

Cultivating Deeper Intention For *Yoga Practice*

CAN YOU REMEMBER THE MOST SPECIAL DAY OF YOUR LIFE? Was it your wedding day, where there were months or years of preparation, a profound ceremony, and a joyous celebration with family and friends? Was it a special vacation or trip that you thought about for years? Was your favorite day an accomplishment, like a school graduation or completion of a tremendous project? Can you remember a profound spiritual experience that might have occurred when someone helped you out of a troubling time, or perhaps an experience in nature where you felt a connection to a higher reality? These “peak experiences” in life grip the consciousness and demand to be taken seriously.

There is always a driving motivation in the pivotal times of life. The experience of a wedding is based on love. Even in situations where people get divorced, they still entered into the marriage from a place of love. Achievements of various kinds are usually based on a desire to serve others, like going to school to become a doctor or teacher, or just to become a better person. Each and every peak experience is the result of a powerful intention. It is unfortunate that for many of us those special days are fleeting and can be named on the fingers of one hand.

In terms of doing yoga, you might remember the first class you took. You might remember a special retreat, where you had a very good experience. If you're a yoga teacher, you certainly remember the training courses and the first few classes you taught. However, once you've practiced yoga for a year or more, it can start to lose its allure, similar to becoming comfortable in a marriage - the enthusiasm around the wedding vows sometimes fades into everyday routine.

This is where the proper use of intention comes into a yoga pose practice. People who are able to transform their original reason for beginning yoga into an intention to make it a spiritual practice realize the greatest benefits. A spiritual practice means renewing deep-seated intentions every day. Connecting to something larger than yourself while doing yoga poses will impact your entire life, including your physical health. When performing yoga poses, the married might think, “Today is another day to consider how to better love my spouse”. Or the individual might say, “Today is another day for me to renew my commitment to a healthy lifestyle”, “Today I'm going to think of my job in terms of its larger purpose in life, and I'm going to feel inspired at work, even if I feel my job is somewhat mundane.” Most importantly, “I'm going to renew my commitment to spiritual growth.”

To better understand intention, we need to consider the three basic qualities of nature, or gunas, from yoga philosophy. The gunas originate from Samkyha, one of the six schools of classical Indian philosophy. In Samkyha

philosophy, the gunas are three “tendencies”: rajas, tamas and sattva. In simple terms, we can think of rajas as activity, tamas as inactivity, and sattva as purity or equilibrium. You can probably identify with all three states of being, whether you are feeling energetic and obsessive (rajasic), dull and depressed (tamasic) or calm, clear and focused (sattvic). Yoga seeks to magnify the pure sattvic state of being because it best facilitates the path of self-realization. In physical practice, this means cultivating an intention that matches the lucidity and luminosity of consciousness itself.

There is intention behind every action that we take a life, and they can either be beneficial or damaging to our well-being. This is certainly true in yoga. Think for a moment, about what might happen to a student whose intention in doing a yoga pose is to look good and impress others. The student is inclined to push beyond his physical limitations and eventually injures himself. In contrast, a student whose intention is to appreciate his body will likely be finely attuned to his capabilities and will have a deeper physical, emotional and spiritual experience in his yoga practice. Let's explore the three types of intention to get a sense of how they affect your life.



Types of Intention

Rajasic: *Active, Excited, Obsessive, Hyper, Competitive, Fast-paced, Clinging, Attached, Infatuated, Ego-boosting*

Tamasic: *Inactive, Dull, Depressed, Fearful, Confused, Lethargic, Helpless, Self-doubting, Disorganized, Lazy*

Sattvic: *Balanced, Clear, Pure, Calm, Peaceful, Content, Illuminating*

Active intentions are those that serve to boost the ego: What can I do and how can I work harder to look better, be more fit, and improve my external self so that other people like or respect me more? This intention is mirrored by many of the cultural values that society reflects from childhood to adulthood - study more, compete in work/school, make more money, be stronger, faster, more physically attractive and stay busy at all times! A capitalist

continued on page 16

society promotes speed, profit, power, progress, stress and materialism. The idea of continually seeking out “more and better” is like a mouse chasing its tail, never finding the happiness that gets put off to “someday.” This type of attitude in a yoga practice continues the fast pace, with no chance to rest or feel, and prohibits the slow-paced awareness required for self understanding and healing.

