I recently read about a temple in Japan which has a highly unusual practice. Next to the well-built monastery is a large tract of undeveloped land. A visitor asked the Chief Monk about the vacant land and why the land was left vacant, without any buildings upon it. The monastery has been in existence for 500 years.

The chief monk replied, “Five centuries ago, the founder was an enlightened man. He saw that a life of pure contemplation led to stagnancy of spirit, and caused the monks to become lazy, losing both intellectual and physical skills. So, he built a beautiful monastery with the help of his disciples, on only one-half of his property. The community of monks lived happily and comfortably for 20 years.

At the end of that period, the chief monk called his disciples and said, “Tomorrow we will begin to tear down all our buildings. Get a good night’s sleep in preparation for the work”. Totally shocked, the monks congregated in small groups, murmuring and complaining. Some left the monastery, questioning the sanity of the Guru. Only those who had full faith and trust in the Master stayed. They began the destruction the next morning. Within one month, the work was over and only about half of the original number of monks remained.

The chief monk said, “Tomorrow we will begin to re-build the monastery on the vacant half of the adjoining land.” Again, there was murmuring and complaining. Many disciples left that night saying, “The old Guru has gone mad. First he makes us tear down our beautiful, comfortable abode. Now he wants us to build another one”.

Those who had faith in the Guru set to work the next day. Within one year, the new monastery was completed, using the skills and knowledge with which it had been built in the first place.

The monastic life went on smoothly for 20 more years. One night the chief monk called all his disciples and said, “The time has come again. Tomorrow we will begin to demolish our monastery”. Again there was a great exodus. Those who remained set to work. Again when the demolition was complete, the chief
monk called on his disciples to build the new monastery on the adjacent vacant plot, which had twenty years before, housed the original monastery.

This tradition of tearing down and rebuilding the monastery every twenty years, alternating from one half of the land to the other, continued even after the founder's death. It continues even to this day. That is why you see half of the land occupied by the present monastery building, and the other half, lying vacant!

The visitor asked, "Why such a peculiar exercise? Is it not a waste of time and materials".

"On the contrary," the chief monk replied. "It is an excellent spiritual exercise. Living in a structure, getting used to comfort and ease, the monks lost their artistic and architectural skills as well as the capacity to meditate. They became complaisant and lazy. They became attached to their present situation and could no longer change and grow! Building and re-building keeps the architectural skills alive and the minds and bodies alert, fit for the spiritual search. Hence, this tradition continues even to this day!"

Bemused, the visitor left shaking his head, but not without noticing the vibrant liveliness and joviality of the monastic atmosphere and its community of cheerful, skillful monks!

This is also how we live our Yoga Life. We tear down, then build up again and then level and balance our bodies and minds. This three-process cycle, ideally, should occur every three months. This is the cycle we follow in the Ashram. October we tear down, with fasting, Eka Dasi etc. November we re-build, December we "balance and level off". In January again the cycle is repeated. January is tearing down, February building up and March is balancing.

It is a good cycle structure to follow for one's life time.