

Yoga Samachar

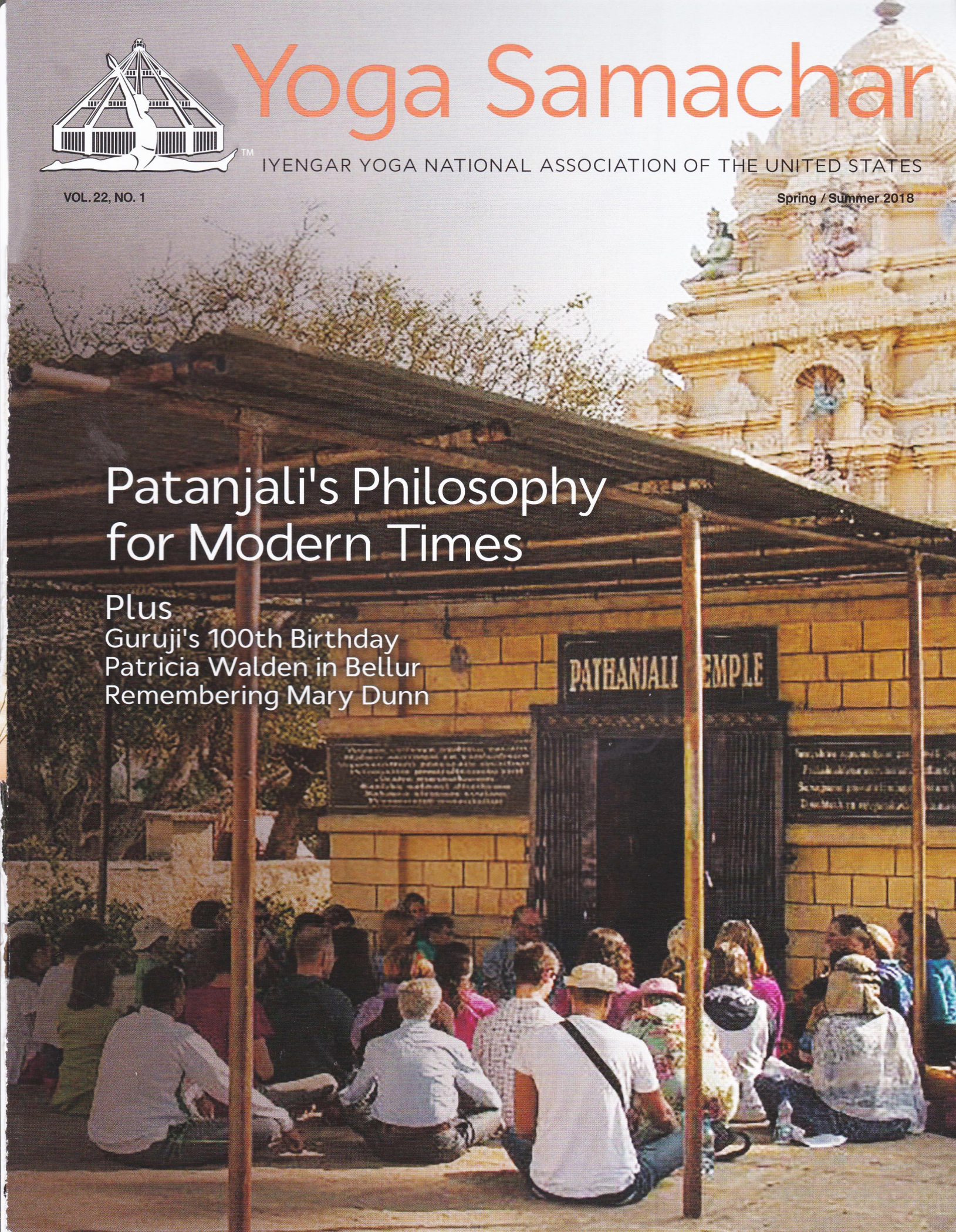
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Patanjali's Philosophy for Modern Times

Plus
Guruji's 100th Birthday
Patricia Walden in Bellur
Remembering Mary Dunn



THE YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

TRAINING PRINCIPLES, NOT COMMANDMENTS

BY STEPHANIE QUIRK

While in a workshop with Stephanie Quirk in the U.K., Heather Haxo Philips asked why some Western yogis seem to have an uncomfortable relationship to the yamas and niyamas. “We want to study them, we want to understand them, but we don’t know exactly how to do this. We haven’t found comfortable ways to bring them into our lives,” Heather said. “Why do you think this is?”

