



Yoga Ethics: Why They Matter by Deborah Adele
[Printed in Integral Yoga Spring Magazine 2013]

Deborah Adele's bestselling book, The Yamas and Niyamas: Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice, is an in-depth journey inside Yoga's first two limbs. In our first interview (Spring 2010) with her about this book, she reflected on how the yamas and niyamas lay the ground rules for our journey toward union, harmony and wholeness. We asked Deborah if she would reflect on further insights she's gleaned since the book's publication in 2009.

In the years since the publication of my book on the *yamas* and *niyamas*, this is the first time I have been asked what has changed for me, and I am finding myself delighted by the inquiry. Interestingly enough I am currently in India. A block from where I am staying is a temple to Patanjali and nearby is a grove of trees where Patanjali is known to have done his practice.

Patanjali in his classic text called the Yoga Sutras, gives us a plan for our journey that we call the 8-fold path. The first two limbs of this path comprise an ethical system. I find that fact to be worth pondering; I mean 2 of the 8 steps are about ethics! So an overriding question for me continues to be why and how is ethics so vital as the beginning of this process towards awakening that 1/4 of his plan comprises this topic? What was he trying to say to us that was so important?

Patanjali defined yoga as the cessation of the whirlings of the mind. In other words, the distance between us and the divine is measured in terms of disturbance and ends when the disturbance stops and the mind can rest. The yamas, translated as restraints, becomes for me the first step of disentanglement from disturbance. And think of it, we aren't even asked to do anything grandiose in this first step, we are simply asked to restrain ourselves from things that cause disturbance to ourselves and our environment.

Our myriad acts of violence, our half truths, our taking, our indulgence, and our attempts to possess, all disturb ourselves and others. Patanjali is asking us to restrain ourselves from these acts in order to move towards finding a permanent resting place in harmony and happiness. I am reminded of something one of my friends used to say, "There are 3 rules: #1 Don't disturb yourself. #2 Don't disturb others. #3 See #1.

Disturbance wears a different hat in different cultures, groups, and individuals and gives no allegiance to formatted answers; we need to be willing to lose our

love for rules in order to engage in the process of scrutinizing where this agitation lies in its grossest places and its most subtle forms. This requires an active engagement with, and discernment of, the moment to moment events of our daily living. I have come to think of this as similar to pulling weeds from a garden and each yama as a flashlight that sheds light on where the weeds of disturbance are.

It is also helpful to be aware of the synchronicity of the outer and inner worlds and how they reflect each other. We are citizens of both worlds, the one we share and our own private inner world. They both seek our attention.

Ahimsa - Non violence

We are afraid of outer attack, but the real brutal attacks come from within.

Where do we find more violence than what we do to ourselves in the hidden corners of our mind where abusive thoughts run on automatic replay? We are caught up in a cultural myth of self-lack that is keeping us in a whirlwind of noise, agitation, tension, and high stimulation. This is true around us and within us. We live in a violent culture and a violated body. Yoga practices that cultivate stillness, rest, and silence are vital to restoring peace in the spaces within us and around us. So I see this restraint from what builds tension physically, emotionally, and mentally, as an essential first step.

As we are able to relax into the internal and external spaces of our lives, we need to look at our fears and restrain ourselves from hiding, denying, or running away from these fears. Violence in all its grossest and more subtle forms can be traced back to fear. I am grateful to the strength of yoga in the west and to the myriad of writers who are supporting us to be vulnerable, to love ourselves, and to assist us with these disturbances.

So the self-work is immense, but it is not the whole picture. We currently live in a time where there is a war on life itself. To hide in denial or feelings of being overwhelmed and helpless or to escape into secondary pleasures...we need to restrain from taking any of these easy roads out. Yogic texts are complete with bloody battles that were waged on behalf of justice. In the most famous battle, Krishna guides the fainthearted Arjuna to fulfill his duty to restore justice, even though the death toll will be immense. These texts stand as fruit for our contemplation; non-violence is not always pretty.

Satya - Truthfulness

I am intrigued that the restraint here is a restraint to stop at anything short of the full truth. This is a significant leap from the tendency to land in a partial truth and be satisfied. If we begin in the internal landscape, it becomes clear that there are three of us that live here. One is a grand image of ourselves that marches out into the public a good deal ahead of us. Another is our shadow piece that gets denied, projected, and all-around ignored. And last is the real us, a uniquely cultured and gifted creature, part beast and part divine. Perhaps most of our

dishonesty shows up in our love affair with our image. This yama is in part a restraint from giving allegiance to this image.

