

Practising self-discipline through the niyamas

The second path of yoga offers guidance for **a life free from the attachments** that cause suffering and separation from the whole. Senior Iyengar teacher Carole Baillargeon explains

Yoga works in mysterious ways and it doesn't take long for students to experience benefits that extend far beyond their body and mind. With consistent practise yoga slowly changes the way we think and the way we relate to the world and with some knowledge of yoga philosophy, its transformative power grows a thousandfold.

Take Patanjali and the yamas. Patanjali is the author of *The Yoga Sutras*, a seminal work in which he condensed previous yoga knowledge into a concise eightfold system. The sutras start with a list of ethical guidelines (yamas) and self-disciplines (niyamas) and many yoga lineages revere its depth of knowledge and profound wisdom of the mind and the nature of existence.

While the yamas refer to disciplines that help us live in harmony with one another, the niyamas call on us to develop certain traits in relation to ourselves. They are: sauca or purity; santosa, contentment; tapas, effort; svadhyaya, self-study; and ishvara-pranidhana or surrender. You can use these five concepts as guiding principles and turn to them for inspiration when facing challenges on your life journey.

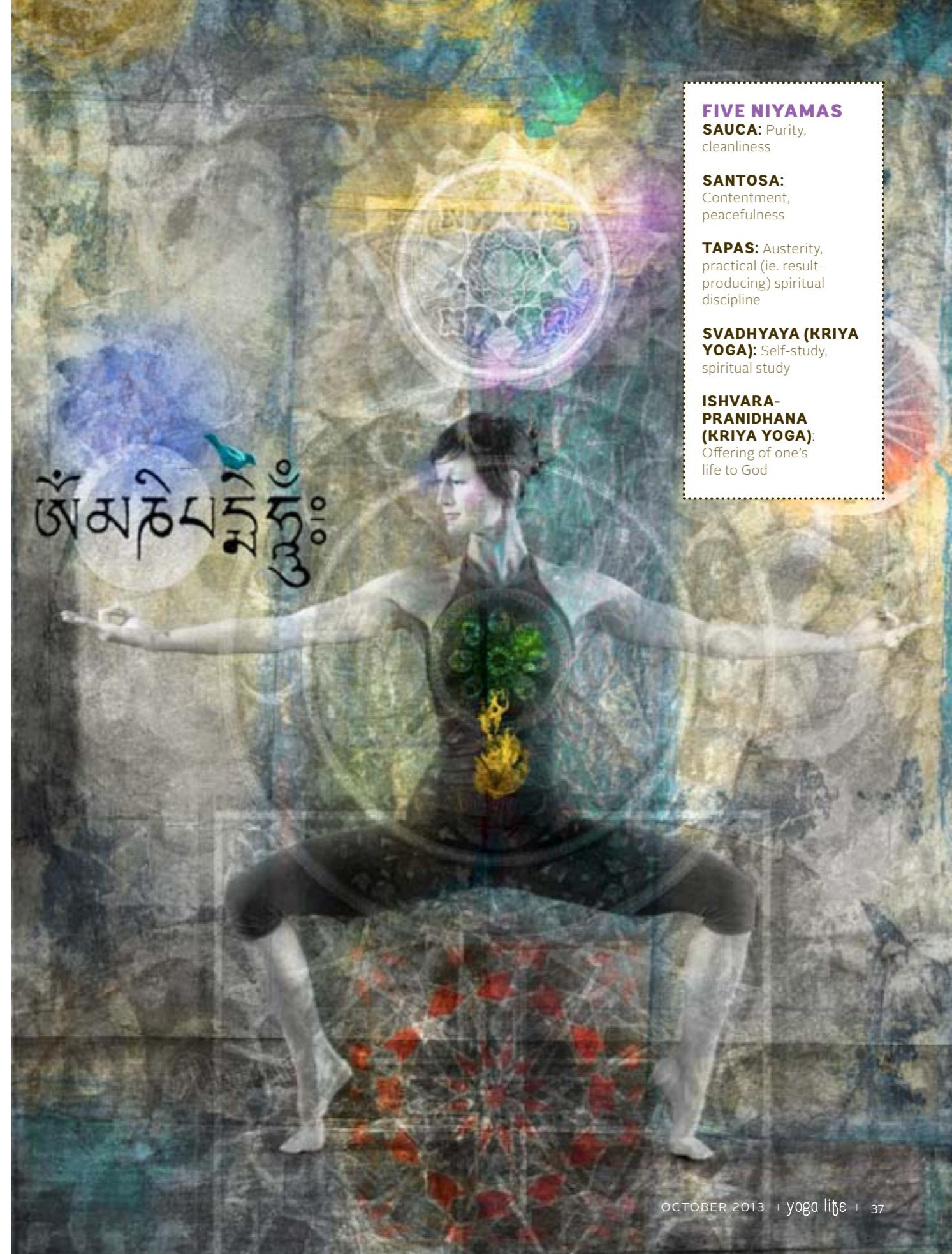
SAUCA – Purity, cleanliness

The concept of purity, the first niyama sets the tone for the others. At the heart of all niyamas, in fact at the centre of the yoga tradition itself, lies the idea of self-purification. The ancient yoga texts describe yoga as a process that transforms the body and mind from gross matter

into a fine jewel so refined that it can perceive its own spiritual core.

