



everyday contentment

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digs through piles of laundry & finds bliss

the second in a ten-part series exploring the
yamas & niyamas

I often dream of water. Water breaking up after a long hold in winter ice. Water rushing gently with me in a canoe, swaying across its current. Water pooling to rest, then tumbling downward again. Clear water. Weed-choked water. Bubbling water. Deep blue, aquamarine, glacial-green, summer-brown, snow-melt white. Water takes many forms in my night wanderings. Always, the water is moving, changing and transporting itself, mirroring my own efforts toward self-realization. Always, and strangely enough, the water seems contented to be in whatever state it is. It moves with acceptance along a varied path.

photos by will lew

When I wake to my daily world after these watery dreams, I am surprised to find myself lying on crisp cotton sheets, wrapped in the dry dimness of dawn. I realize that the water in my dreams has carried me on a pleasing current that feels like my true nature, like the most authentic movement of a soul. I rise from my bed to look out the window, where the Kootenay River passes by in the valley below. The river seems unperturbed. It even seems uninterested in its own passage. There is a sameness and reliability in it that suggests nothing has changed through the night. Yet I know that the water flowing by several hours ago has moved on, and that fresh water has come to fill its place. This constant change happens whether I am paying attention or not.

In *Yoga Mala*, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois speaks of a few different types of happiness, one of which envelops both constancy and change. He points out the difference between momentary hap-



piness that depends on a particular circumstance and of another happiness he calls *samtosa*. The latter is a state of contentment that relies on no particular situation. *Samtosa*, unlike the happiness, joy or elation that I am more familiar with, is a constant state of mind. The second of the five *niyamas* defined in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, *samtosa* does not depend on being in love, winning the lottery or reuniting with an old friend. It does not require that a meal be prepared perfectly, that the sun be warm on one's shoulders or that the gift one asks for is in fact the one received. No matter what is happening in life, the state of contentment is possible.

The *niyamas* (attitudes concerning the self), together with the five *yamas* (attitudes that concern others and the environment), form the first two limbs of Ashtanga Yoga. These branches of the yoga tree are not actually practised like asanas. They are instead attitudes that are developed, influenced and gradually refined by the repetition of breath and movement. While we are all born with the human heart's capacity for *samtosa*, it does not necessarily flourish in us with ease.

The landscape where I live is defined by moving water, water that teaches me more about *samtosa*. Two major rivers, several tributary rivers, hundreds of creeks and countless seasonal streams find their way down steep mountains. They fill the narrow valleys as they make their way past me to the lowest point, the unseen ocean several hundred kilometres away. The movement of water is governed largely by gravity, a force that keeps it down and sends it on its way. Water responds directly to the instructions of the landscape, to the shape of the Earth.

... the Yoga Sutra quantifies contentment as “counting for more than all sixteen heavens together.” I am not certain how many heavens are contained in the heap of wet clothes still confined to their laundry basket, clothes that belong on the line swaying in the breeze.

It searches out its path, finding a crevice in which to gather as a creek, a shelf of rock over which to tumble as a waterfall, a valley in which to widen as a river. Consistently, throughout days, throughout seasons, throughout long and dream-ridden nights, water flows around me.

I like to sit beside a creek in the woods near my home and watch the water move down the mountainside. It cascades smoothly over a rounded stone. Then it spreads peacefully into an eddy, where it rests briefly before moving on with a fresh burst of energy, passing with a gush and a swirl. This water, like the circumstances of my own life, does not always pass in a gentle way. Sometimes, after a heavy rain, the creek stirs into an agitated froth, busy with the effort of draining the mountainside of fallen moisture. In spring, if warm rain in the valley combines with snowmelt from high in the mountains, the water can surge into flood, scouring away its own banks, pulling at rooted trees and tossing boul-



ders. At this time, water seems decidedly destructive, even dangerous. In summer, it can slow to a trickle, moving quietly and peacefully. Always, no matter its particular circumstance, water continues to flow on its own way, seeking the ground, singing a particular liquid song.

Often, when I am on the yoga mat, my mind erupts into chaos. I watch it present resistance or fear or any number of distractions to divert me from the steady rhythm of movement through the asana. When this happens, I do my best to turn my attention to the breath. I feel its current flow like water across my agitation, my fear or my impatience. In practising yoga like water, I have learned to maintain a sort of stability and certainty that keeps me focused. It is possible to stay grounded even in the midst of tumble and froth, to accept one's path, to flow consistently and reliably with a steady focus in mind.

And then there is the daily life that occurs off the mat, where my practice

of yoga meets its greatest challenge in a family and home life filled with the noise and energetic movement of teenagers. Hip-hop music pulses against the walls. A group of young men gathers to watch a game on TV, laughing and carrying bowls of potato chips from the kitchen. When they leap up in response to an exciting play, one of them knocks a glass over and it shatters against the floor. Broom and dustpan in hand, I head for the broken glass and on the way see that the dog has just peed on the carpet. I remember then that I have left the hose on too long in the garden. My mind tumbles after that toward the fact that the laundry must be hung out now, or it will not be dry before dark.

Pulling wet clothes from the machine, I hear another son arrive home with a friend. They are both hungry and need a ride to basketball practice. It is an unlikely circumstance for experiencing contentment. Better that I should be contented in my solitary meditation beside a rushing stream, or in the silence and peace of my writing studio. As I help my hungry son find something to eat, I am surprised to feel a deep current of contentment wash over and settle around me in a satisfied pool. Clearly, this is not happiness dependent on circumstance. The contentment follows me as I assist in cleaning up the glass, then dry the dog's puddle. I leave the wet laundry behind without hanging it up, so that my son will not be late for basketball practice.

I know that from a source deep within me, I have found *samtosa*. I realize that I would not want to be anywhere else than where I am. Oh, yes, a part of me is most certainly challenged and frustrated by the distractions, the interrup-

tions and the unexpected developments of the afternoon. I would prefer that the dog had not peed on the carpet, that the laundry had been hung out as planned.

In *The Heart of Yoga*, T.K.V. Desikachar says that the real meaning of *samtosa* is to "accept what has happened." He quotes a commentary on the Yoga Sutra that quantifies contentment as "counting for more than all sixteen heavens together." I am not certain how many heavens are contained in the heap of wet clothes still confined to their laundry basket, clothes that belong on the line swaying in the breeze. I do know that learning to live and move more like water, with acceptance of the ground and my particular place on it, has allowed me an occasional taste of the cool, quenching liquid of *samtosa*. ॐ



Eileen Delehanty Parkes practises Ashtanga Yoga and lives in Nelson, BC. She is the author of *The Geography of Memory* and co-author of *The Inner Green*. Eileen's exploration of the *yamas* and *niyamas* will continue in the next issue as she interprets *aparigraha* (to take what is necessary).