This is Stephanie’s response.

A big part of our conflict comes from being members of a Judeo-Christian-conditioned society. In practicing yoga, we are trying to fit into the clothing of an Eastern cultural tradition that also goes back thousands of years. It turns out the two don’t fit perfectly. They sound like they do, and in fact, we have heard our own Guru say that the *yamas* “are just the same as your Ten Commandments,” but there is, in fact, a difference. And when one is trying to practice the *astanga* (eight limbs), the difference has an effect.

The Ten Commandments begin with injunctions about how one should relate with the supreme authority and its agency, the church. (See sidebar on p. 14.) They are “writ in stone.” They are fixed, and their form is not an outline or guide for conduct; rather they are “rules” of conduct. So our loyalty and obedience to an ultimate authority is being commanded, and only after those commandments do we encounter injunctions that are parallel to those we find in the *Yoga Sutras*.

TRAINING PRINCIPLES

The *yamas* and *niyamas* (see sidebar on p. 13) form part of a text that has as its “auspicious” aim the cessation of that which disturbs every level of our being so that we may realize our liberation and release into our own true state. Through yoga, we encounter the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and they act as reconditioning or transforming principles that we undertake. They are training principles, not commandments.

The *Yoga Sutras*, the source of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, is a major text for one of the six orthodox Indian *darshanas*. And here is an important point: *Darshana* means to “catch sight of” or “to have insight into.” In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali illuminates eight spheres we can work through. Those spheres were considered by its author to be the essential path that is yoga, and together they are most efficacious for the purpose of *darshana*. Out of those eight, the *yamas* and *niyamas*, when combined, constitute 25 percent of that process. That’s a lot. However, mentally we tend to combine the two, often pronouncing them as “*yamaniyama*.” Because we join them verbally, we think of them as one. In effect, we reduce the eight limbs to seven. The two lists, though linked in their aim, are fundamentally different from each other.

The *yamas* address aspects of human nature that need to cease or be taken out if transformation is to happen—if we are to dwell in the abode of the true self. It’s the only way we can harmonize and beautify our energies enough to get a sight of a Self that is far deeper and more profoundly meaningful than anything else we have or can even imagine experiencing in our lives. To put it a bit more dramatically: The *yamas* are those aspects of ourselves that have to die, or our quest—our practice—will become dead in the water, no matter how many hours we put into it.

The *niyamas* are simultaneously approaches to living and the outcomes of undertaking all eight arms of the *astanga* (*kriyas*). The *niyamas* are carried out cycle after cycle in an ever-deepening and penetrating spiral, offering a cleansing through *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara* and so on to *samadhi*. Through each of the arms, *santosha* is rendered and established at a more subtle level. Each of the *niyamas* requires its own intelligent and tireless approach: *tapas*. Each is a prism through which deeper and more subtle levels of the self are seen and understood. This ongoing *svadhyaya* offers clearer sight of the true self, *Isvara pranidhana*. So the *niyamas* go on and on, cycle after cycle, simultaneously deepening one’s practice according to one’s maturity.