I had an interesting experience in the middle of a long meditation. It was as if all of a sudden the repressed parts of myself emerged from a dungeon deep within me and paraded in front of me one by one. These were all the things I regretted, some so distasteful I had refused to acknowledge them even to myself. In short, they were all the things I pretended weren't part of me. For instance I saw cancer take the life of my young, vibrant sister-in-law and myself too lost in my own life to really be present to her. Other omissions paraded in front of me as well as acts of unkindness, lies, greed, jealousy, anger, and harm to others....all times when I bulldozed everyone around me in favor of my own perceived needs. It took all the courage I had to sit there and really see and acknowledge this part of myself. This went on for what seemed an excruciatingly long period of time. When it was over, I knew I had been changed. It wasn't that these things were gone from my life or that they had become purified and I was now angelic. It was more like they became integrated into me. Pretending to be my image lost its firm grip on me and I could feel myself become a more authentic, compassionate being.

Because of this experience I think truthfulness asks a fierce "seeing" of ourselves and the world at large. When we give our allegiance to the way we wish things were, we stay stuck in expectations, sensory perceptions, conditioning, ideals, and paths to improvement. We hold on to the very things that limit us and keep us in partial truth telling. We hold on to the very things that prevent the harmony and happiness we are seeking.

Much like my meditation experience, I think the imbalances of our world are longing to be fully seen and acknowledged. Much as our breath, our nervous systems, the vitality of our bodies, the mental clarity and focus of our minds are all disturbed, so is the balance of the planet and the systems that run it. Our planet is disturbed. We all know this, but we haven't really told ourselves the truth about it.

Joel Kramer has a quote I have come to love, "The seeing is the movement." It is seeing the truth that breathes space into reality and opens up the possibility for something new to occur. This is hopeful to me.

Asteya – Non-stealing

Non-stealing is restraining from taking what doesn't belong to us, what we don't need, what is more than our share, and what depletes the future. It is restraining from doing others work for them, rescuing them, fixing them, and worrying about them. It is restraining from making ourselves smaller or bigger than we are, or from trying to be something we are not or hiding from what we are.

My husband and I live in a modest home in a semi-compromised neighborhood.

People ask me if my address is wrong in the phone book, and I have to remind myself that I am not a failure; it is respectable to live more simply. That said, we don't all need to live in small houses. Yoga has an answer for this yama also. Gather all the resources you need to support your particular service in the world. No more; no less.

As with all the yamas, we need to observe what is happening within us and within the culture at large that causes us to choose disturbance over harmony.

Knowing these trigger points makes us aware of those times we may become dangerous. For instance, I know that both caffeine and sugar wreak havoc on my nervous system; I am left primed to be irritated and irritating; in fact, I go looking for trouble. I am stealing from my own well-being as well as those around me.

Brahmacharya – Non-excess

Like truthfulness, this is another "go all the way" yama. In other words, restrain from settling for anything less than wonder, awe, and the sacred. And restrain from anything that keeps you from this place. It is easy to grab our work, sweets, a good movie or romance novel, or get lost in the web. Not that there is anything wrong with these things. In fact, from a place of the sacred, not much fails to be sacred. The mystics know this well. It is only when we substitute anything for wonder that we find ourselves held in dullness and primed for excess.

Walking with the eyes of wonder, hand in hand with the sacred, listening to the voice of the divine, evokes passion and vitality. Why would we settle for less?

Aparagraha – Non-possessiveness

We can't possess anything anyway, so it is funny to me how hard we try. We use things and people to prop our insecurities on. It is like putting chains on these things and demanding them to never move, never change, and be available when we need them to make us exceptionally happy. We attempt to freeze joy so we can visit it when we are feeling depleted.

Patanjali knew that what we hold onto creates a problem not only for others, but for ourselves. Our fear of loss and losing causes us great suffering. (Patanjali expands this concept with the kleshas.) We alternate between anger and grief, constricting ourselves against life and missing the grace that is trying to find us.

And by making ourselves a subject and everything else a possession, we become a lonely ruler of a kingdom devoid of relational opportunities.

These practices of restraint are difficult for those of us cultured in American ideals. We tend to hide violence under the voice of freedom, to be in love with the image of success, to justify our right to take what we think we need in the name of progress and civilization, to drown ourselves in noise, stimulation, and drivenness so we can't see or hear the sacred, and to amass possessions as a sign of competency. And we have come to love the positive upbeat side of

thinking which holds unpleasantness prisoner; we don't want to disturb ourselves by acknowledging disturbances.

We are a great nation and a great people who have gotten ourselves out of balance. Restraint is not a bad thing or a negative thing. It is a much needed grace that can feel like a fresh breeze blowing a new hope and possibility in our individual and collective lives. It is an effort that can begin to bring us the very things we are longing for. And it is only the first step.

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.