yamas, niyamas & bears... oh my!

eileen delehanty pearkes explores her place in the food chain, her back garden & her dreams

Like many in the West, I began the practice of yoga exclusively as a physical experience. Gradually, however, what I thought of as a series of exercises began to influence more than just my physical body. I have grown more patient as I move my chin slowly and gradually toward the floor in *Kurmasana*, the Tortoise. The focus of my mind has sharpened in its intent as I have learned to balance in *Bakasana*, the Crane. These and other "animal" *asanas* have encouraged me to see yoga not just as fostering a relationship with the Divine, but also with the world I inhabit. Yoga influences how I conduct myself and how I treat others around me.

illustrations by karen messer

Although there is no "bear" pose, I have contemplated the source and nature of the bear's strength when I stand in *Utkatasana*, Fierce pose. Bears live all around me, usually unseen in the dense woods that spread up the steep sides of the valley where I live. I feel their presence when I walk in the woods, even when I have no tangible signs of them. Bears also follow me into my dreams, speaking to my inner world about the powerful nature of a soul's capacity.

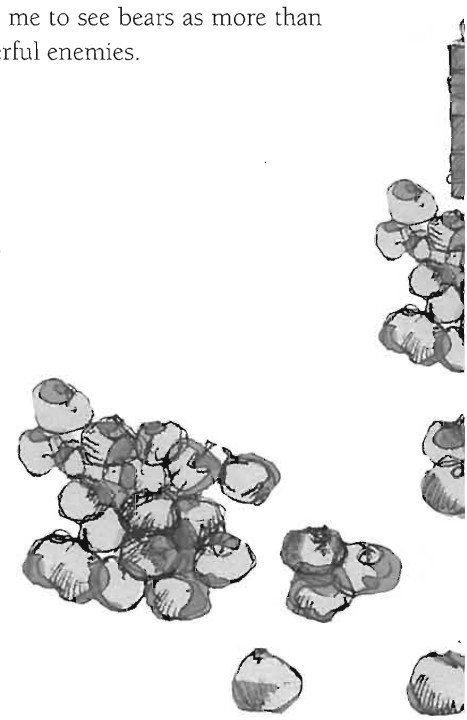
Bears are physically strong and deeply instinctual creatures. They have long, sharp claws designed for digging grubs and grabbing fish. They have powerful jaws and acute noses. This year across Canada, nearly a dozen fatal or serious attacks by bears on human beings have taken place. The human beings have been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Without intending to do so, they have surprised the bears. The bears have reacted by attacking fiercely in defence, sometimes with tragic consequences.

As well as being feared for their ability to attack human beings, bears are also openly disliked for being marauders and thieves. When they enter our town each year in the autumn as the days grow short and cold, they come to steal: garbage, orchard fruit, compost. Conservation officers in our rural region shoot and kill an average of forty bears annually to protect the area's human citizens from potentially dangerous encounters, and to eliminate those bears that may otherwise become conditioned to civilized sources of food.

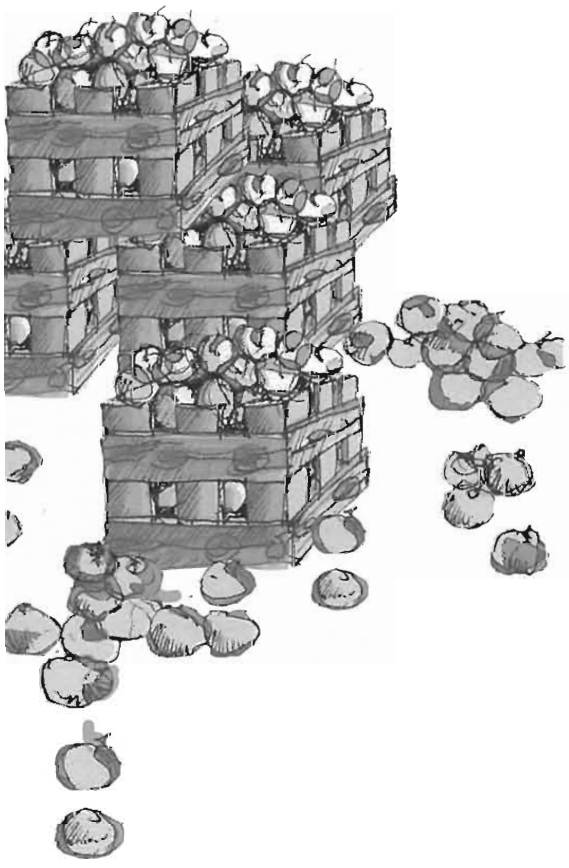
Last October, I discovered pockets of depressed soil and broken branches in my garden. Later that week, as I walked along a woodland trail, I found bear scat laced with the red-orange pulp of mountain ash berries, some of the last wild fruit to ripen. Drawn down to the edge of town from the remote mountain ridges by the scent of ripened fruit and rotting compost, bears were rooting in garbage cans, climbing onto porches, even walking right into some houses perched near the edge of the wild. Bears are omnivorous. They will eat anything.