NOT AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT

The idea that the *yamas* are a “subject” to be studied reminds me of an old dairy farmer who had his herd up off the road between Boolara and Mirboo, in Gippsland, Australia. He once said, “I know why the lines are painted on the road. It’s so you can tell if you are still on the road.” Trying to study a subject called the *yamas* and *niyamas* is like searching for the lines painted on the road, at night, while driving a car with lights that barely work. To study them as a subject is academic. Thinking they are to be seen painted clearly and delineated like the road markings is a bit off track. They are not painted or written down for memorization, or we could just pick up a copy of the *Yoga Sutras* and read the list, read Gururji’s and other commentaries, and call it good. That would be a bit like looking at the catalogue of an art exhibition and then saying you saw the exhibition. As students, we are meant to be executing the actual works of art, not collecting catalogues.

We find the *yamas* only through our practice, through

awareness and reflection. Their power in our lives, their efficacy, and our ability to take hold of that aspect of ourselves will depend on the illuminating potential that our practice brings to the *antar-karana* (conscientiousness). The *yamas* are pointing to something in our lives that is very much part of our DNA, our deepest being; they are not notes to be read from the *Yoga Sutras*. To “study of them,” to come to know them, to be transformed by them, is a revolutionary act: Their study has to become something else.

Until we are evolved, we will do and say and think things that are essentially unskillful. The sense of shame and awkwardness we feel at the mention of the *yamas* is perhaps the second reason why we find a conflict in grasping the subject. In an ideal yoga life, we would rather begin from a place of stainlessness—or purity, piety, and innocence. The longing for that state is huge in us. But all the signs point to that not being where we are beginning from.

The reason why I say the *yamas* (especially) are part of our DNA comes from commentary I heard from Gururji. He indicated that the five *yamas* are those particular five because they address the most destructive forces in our lives (*himsa*, *asatya*, *steeya*, *abrahmacharya* and *parigraha*). He would at times point to the four *yamas* that came after *ahimsa* as indicating the various destructive ways *himsa* is carried out in our lives.

Himsa means “doing injury or harm,” so *ahimsa* is “to avoid doing injury or harm.” The “a” of *a-himsa* puts a negation in front of the word for harm or injury. Here lies the difficulty for us: We can’t easily relate to an empty *himsa*-shaped space. We can barely look at the extent, both gross and subtle, of our harming nature, but to relate to an empty *himsa*-shaped space leads to a conflict. With *asatya* as a form of *himsa* we cannot face our own violence directly. We cannot skirt around the harm. We cannot cut out, rub out, paint out the harm in ourselves. If we were able to we would end up with an empty “harm-shaped space” or the ghost of harm. We require an approach that counters the harm by establishing the opposite.

With the Sanskrit “a,” we need to intentionally undertake practices of kindness (*maitri*). *Sutra* I.33 says, “Through cultivation of friendliness, compassion, joy, and indifference to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice respectively, the consciousness becomes favourably disposed, serene, and benevolent.” But *maitri* first has to be developed toward oneself. You have to physically and mentally experience *maitri* in order to extend it to others. It has to be an actual experience, and only then can you work on *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upeksa*. Otherwise these are abstract concepts.

But to be at once “*maitri-ful*” is presenting the same problem as cutting out all the *himsa*. The intermediary stage is *santosa*,

and that feeling of *santosa* is usually experienced hand in hand with the purifying aspects of *abhyasa*, *saucha*. Perhaps you are seeing now what I meant by simultaneously linked yet fundamentally different from each other.

As I indicated, the rest of the *yamas*—*satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, and *aparigraha*—are all aspects of *himsa* working through different channels.

With regard to *satya*—everyone lies. If *maitri* is what needs to be established to counter *himsa*, trust needs to be strengthened, and especially trust in yourself in order to be able to speak and act in truthfulness. *Asteya* means not taking what is not given. Acting with generosity is a way to practice and to counter *steeya*. Feeling complete in what one has includes generosity in true regard toward oneself. *Abrahmacharya* is the need for someone or something to complete oneself. Developing stillness and *santosa* in oneself is the balance for the need to have another person in order to feel complete. *Aparigraha*, or nonpossessiveness, can be approached through simplicity as well as the contentment developed in *brahmacharya*. Notice that there is a link between the five *yamas* and how training in *maitri* works for all of them.

