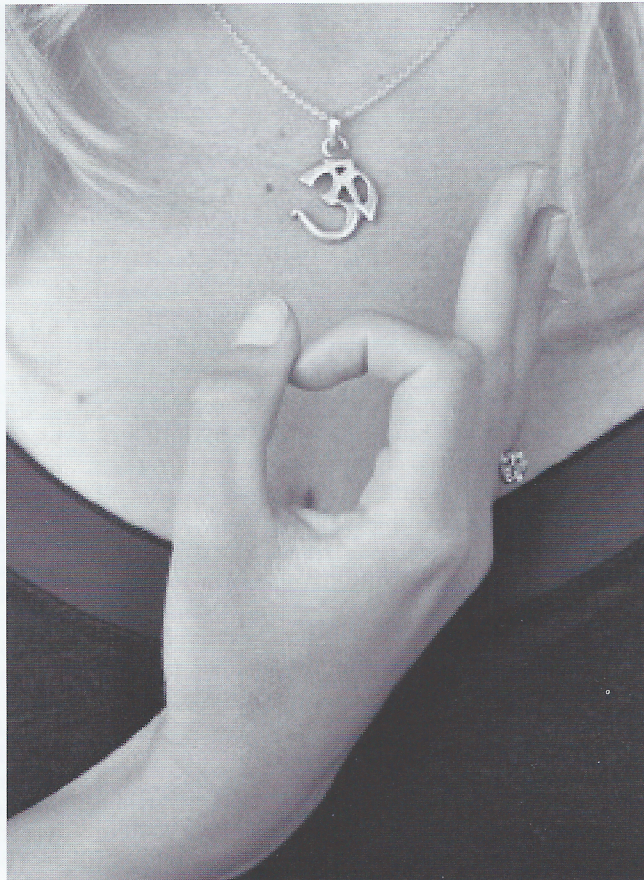


## How Do We Guide Clients Toward a Deeper Level of Intention?

As Yoga therapists, we are often charged with guiding our clients toward finding a meaningful and individualized path of health and healing. At times, clients come to us with a superficial reason for their goals, mostly because they haven't been encouraged to uncover the deeper levels of motivation for practice. If the therapist is able to guide clients to transform their original reason for coming to Yoga therapy sessions into a spiritual intention, clients may have a greater chance of meeting their goals. The insights that they gain in their therapy sessions are imbued with a sense of deeper purpose and a level of understanding that can be applied to tasks outside of the therapy session.

Understanding intention is fundamental to life, not just Yoga. As clients learn to cultivate pure intention in Yoga practice, they may start to do the same in their daily actions. Many people live disconnected from their intention for doing things, whether in work, relationships, or some other area of life. How can students embody their most inspired self if they aren't clear on the reasons behind their actions?

A commitment to spiritual healing means renewing deep-seated intentions every day. Connecting clients to something larger than themselves while doing Yoga poses will impact their entire lives, including their physical health. When performing Yoga poses, a married person might think, "Today is another day to consider how to better love my spouse." Or an 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"; or, most importantly, "I'm going to renew my commitment to spiritual growth."



To better understand intention, we can consider the three basic qualities of nature, the *gunas*, from Yoga philosophy. The *gunas* originate from Samkhya, one of the six schools of classical Indian philosophy. In Samkhya 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. Clients can probably identify with all three states of being, whether they are feeling energetic and obsessive (*rajasic*), dull and depressed (*tamasic*) or calm, clear, and focused (*sattvic*). The Yoga therapist seeks to offer practices that will magnify the client's pure *sattvic* state of being because it best facilitates the path of self-realization. In practice, this means cultivating an intention that matches the lucidity and luminosity of consciousness itself.

There is intention behind every action that we take in life, and it can either be beneficial or damaging to our wellbeing. 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 potentially injure himself. In contrast, a student whose intention is to appreciate the body will likely be finely attuned to her capabilities and will have a deeper physical, emotional, and spiritual experience in her Yoga practice.

### Types of Intention

Let's explore the three types of intention to get a sense of how they affect daily life:

**1. Active intentions (rajasic):** active, excited, obsessive, hyper, competitive, fast-paced, clinging, attached, infatuated, ego-boosting. These are

intentions that serve to boost the ego: 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 society promotes speed, profit, power, progress, stress, and materialism. The idea of continually seeking out "more and better" is like an animal 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. *Rajasic*



intentions can have short-term positive outcomes but if they are not connected to something deeper, they often lead an individual to a level of attachment that can further his or her suffering.

**2. Inactive intentions (tamasic):** inactive, dull, depressed, fearful, confused, lethargic, helpless, self-doubting, disorganized, lazy. These are intentions that stem from fear and confusion and may 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.

**3. Pure intentions (sattvic):** balanced, clear, pure, calm, peaceful, content, illuminating. 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, such as “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.

## Steps for Guiding Clients Toward Deeper Levels of Intention

Advise clients to outline two or three personal goals. Let's say they'd like to improve their health, relationships, and spirituality. Investigate the deeper purpose for the intention in these particular areas. For health, perhaps they think happiness equals losing a little weight, a very common health concern. Be very careful to recognize that such a specific physical goal is not the most effective intention. Self-inquiry becomes really help-

ful here—see if the client can ask why—“Why do I want to lose a few pounds?” The first answer 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.

The next level of inquiry might be “Why do I want to look good?” Let's suppose that the deeper desire is to improve the client's love life. The spiritual aspect of this desire is love. Encourage clients to follow the intention of love and their 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 “Why?” Perhaps they want to live longer and be there when their children grow older. The reason for losing weight is now a virtue: to help others. The intention of their 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 for the client, along with some patient guidance on the Yoga therapist's part. Keep on asking them “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 clients progress, everything they learn should help them integrate the essence of the newly uncovered intention into practice as well as daily tasks. The intention may evolve or change as they continue to study Yoga.

## 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. To help students apply intention in practice, offer them the image of a chalice, a holy cup, and ask them to name this chalice with their intention. Let the lessons and experiences of the Yoga therapy session fill the cup. Allow insights related to the intention to fill the cup; the deep feeling of peace fill the cup;

the inexplicable mystery of spiritual connection to fill the cup. Encourage them to think of the intention as a focus for receiving and enriching their perception of the experience. This visualization exercise can help the practitioner internalize in a highly personal manner the potential of the lessons learned from the practice of intention.

Although I suggest that students arrive at one intention and use it for a period of time, know that they can always change intentions. If they're feeling weak one day, they might adjust the intention to having courage to practice Yoga. Or if they're filled with a deep sense of gratitude, they 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 is that it is heartfelt and sincere. If the intention doesn't fit their mood, there's no point in setting that intention because it's not going to serve them in practice.

The guidelines for cultivating positive intention also apply to how students live their lives. Whether they recognize them or not, 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 can guide clients to tune in and listen to their inner guidance. The spirit's healing potential is allowed to come through and change what needs to be changed. Practicing Yoga means continually working toward a pure approach of awareness and acceptance. There is no perfection, just the ever-evolving journey. **YTI**



*Robert Butera, M.Div., PhD is the founder and director of The YogaLife Institute in Devon, PA, where he leads the Comprehensive Yoga Therapy Program; publisher of Yoga Living Magazine; and author of The Pure Heart of Yoga (Llewellyn, September, 2009). Bob has*

*been teaching Yoga and meditation for over twenty years. Bob was originally trained by pioneers in the field of Yoga therapy at The Yoga Institute of Mumbai, India, and has a PhD in the field of Yoga Therapy from The California Institute of Integral Studies. Learn more at [Yogalifeinstitute.com](http://Yogalifeinstitute.com).*