So easily my mind tries to convince me that I am not a part of nature, that my heart does not beat with earthly rhythms, that I am not of the soil but instead superior to it. My heart, encouraged to open and speak its own truth through my practice of yoga, knows better. Bears are part of my world. How I treat them, my attitude toward them, how I relate to them, all of these behaviours involve making decisions that are as much spiritual as they are anything else. Yoga's popularity in the West may well be a reflection of a cultural hunger as powerful as the ravenous appetites of the bear, to re-establish an innate, deeply remembered connection between what is spiritual and what is physical. My dreams and thoughts of bears pull me toward that possibility. Yoga asks me to see bears as more than just powerful enemies.

So easily my mind tries to convince me that I am not a part of nature, that my heart does not beat with earthly rhythms, that I am not of the soil but instead superior to it. My heart, encouraged to open and speak its own truth through my practice of yoga, knows better.



Patanjali defines ideal conduct and behaviour in the Yoga Sutras as the *yama* (behaviour toward the other) and the *niyama* (behaviour toward the self). The *yama* and *niyama* are the first two "limbs" of yoga wisdom outlined by the Sutras. The third is *asana*. In the same way that the wind passes through the trees as an invisible yet still noticeable force, the *yama* and *niyama* inform our every movement through the postures and our lives. They animate the *asana* from being simply a physical practice to one that expresses attitude and guides conduct in relationships.



One morning in November, just before the first snow spilled from the sky, I discovered that a large bag of sunflower seeds purchased for my winter bird feeder and left on the ground beside my studio had been ripped open by a bear during the night. Seeds had been scattered across the damp ground. I felt mildly indignant and also somewhat betrayed, as if something that belonged to me had been taken without my permission. *Asteya*. The third of the five *yamas* means "non-stealing" or "not to take something that does not belong to you." This *yama* can be interpreted in a narrow way as referring to stealing an object, such as apples or sunflower seeds or money, but it can also mean the theft of something unseen, such as energy – or power. I swept up the seeds and took stock. Some had been eaten, but many remained. How was the bear to know that this bag of food was not free for the taking?

Two years ago, more than the usual number of bears were shot and killed in this region as they tried to fatten before their winter hibernation. That summer had been exceptionally dry. Fire had burned thousands of hectares of forest surrounding our town. Remaining wild berry supplies were poor. Two of the bears shot were a mother and her cub. They had been lurking in our neighbourhood for weeks, searching for food. I was woken one night by this pair of bears as the dogs barked at them when they passed through our yard. I stepped out into the darkness and heard the plaintive cries of the cub, coming from the neighbour's backyard treehouse. The dogs' barking had frightened the cub and stranded it there. The sobbing had sounded almost human.

That experience was the first that asked me to think of bears differently. Despite their power, the mother and her cub were vulnerable, too. The cries of the young bear reminded me that this animal, like human beings, is capable of confusion, loss and even fear. As a mother myself, I could understand the goal of the mother: to protect her cub's vulnerability and be sure that her cub had its needs met. These creatures were, in the end, two beings intent on survival in their own world, a world that had intersected briefly with my own.

I once dreamed of a bear that had been confined in a house. The bear attempted to escape, frightening a flock of birds in the garden in the process, stirring them up into winged chaos. One of the birds hooked its wing on a tree branch and found itself caught, hanging upside down. The other birds continued to flap and flutter around the tree, creating a distraction so that the bear would not notice the trapped bird.