At a base level, Patanjali recognised the importance of keeping our body and environment clean. For example, back then as it is today, traditional yogis have a bath before their yoga practice and many still practise internal cleansing »

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FIVE NIYAMAS

SAUCA: Purity, cleanliness

SANTOSA: Contentment, peacefulness

TAPAS: Austerity, practical (ie. result-producing) spiritual discipline

SVADHYAYA (KRIYA YOGA): Self-study, spiritual study

ISHVARA-PRANIDHANA (KRIYA YOGA): Offering of one's life to God

pose

procedures that target organs like the stomach and bowels. The idea of internal cleanliness also applies to the kinds of food and drinks we consume, which should support and enhance our yoga practice as well as our life goals. Over time, a healthy diet is not a challenge anymore as the body starts craving different, more nourishing foods.

Far more challenging is keeping our minds and speech clean. Clean mind? Clean speech? This is for each individual to explore, especially in relation to the kinds of thoughts we entertain about ourselves.

SANTOSA – Contentment

It is always nice for yoga students to find out that contentment is an important part of yoga. Unlike beaming happiness, contentment is a subtle feeling, one that is not easily perceived in others and one that can be present in people who might even look externally deprived.

Ultimately, the idea is to probably practise contentment as a way of life, but in the meantime, how about practising random contentment? Like stopping our minds for a few seconds here and there during the day and acknowledging how lucky we are. If you live in an affluent society unaffected by war, you and your loved ones have no major health conditions, you have food in your belly and a bank account, then you have a lot to be content about. Yet contentment often eludes us.

If we could manage to feel contentment when things go well, we perhaps have a chance of maintaining some sense of contentment under trying circumstances.

TAPAS – Effort, burning zeal, intense focus

Yoga's intrinsic quality of self-purification is not second nature to anyone. Doing any type of yoga involves physical and mental effort and a fair dose of fire and self-discipline to sustain our commitment. All of that is tapas. To achieve

anything – practise the niyamas, create a family, go to work – we need to apply some degree of effort, or tapas. The bigger the flame for what we do, the more tapas, the more chance we have of succeeding.

Fire, however, needs to be contained and channelled, otherwise it can get out of control. In a similar manner, our burning desires need to be directed with clarity of intention and tempered with contentment and surrender (the fifth niyama). It is significant that Patanjali placed contentment before effort, reminding us that while exercising effort and self-discipline, one should also recognise progress when it comes and be content along the way. Contentment can help sustain and counterbalance our effort and be used to pick ourselves up when we miss our target.

SVADHYAYA – Study of scriptures, self-study

Svadhyaya means the study of scriptures and for the traditional yogis it meant delving in texts such as *The Vedas* and *Upanishads* and later on the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Yoga Sutras* and *The Yoga Pradipika*. In our modern world, svadhyaya can be extended to mean studying any religious scripture and, in a more contemporary context, svadhyaya can be interpreted as studying subjects that remind us of our place in the bigger scheme of the universe. It can be studying metaphysics for example, or reading material of a spiritual nature.

Svadhyaya is associated with curiosity and desire to learn about oneself, about life, the human condition and the nature of reality. This can be done not only by reading but through introspection, a teacher,

observation of others, yoga practices, discussions or any other means you might come up with. Svadhyaya can also imply that we keep juggling those big questions and from there reflect on whether our thoughts, speech and patterns of behaviour are aligned with our findings.

ISHVARA-PRANIDHANA

– Surrender

As much as we forge and sculpt our own lives, using our mind and actions to manifest our reality, the outcome is never really ours. Disappointments and hardship will fall on us, no matter how much we try to escape them. Ishvara-pranidhana's traditional meaning has to do with surrendering our will to God's will. Ishvara-pranidhana has to do with offering our daily activities back to the source of life. It is a gesture of gratitude for what has been given to us, whether it pleases us or not.

You can also strip the concept to its bare minimum and just keep the word surrender. We don't need to look very far to know that surrender and letting go is often the response that life is calling for. When we foster an attitude of surrender a deeper sense of acceptance towards life starts to emerge – life as it is and not life as we want it to be.

Embedded in the concept of niyamas is the idea of self-responsibility, that each individual has the potential to generate his or her own happiness while knowing that happiness cannot really be derived from external means, but must come from within. Purity, contentment, effort, self-study and surrender are means to create a better relationship with ourself and what a good starting point to share and contribute to the world. *

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carole Baillargeon has been practising Iyengar yoga since 1986 and now holds a senior intermediate II Iyengar teaching

certificate. She teaches workshops in Australia, where she owns Darwin Yoga Space, and around the world.