



full circle

The bears have been in their winter lairs for over a month now. The sun has followed suit, settling in to sleep along the horizon line. Crows roost quietly in the dense shadows of the cedar forest, while the creek that runs along our street is gripped by ice. Even the skunks under the floorboards of my writing studio have nestled together. This is not a time for much outer activity. The mating, blooming, fruiting and feasting will have to wait for another year.

While I do not hibernate like the bears, I shift my behaviour to accommodate winter. I spend more time sleeping. I go to bed earlier, rise later. During my asana practice, I hover near a portable heater, trying my best to keep muscles warm even as the temperature outside tumbles further. I sometimes wonder why I persist with this paradox of practising a form of moving meditation that was developed in a tropical climate, even though I live in a northern latitude. But the benefits of the practice continue to astonish me. So I persevere with it, through the seasons, through health and through



what is my path toward & away from this earth?
In the final installment of the *yama & niyama* series,
eileen delehanty pearkes examines *svadhyaya*, self-study.

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illness, through sadness and through joy. The asanas help me transform the ideas my mind pursues so hungrily into the real stuff of life.

The asanas are the third in an eight-limb process that is traditionally preceded by the first two limbs, the *yama* and *niyama*. The *yama* and *niyama* are ethical principles and behaviours outlined several thousand years ago in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. I first heard about these principles in a yoga workshop six years ago. As I became more curious about

them, I sought to understand the *yama* and *niyama* and the role they might play as a foundation for my physical practice. I studied them, in the context of my daily life.

In Sutra 2.44, Patanjali introduces and defines the fourth *niyama*, *svadhyaya*, or self-study. Self-study is one of the five personal behaviours or habits most recommended for a yogi's life. It is through self-study, the sutra explains, that one comes into communion with one's chosen personal deity, or *ista-devata*. In

this context, self-study is a very personal and yet universal task, one that can be confined to a private experience of the Divine, but broadly encompasses many religious practices.

Svadhyaya is also interpreted as the study of ancient texts or the recital of Vedic verses and prayers in accordance with strict rules. Even in this seemingly more restricted sense, the fourth *niyama* can be universally applied across belief systems. T.K.V. Desikachar explains that the study of any ancient text is simply

a vehicle for reflection. In this sense, he says, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, or the Koran are books of wisdom that teach human beings to better understand themselves. Broadly, this sutra simply asks us to reflect on our lives and our conduct in order to develop a relationship with our chosen deity.

Many years ago during a camping trip with our two young sons, I lay on a pebble beach beside a lake, relishing the warmth of stones heated by summer sun. The water lapped gently against the shore. A soft breeze was blowing and our energetic boys were playing down the beach. Lying quietly, I drifted in and out of a state of deep and rather unchar-

acteristic relaxation. I experienced the earth as I never had before. It was not just a surface. It felt alive. Instinctively, I spread my arms wide, in an attempt to embrace the physical existence that had taken form beneath me. This was an early attempt to reach out for the body that is this earth.

Was it just before or just after this experience that I discovered Hatha Yoga? My earliest exposure to the physical limb of the practice was with a teacher grounded in the Iyengar tradition, and with her I learned about the metaphors embedded in the various poses. *Tadasana* (The Mountain), in which I sought stability. *Vriksasana* (Tree), using one leg like a trunk, the other like a branch.

Garudasana (Eagle), arms folded in like wings. These aspects of the natural world greeted me in a body that was ungrounded, a mind that was overwhelmed. In this way, nature and its creatures first met up with my physical and spiritual practice, encouraging me to see that I am one with the world.

For the past seven years, I have practised Ashtanga Yoga. In this strenuous physical practice, my mind has met its match. A meditation that emphasizes the coordination of movement and breath, Ashtanga Yoga is at once active and grounding, challenging and affirming. This practice will not allow me to deny my body, nor will it allow my mind to take over my physical and spiritual



experience. The discomfort or restriction, flexibility or blissful relaxation that I experience reminds me over and over again that I am, first and foremost, on this earth, alive. My physical body will host any spiritual life that I develop.

The Ashtanga tradition as carried forward by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois asks that students progress through a set series of postures individually, adding one after another only as they are mastered. I have taken years to reach what is often regarded as the “peak” of the Primary Series, a collection of postures requiring both significant hip flexibility and core strength, among them *Garbha Pindasana* (Embryo-in-the-Womb). Recently, despite my doubts that I ever might

reach that point, I achieved Embryo-in-the-Womb. Threading my arms through legs crossed in Lotus, balancing on the sit bones and lifting the hands around the shins to the face, I then rolled around like a little embryo: from the balanced upright position, back along the spine and then up again. Each time I rolled, I shifted slightly to the right. After the prescribed nine rolls (representing human gestation), I had, more or less, completed a circle.

Embryo-in-the-Womb is not just a posture, nor are the asanas simply a physical challenge. Through self-study, they reveal at least a portion of their mystery. The actions of *Garbha Pindasana* are a reminder that life is an ongoing

round of growth and gestation. As my body turned and rolled on its curve, it became a microcosm of the earth, turning and rolling through the cosmos. And so my memory returns, full circle, to the summer day a decade ago when I first acknowledged the earth beneath me.

When it came time to study the *yama* and the *niyama* a few years ago, I was drawn to reflect on them in the context not just of my own physical body, but as they relate to the larger body I am part of, the ecosystem where I live. B.K.S. Iyengar explains that there are two paths to self-study: from the skin inward to the deepest core of the self, and from the core of the self outward to the skin.



This rhythmic path of understanding—from outer body to inner self, inner self to outer body—echoes the intake and release of breath. It also serves as a model for the individual body's relationship to the mother which is our earth. We live somewhere. We are taken care of by something. The earth, like our skin, is a support structure, a protection. We must always remember that.

It can be a long process reconciling the body and the earth with a spiritual life. Spiritual lives are often depicted as being removed from everyday reality: the Taoists have their caves, the gurus their ashrams, the monks their monasteries, the nuns their cloisters. But so many of us who seek spiritual dimension in our lives are householders, ground-dwellers. I am a woman in a marriage who has given birth to two sons, someone who loves to dig in the soil and cook, to get her hands dirty, as my mother used to say. My deep reflections on spiritual and ethical conduct, once they began, quickly and understandably moved out from my personal body to the body of

my world: the birds, the creek and the garden, the skunks, the trees and the bears. What is my path toward and away from this earth?

Iyengar explains that walking regularly along the two-way path from inner to outer and back again in the asana practice can result in greater harmony and health for a human being. I wonder whether unifying the inner and the outer levels of experience can also result in increased harmony between human beings and the natural world. In *A Place in Space*, Gary Snyder suggests that an ecosystem is a kind of mandala, in which there are multiple relations between elements and creatures that are all-powerful and instructive. Tossing out hierarchical models, Snyder suggests that each creature, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, has a role to play. He asks us to step beyond our own human perspective to develop an ethic that includes non-human nature.

As my love of the natural world and the practice of yoga have braided together over the years, it seemed inevitable that

when I studied the *yama* and *niyama*, I would connect them to the non-human experience of the place where I live. Just as the asanas link the body to nature through the use of metaphors like Tree, Eagle and Mountain, so too can an ethical principle consider the actions of human beings to the natural world we inhabit. And so it is that the crows and the pine trees, the creeks and the skunks have reminded me of something important. How I choose to relate to the wild creatures and systems of this earth does make a difference. ॐ

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