Maitri is where Patanjali talks of the strength and power (*bala*) to be found through our practice. See *Sutra* III.24 *maitryadisubalani*: “He gains moral and emotional strength by perfecting friendliness and other virtues toward one and all.” Mr. Iyengar continues in his commentary, “The yogi who perfects friendliness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), and benevolence (*mudita*), and who regards things impartially without becoming involved (*upeksa*), keeps his consciousness free of desire, anger, greed, lust, pride, and envy. With his mind cleansed of such weaknesses, an amiability evolves which spreads happiness to all. His equipoise of mind creates a graceful disposition of heart.”

In reading this, you might recoil from all of the sweet niceness. But it truly doesn’t all happen at once; it happens according to the depth to which we have penetrated. If there were a single word for how to work with the *yamas*, it would be patience. It will take time. The change is going on but we can’t always see it.

BEING IN THE GAP

We are part of a system that claims the only true authenticity of a participant is the imprint left on the mat from ardent practice. But we have a strange gap between our experience and our understanding. We have usually undergone a shift or change because of our practices long before we realize it. Depending on the level or intensity of our practice, profound changes are happening even at levels below our awareness. These changes bear fruit either immediately or some time later (*sopakrama* and *nirupakrama*)—and we never know which.

Once we notice that a change or transformation has occurred, we are simultaneously opened up to understanding an even deeper level of ignorance and unskillfulness. So as practitioners, we have to be open to these levels that we cannot yet perceive. The problem we face is what to do in that gap of maturation. We need to constantly make changes in our outer process to accommodate our inner changes. The thing is, we never know at any point what our inner state will be. For this reason, we can only ever approach the *yamas* and *niyamas* as a guide. They are not commandments set in stone. If we relate to them in that way, they will be irrelevant and unsatisfactory. They are training principles.

OVERT PRACTICE OF THE YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

In our path of yoga, the *yamas* and *niyamas* are not explicitly expressed. As per B.K.S. Iyengar, they are said to be implicit or implied in our practice. How? *Sutra* II.28 states that “by dedicated (*anusthanat*) practice of the various aspects of yoga, impurities are destroyed: The crown of wisdom [*ijnana diptih, vivekakhyateh*] radiates in glory.” I am sure we have all exclaimed at one time or another after class, “Oh, I feel so much better than before the class.” The practice of *asana* invokes this semiautomatic response. We are taken out of our heads; our awareness is guided and spread globally throughout the whole of our embodiment. This is often experienced as a relief (*santosa*), and the disturbances and perplexities that hold the mind in thrall are lessened.

By undertaking *asana* we also rectify disturbances in the physical, physiological, and nervous systems, so the outcome is *saucha* and *santosa*. The ramifications of these two beneficiaries is both immediate as well as spread out over a long period of time. They are cumulative, but we still face the problem of the gap I mentioned earlier. There is a gap before we are fully aware that changes and transformations have happened. We cannot immediately identify which *yamas* have been cleansed, dried, and put away. The depth to which we can access our transformation depends on how we are undertaking the rest of the *niyamas*: *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *Isvara pranidhana*.

Over time, if we have developed consistency and regularity in our practice, a convergence of aspects we were hitherto unaware of will gather momentum. Then we realize that our practice has brought us these changes. We understand that it has required sacrifice but that it is also bearing fruit. In retrospect, we may recognize that there was a single moment of change, a specific event, or it may be an imperceptible but stronger hold on the practice, holding to it with more faith as well as sincerity and determination!

The amount of awareness and strengthening resolve we experience can then change the quality of the intention by which we practice. And the outcome of *that* practice also continues to change—this is *tapas*. Deliberately seeing and refining our intention acts on the quality of our actions (*yogah*

YAMAS AND NIYAMAS

From B.K.S. Iyengar's translation,
Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Yamas

II.35 *ahimsapratisthayam tatsannidhau vairatyagah*: “When nonviolence in speech, thought, and action is established, one's aggressive nature is relinquished and others abandon hostility in one's presence.”

