29 Not speak ill of others, even when I disagree with them
5. Asteya (non-stealing)
    a. Q20 Be careful with the time and resources of others
    b. Q30 Not acquire things in any way that do not belong to me

**Appendix C**

Recruitment poster.

**Appendix D**
Thematic analysis of participant narratives by identifying key words and sorting into main themes.

| Question | Narrative | Categories | Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| "How and why did you start practicing yoga? What keeps you coming back?" | Family! My mom and grandmother have always loved it, so we went a lot. But at UVM, my friend and I took Amanda's Wednesday morning class every week and we loved it so so so much! It's so grounding for me. | Family, Grounding | Community<br>Mental and emotional well-being |
| | For the physical and mental benefits! | Health | Physical benefits, mental and emotional well-being |
| | I love how good I felt after practicing yoga and how it ties mindfulness into my daily life! | Feels good,<br>Mindfulness | Mental and emotional well-being |
| | I started going to UVM's group fitness yoga classes in as an underclassman as something to do. At first I found it boring, but kept doing it. When Covid hit, I started doing online workout classes with friends across the country daily. I found a power vinyasa that I really liked and got really fit doing, which I enjoyed a lot (end of senior | Fitness,<br>Self-care,<br>Routine | Physical benefits,<br>Mental and emotional well-being |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | year/3.5 years of practice). Once I was working post-grad, I got a membership to a local studio through my job. I started going multiple times a week, especially for the classes outdoors. Once I started grad school, I started to shift away from fitness yoga and more to using it as a practice of self-care when stressed from school. I also started preferring slower classes. I also participated in YTT, and still practice a little bit, but looking forward to reconnecting once I'm working again. I keep coming back because it's almost like a nice routine in my life no matter where or what I'm doing. I just don't have the time riight now to practice that much, the income, and with what little time I have, I need to workout for endorphins. I'm excited to reunite with yoga more when I'm done with school. | | |
| | I started going to yoga at UVM to get away from bad roommates and it | Safe haven, movement | Community, Physical benefits |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | became a safe haven for me. I'm going to be an elementary school teacher and I decided to complete a YTT so I could have a side hustle I enjoyed. I teach more than I practice these days, but it's still nice to move my body in a gentle way. | | |
| | I started yoga about 12 years ago when I was in undergrad and took a yoga class one semester. It was challenging, but honestly the best thing I've ever done. I still continue to practice to this day. | Challenge | Spiritual and personal growth |
| | Initially the practice started as a way to stay physically strong and flexible. About ten years ago I became a yoga teacher and have been practicing yoga ever day for nine years. My practice now extends beyond the mat into the other limbs of the practice as well. What keeps me coming back is how good I feel on and off my mat. Each time I step onto my mat I feel ttansfomd. | Strength, Flexibility, Feels good, Limbs | Physical benefits, Spiritual and personal growth, Mental and emotional well-being |
| | My girlfriend and my family, especially my | Community | Community |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | mom who introduced yoga to me at a young age | | |
| | My mom's best friend growing up is from India and a yoga instructor so I grew up attending her classes with my mom. I continue to practice yoga for the physical and spiritual benefits. Flexibility and stretching help when my body is stiff and sore. | Flexibility, Spiritual benefits, Physical benefits | Physical benefits, Spiritual and personal growth |
| | Recommend by a friend, love it way more than any other exercise class ive ever taken. i always walk away feeling good | Exercise, Feels good | Physical benefits, Mental and emotional well-being |
| | Started with my mom during COVID | Community | Community |
| | Stress management, mind-body integration, spiritual exploration, community. | Stress relief, Spiritual, community | Mental and emotional well-being, Community, Spiritual and personal growth |
| | Stress relief, good for body and mind | Stress relief, physical and mental benefits | Mental and emotional well-being, physical benefits |
| | Stress relief, meditation and movement practice. | Stress relief, meditation, movement | Mental and emotional well-being, physical benefits, spiritual and personal growth |
| | The practice is truly grounding and | Grounding, Strength, | Mental and emotional well-being, |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | strengthening for body/mind. I also cherish the sense community. | Community | Physical benefits, Spiritual and personal growth, Community |
| | To gain flexibility , improve gut health, stay physically active and for stress relief | Flexibility, Gut health, Stress relief | Physical benefits, Mental and emotional well-being |
| | i practiced as a kid a little, and when i came to college my super cool friend alexandra put me on to an awesome studio here in burlington and i fell in love! | Friend | Community, Mental and emotional well-being |
| | it relaxes me, i also love the instructor when i go to yoga at uvm! | Relax | Mental and emotional well-being |
| | I started practicing yoga in middle school and through high school at my local gym. I found yoga again in college at Sangha studio and eventually got my 200 hour YTT with my roommate and bestie alexandra Gresham :) | Friend | Community |