



Cultivating the Niyamas by Deborah Adele [Printed in Integral Yoga Magazine Summer 2013]

With the niyamas, step two of the 8-fold path, Patanjali lays out five observances we can begin to cultivate to support a tranquil mind. The practice of these observances trains our minds to enjoy the finer things of life such as purity, contentment, discipline, self-study, and surrender. Much like training our taste buds to appreciate the benefits of broccoli over ice cream, the mind will eventually find great pleasure resting in these observances. (See our Spring 2013 issue for Deborah's article on the five yamas.)

Saucha: PURITY

I recently saw a bumper sticker that said, “Well, at least the war on the environment is going well.” These words captured the angst of our times where in the midst of so much not working, we are successful at polluting and destroying the very thing which nourishes, sustains, and gives us life. In a culture that is poisoning itself instead of purifying itself, what does purity look like?

Our daily cleansing practices are more important than ever, and yet the practice of purity can no longer afford to be personal only; it must include the planet. We cultivate purity not only with our neti pots, but by being cognizant of our environmental footprint and making sustainable choices. We cultivate purity not only by our fasting, but by associating ourselves with one of the grass roots organizations involved in serving life rather than destroying it, such as sustainable agriculture, community gardens, alternative sources of power, and micro-loans.

We cultivate purity not only by purifying, but by guarding what is pure. Whether we find it in pristine places yet untouched, in a species still begging to not go extinct, in the generosity and kindness of our hearts, in the expansive thoughts of our minds, we protect these places from any onslaught of contamination. We nourish these places where we find purity so that the environment of our hearts, minds, and the spaces in which we live are rich with that which welcomes life, not that which destroys it.

Samtosha: CONTENTMENT

Contentment is the basis of happiness and peace, yet we are faced with a myriad of longings and desires that keep contentment out of reach. We experience an almost constant longing for anything other than what is happening in the moment. Almost constantly, we experience a voice telling us everything that is wrong with us and denying us any kind of peace with ourselves. We experience a constant desire for things to go the way we want them to and a disappointment

when they don't. And as if these internal messages weren't enough, we experience a constant bombardment of advertisements designed to lure us deeper into our discontentment. We could easily sing along with Dorothy, "Somewhere over the rainbow."

All these messages ensure that we will be tossed about, riding waves of highs and lows, happiness and disappointment, landing anywhere but in contentment. We get pulled out of ourselves, longing for what we don't have. And where the mind goes, *prana* follows. The price we pay for being the easy prey of allurement is a loss of our vital energy.

How do we cultivate contentment in a culture that begs our allegiance to discontent? How do we "stay home", content with ourselves and our lives? First we need to understand that contentment does not mean we are suddenly in a life full of ease with constant feelings of satisfaction. Just the opposite is true: We are cultivating the ability to entertain a vast range of emotions and experiences and still stay connected to contentment. We can learn to live with our desires by cultivating ones that lead to equanimity. We learn to live with the critical inner voice and love ourselves anyway. We are learning to tolerate fluctuations with one foot firmly planted in the middle.

As we establish ourselves in our *dharma*, we find satisfaction. As we reach out to ease the suffering of others, we become established in ourselves. And as we root ourselves in our tradition, we find ourselves less prone to wobble. Mataji Narvada Puri, a beloved teacher in India said, "You have to be willing to give up a little happiness to give up your sadness." As we stop chasing after what we don't have and become intimate with what is, we begin to find that home isn't such a bad place after all.

Tapas: SELF-DISCIPLINE

We are becoming a soft culture. When life seems a little challenging, it is easy to escape, and the escape routes are numerous. Food, alcohol, stores, television, and internet are among the variety of ways we can pamper ourselves. When we continually take these easy escape routes, we lose access to our capacity to endure. Self-discipline is about shortening the distance between ourselves, our lives, and the Divine by getting rid of our escape routes. It is having the courage to face our lives as they are and the ability to stay in our lives no matter what. It is seizing hardship and disappointments as an opportunity to develop new skills. Yogiraj Achala said, "Have a philosophy and be a disciple of it."

With this *niyama*, Patanjali is asking us to be a disciple of a calm mind.

Whatever cultivates a calm mind, do it. Whatever cultivates a support system for a calm mind, practice it. Plug the holes of weakness wherever you find them with an all-inclusive balanced and nourishing life style. Build the foundation of endurance, strength, resilience, and character upon which the mind can rest.

Svadhyaya: SELF-STUDY

I was in the Minneapolis airport with a short layover. Rushing to get to my next gate to catch my flight, I made a quick stop in the women's bathroom. As I entered, I saw four men standing there. Stunned and confused, I wondered what these men were doing in the women's restroom. It took a while for my mind to understand that I was the one in the men's bathroom! I was the one in the wrong

place! Self-study is like this. It is seeing how often I am in the “wrong” place because of the limits of my conditioning and my personal orientation as the center of the universe.

In a very real way, self-study begins to free us from our own ignorance. As we notice our perception problems, we can begin to see through the limits of our own conditioning, and we become more available to reality as it is. We begin to understand how much of our own limitations we put on the moment and how cloudy our decisions are. We become open to knowledge.

My 87 year old father has recently been telling me stories of his relationship with my mother in their early years and how we children were so important to them.

What he has been sharing has been changing my understanding of my growing up years. As my history gets rewritten, my future has different possibilities. Self-study allows us to rewrite our history, our present, and to become more available to a different possibility of knowing ourselves in the future.

As our self-imposed limitations and conditioning are revealed, we become less enamored with them; their grip weakens. We are more permeable and more available to the deeper subtleties and more expansive truth about who we really are.

Ishvara Pranidhana: SURRENDER

To understand surrender, we turn to the gurus, sages, and mystics of all traditions. They all radiate a joy, compassion, childlike wonder, and unfailing trust. They seem to accomplish more for the world than seems humanly possible. And they unabashedly display a constant love affair with the divine. They almost seem like a different species than the rest of humanity.

These great ones embody surrender, but what is their secret? If we look closely at their lives, it appears there is a common thread: they all spend hours every day in communion with their God. Dom Helder Camera, a Catholic priest, was said to meditate from 2-6am every morning and then spend the rest of the time ministering to the poorest of the poor in the barrios of Brazil. Tending to his intimate relationship with God took precedence; his character and selfless actions were the fruit of this devotion.

In a world of tension, fear, tight schedules, and lack of vision, the mystics show us the power of surrender and choosing daily to cultivate an intimate relationship with the divine. It is this growing intimacy that counters tension with ease, fear with love, tight schedules with eternity, and lack of vision with miracles.

Surrender is a stance of devotion to the Divine. It is the willingness to be led, to be changed, and to unflinchingly trust. It is the constant willingness to be vulnerable and available to the Divine, risking intimacy at every turn. It is the boldness to claim a love affair with the Divine.

With the practice of these five niyamas, we are increasing the strength and beauty of our being as we find ourselves more established in our center and enjoying lasting tastes of a tranquil mind. Through the ever-increasing harmony our practice is creating, we find we are more available to explore the deepening subtleties of our being.

Deborah Adele is an engaging, lively, and thought-provoking speaker who is not afraid to share stories from her own years of living and learning. She facilitates thoughtful and tangible ways of showing up to life in new

ways, leaving participants with a dynamic combination of hope, inspiration, and practical knowledge. She is the author of The Yamas & Niyamas: Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice, 2 CD's: The Art of Relaxation and The Practice of Meditation and authored a regular wellness column for the Duluth News Tribune.