II.36 *satyapratisthayam kriyaphalasrayatvam*: “When the *sadhaka* is firmly established in the practice of truth, his words become so potent that whatever he says comes to realization.”

II.37 *asteyapratisthayam sarvaratnopasthanam*: “When abstention from stealing is firmly established, precious jewels come.”

II.38 *brahmacaryapratisthayam viryalabhah*: “When the *sadhaka* is firmly established in continence, knowledge, vigour, valour, and energy flow to him.”

II.39 *aparigrahasthairye janmakathamta sambodhah*: “Knowledge of past and future lives unfolds when one is free from greed for possessions.”

Niyamas

II.40 *saucat svangajugupsa paraih asamsargah*: “Cleanliness of body and mind develops disinterest in contact with others for self-gratification.”

II. 42 *santosat anuttamah sukhalabhah*: “From contentment and benevolence of consciousness comes supreme happiness.”

II.43 *kaya indriya siddhiih asuddhiksayat tapasah*: “Self-discipline (*tapas*) burns away impurities and kindles the sparks of divinity.”

II.44 *svadhyayat istadevata samprayogah*: “Self-study leads towards the realization of God or communion with one's desired deity.”

II.45 *samadhisiddhiih Isvarapranidhanat*: “Surrender to God brings perfection in *samadhi*.”

karmasu-kausalam: “yoga is skill in action”—verse II.50 in *The Bhagavad Gita*, and finally we have dissolved or disappeared into the practice itself. We have surrendered to the extent that we no longer separate the practice, function, or result of our *sadhana* (practice). We surrender to *Isvara pranidhana* (our recognised higher “power”).

All of that is to say, yes, the practice works. It may even change, reduce, and in time, eradicate the seed that produces those destroyers of our humanity (see *Sutra* III.51). But it is definitely a process, and we are in that process. We are in the wash right now, and it will take a lot of cycles. Back and forth, over and over again, we must return to that practice.

In the gap between action and fruition, when we have yet to completely transform ourselves into divinity—indeed it may take lifetimes—we can build community. There is a reason why I bring this up. One of the things I noticed once I started journeying from Pune to teach and thereby visit many yoga communities, was a new voice. That voice was speaking of the importance of building community. The importance of our community, and the necessity to nourish that community, was being emphasized.

I have been thinking of the arising of this “community-mind” in our midst. But what part is it playing, what is its contribution to our path?

I have come to see community as fulfilling several vital roles for us within our practices. It provides a true testing ground for the *yamas* and *niyamas*. The *yamas* and *niyamas* cannot be assessed as part of a certificate exam, but they are unavoidable and have to be worked with, even through the distractions of

boards and committees. These structures are our training and our cremation ground. They provide us with instances where we come together in shared goals for the common good, and in this way the grip of self-centralized concern is diminished. But I see community as something that is pointed to in the first chapter of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* where there is a list of factors that lend themselves to success, and to failure, on the path. It talks of no longer keeping company with unsuitable people. Community doesn't just give us Yoga Club membership; it provides a supporting context, a sheltering monastery or refuge, whilst we are awaiting what is in store. It is definitely an outer structure. It may be seen as an indirect practice, but it is very importantly a protection and a steadying tortoise for the insights and changes that are to come. It protects the inner process.

A native New Zealander and teaching member of the Australian Association, Stephanie Quirk began studying Iyengar Yoga in 1987 in Sydney, Australia. After a series of accidents, she made her first journey to RIMYI in 1991. Inspired by the Iyengars' knowledge and their dynamic presence in class, she decided to return to Pune in 1994 and lived and practiced there, working directly with the Iyengars and assisting them in general and therapeutic classes, until recently. Since 2002, she has been teaching to Iyengar Yoga institutes and schools worldwide, sharing the understanding and insights from her years of work at RIMYI, both in the classes and on various publication projects. Read more about Stephanie at www.stephaniequirk.com.au/.

The Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, found in the Ark of the Covenant are:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honour your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house, wife, or property.