Inactive intentions stemming from fear and confusion cause a person to practice yoga simply because a doctor or friend said to. Laziness leads to an intention of wanting instant results without putting forth the effort required to really change habits and perceptions. Many people start yoga and quit early in the process because they are not ready for the big changes and challenges associated with personal growth.

Freedom from suffering (physical, psychological and spiritual) happens with the cultivation of **pure intention** - bright, calm, clear, immaculate, illuminating and balanced – and learning how to practice these states of mind, body and spirit. The intention for yoga poses becomes a virtue like “compassion” or “courage”, changing with each day, depending on what is relevant for living well. A new perspective helps us to deal with stress and transform attitudes toward daily interactions. We discover the true source of pain, learn how to take responsibility and become who we want to be. In this space, a yoga practice offers a fuller sense of self-awareness and facilitates the greatest healing.

Cultivating Pure Intention

Pure intention is fundamental to life, not just yoga. As you learn to cultivate pure intention in yoga poses, you’ll start to do the same in your daily actions. Many of us live disconnected from our intention for doing things, whether in work, relationships or some other area of life. How can we embody our most inspired self if we aren’t clear on the reasons behind our actions?

Steps for Setting Your Intention

Think of two or three personal goals. Let’s say you’d like to improve your health, relationships and spirituality. Investigate the deeper purpose for the intention in these particular areas. For health, perhaps you think happiness equals losing a little weight, a very common health concern. Be very careful to recognize that a specific physical goal is not the most effective intention. Start to ask yourself “Why?” “Why do I want to lose a few pounds?” The first answer, if you look to the qualities of reality, might be an inactive response based on fear: “I want to lose weight because people will like me more.” Or, “I’m afraid of having a heart attack.”

In their essence, the desires are not bad; they just need to be connected to a deeper intention. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to look good or be healthy. **The problem is when the desire becomes the intention.** Ask yourself why you want to look good. Let’s suppose that your deeper desire is to improve your love life. The spiritual aspect of this desire is love. Follow the intention of love and your yoga practice becomes centered on the giving and receiving of love.

With the example of wanting to lose weight in order to be healthier, again ask yourself “why.” Perhaps you want to live longer and be there when your children grow older. The reason for losing weight is now a virtue: to help others. The intention of your yoga practice is to become a strong and healthy person in order to serve other people.

All that is required to be successful in setting a deep intention is a little time. Ask “why” until a virtue is reached. Some common examples of virtues would be love, compassion, peace, joy, service, balance, faith, trust, hope, acceptance, forgiveness, patience and devotion. Intentions are not limited to these virtues, but these are good examples.

As you progress, everything you learn should help you integrate the essence of your intention. The intention may evolve as you study yoga. After a period of time, you will notice that one intention remains consistent for each season or even years.

Applying Intention to Yoga Pose Practice

Many students arrive at their intention with great precision but wonder how to apply this intention to yoga poses. Or, the yoga teacher says, “Choose an intention for this class” but doesn’t say how to apply this intention. I offer you the image of a chalice, a holy cup. Name this chalice the name of your present intention. Let the lessons and experiences of your yoga session fill the cup. Let insights related to your intention fill the cup; let the deep feeling of peace fill your cup. Let the inexplicable mystery of spiritual connection fill your cup. Think of your intention as a focus for receiving and enriching your perception of the experience.

While I suggest that you arrive at one intention, and use it for a period of time, know that you can always change your intention. If you’re feeling weak one day, you might adjust your intention to having courage to practice yoga. Or if you’re filled a deep sense of gratitude, you might hold the intention of offering gratitude to the world through each yoga pose. The most important thing to keep in mind in using intention in your practice is that it is heartfelt and sincere. If your intention doesn’t fit your mood, there’s no point in setting that intention because it’s not going to serve your practice.

The guidelines for cultivating positive intention also apply to how we live our life. Whether we recognize them, the underlying intention in all activities and thoughts determines the result. Seen in this way, daily life is like a yoga pose. And, vice versa, yoga poses embody life in that moment. Rather than avoiding the deepest and perhaps most difficult parts of life, we tune in and listen to the callings. Our spirit’s healing potential is allowed to come through and change what needs to be changed. Practicing yoga means continually working towards a pure approach of awareness and acceptance. There is no perfection, just the ever-evolving journey. For this reason, finding like-minded friends and a yoga community is very helpful. We look to the yogic wisdom collected by the masters and practitioners over thousands of years and discover we are not alone and never have been. ▲

Excerpt from *The Pure Heart of Yoga: Ten Steps to Transformation* (Llewellyn, September, 2009)