Originally, I saw the bear as the villain in this dream and the bird as the victim. Since I heard the cries of the lost cub, the dream's symbols have gradually shifted in meaning. I can now

... the *yama* and *niyama* inform our every movement through the postures and our lives. They animate the *asana* from being simply a physical practice to one that expresses attitude and guides conduct in relationships.

see more clearly that the bear has been trapped in the confines of a house and is simply trying to escape. I, too, have felt trapped – by social structures, the expectations of others, or my own mind – unable to express my power freely. So, too, have I felt threatened like the bird. I have been caught hanging upside down, vulnerable to attack, in need of protection from a community of friends or family. My fear about being attacked does not, however, justify a judgement of the bear emerging from the house as "evil" or "bad."

When I look closely again at how the dream concludes, I see that the bear never does take advantage of the bird caught in the branch, though if it wanted to, it could have quickly overwhelmed the protection offered by the birds. Instead, the escaping bear lumbers off down the hill, knocking down stone walls in the garden in the process. The walls, symbols for the rigid constructions of a mind, walls that need a certain amount of power to be dislodged.

Several years ago, a friend of mine bought an abandoned farm in a remote area surrounded by wild and undeveloped spaces, fronting on a river. He found an old apple tree on his new weekend property, planted by the first settler to the farm over fifty years earlier. He pruned it and watched the fruit ripen with pride and expectation. When he arrived in the fall with boxes for picking, he was dismayed to find that a bear had eaten the apples. The weight of the animal climbing to reach the highest fruit had broken several of the carefully pruned branches.

The next year, he pruned and waited, only to find that again, the bear arrived before he could harvest the fruit. Finally, he decided to pick the apples a week before they were perfectly ripe. As he harvested, his thoughts returned to the bear. He realized that the tree provided more apples than he really needed, and that the bear had probably been harvesting the apples from the tree for years when the farm was uninhabited. After he had taken what he wanted, he shook the branches gently, knocking the rest of the fruit to the ground for the bear. When he returned to his property a few weekends later, he found that all the apples on the ground had been eaten and the branches of the tree left unharmed. The sharing of apples in this way with the bear demonstrated an innate understanding that this natural world does not belong exclusively to

human beings. He acknowledged in doing so that he had been intending to steal from the bear.

Wildlife experts would not encourage such behaviour, especially in densely settled areas. In our town, we are asked to pick up and dispose of overabundant fruit, so as not to draw bears toward us and invite the conflict between our own power and theirs – a conflict that usually results in death. Several days after they passed through our yard, the mother and cub were found rooting around in bags of ripe windfallen pears, placed by a householder in a back alley. The conservation officer was called and the bears were destroyed.

I watch the bright light of early spring move down the mountain in front of me, bringing with it the start of a new season. The bears nestled in their protected dens will be waking up soon. Some of them will have birthed their young during the winter, cubs who will soon be large enough to follow their mothers in food-gathering work. Drawn back into a thawed world, bears will appear once more in the wooded landscape where I live. I will see their commanding pawprints in the spring ooze of marshland, hear the thrash of their strong limbs in the brush ahead of me, sense their power, even when I cannot see it.

How can I develop more respect for the spiritual, physical and mental capacity of all the Earth's creatures? The spilled seeds, upturned garbage cans and broken fruit tree branches – these may be signs of a tendency to take what is not always mine to have. I know that I am capable of abusing my power in many ways, and that I can steal power from others. What better wild animal to inspire me to understand my relationship with power than the masterful bear, one whose natural divinity has been so upturned by human activity, whose fierceness in defence of its territory can be so misunderstood? ॐ

Eileen Delehanty Pearkes writes and practises Ashtanga Yoga in Nelson, BC. She writes more about bears in *The Inner Green* (2005), available through www.maapress.ca.

Yamas

1. Ahiṁsā
   Behaving with consideration and attention to others and ourselves.
2. Satya
   Truthfulness: what we say, how we say it, how it could affect others.
3. Asteya
   To take nothing that does not belong to us.
4. Brahmacarya
   Responsible behaviour with respect to the goal of moving toward the highest truth.
5. Aparigraha
   Take only what is necessary; do not take advantage.

Niyamas

1. Śauca
   Inner and outer cleanliness.
2. Saṃtoṣa
   Accepting what happens.
3. Tapas
   Keeping the body fit, or, heating the body to cleanse it.
4. Svādhyāya
   Self-reflection, or, the repetition of mantras.
5. Īśvaraprāṇidhāna
   To lay all actions at the feet of the Divine.

From T.K.V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999).