

# LIVING YOUR YOGA

*Finding the Spiritual  
in Everyday Life*



JUDITH LASATER, Ph.D., P.T.

# Living Your Yoga

Finding the Spiritual  
in Everyday Life



Judith Lasater, Ph.D., P.T.



RODMELL PRESS  
Berkeley, California  
2000

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Rodmell Press, 2147 Blake St., Berkeley, CA 94704-2715;  
510/841-3123; 510/841-3191 (fax); RodmellPrs@aol.com (e-mail);  
www.rodmeilpress.com.

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Printed in the United States of America

04 03 02

5 6 7 8

ISBN 0-9627138-8-0

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-75818

**Editor**

Linda Cogozzo

**Copy Editor**

Katherine L. Kaiser

**Cover and Text Designer and Compositor**

Jeanne M. Hendrickson, Hendrickson Design

**Lithographer**

McNaughton & Gunn, Inc.

Text set in Fairfield, Helvetica, and Papyrus

**To the reader:** The Sanskrit terms that appear throughout the  
text have been transliterated without the diacritical marks. The ण  
and ष have been written as sh.

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## Foreword

In *Living Your Yoga*, Judith Lasater provides an elegant yet sturdy bridge between yoga on the mat and the yoga of daily life. When we leave the sanctuary of a yoga studio, roll up our sleeves, and set to work in the world, we must be careful not to add to the confusion and violence that already exist. This book of essays and guided practices, based on selected verses from the *Yoga Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, can assist us in this endeavor.

The author shares her understanding of yoga's ancient teachings and shows us how to apply them to our contemporary lives. Especially insightful is the warm and personal way in which she addresses the division many of us feel when the peace we experience in our yoga practice is disrupted by everyday reality. Judith Lasater explains how her practice has helped her to sort through life's tangles, clarify her values, and renew her commitment to her ideals. She bares her soul so that we can see our own.

Now that yoga has entered the mainstream, it is more important than ever for yoga teachers to communicate how postures, breathing techniques, and meditation are rooted in moral principles. Yoga addresses the ethical life through a whole range of practices that encourages us to live in harmony with nature, making our actions conducive to both personal and planetary health. The great yoga teachers urge us to consider all aspects of our lives, to revere all living things, and to take no more than we need. Surely, a complete yoga practice must encompass a way of life that addresses the harm we inflict on

ourselves and other living things, as well as doing our part to reduce pollution and to share the limited resources of our planet fairly with all other beings. In *Living Your Yoga*, Judith Lasater shows herself to be a part of this teaching lineage.

I am thankful every day for the great gift of yoga. The precious time I spend practicing yoga's healing postures provides me with a much-needed physical and psychological cleansing. Yoga gives me a sense of peace and expansion; equally important, it gives me the inner strength and resiliency needed to face the complexities of life in the twenty-first century.

Judith Lasater has helped me to understand more of yoga's universal truths and to use them conscientiously in my life. Her helpful, accessible book will introduce many more people to yoga's timeless wisdom. Yoga teachers and students everywhere will be inspired to deepen their understanding of yoga philosophy. *Living Your Yoga* is a book I will recommend wholeheartedly to my students in the years to come.

Suza Francina

Author, *The New Yoga for People Over 50*

Ojai, California

September 1999

## Preface

The complex five-thousand-year-old tradition of yoga is about a very simple thing: happiness (*ananda*). Yoga tells us that in order to realize lasting happiness, we must discover our true, spiritual nature. This requires that we commit ourselves to nothing less than self-transformation and self-transcendence. For although our true nature, or spiritual Self, is always the same, it tends to be obscured by our conventional thoughts, emotions, and patterns of behavior. The yoga tradition compares this circumstance to the brightly shining sun, which is ever radiant but periodically hidden from our view by drifting dark clouds.

Yoga helps us to remove all obstructing (mental) clouds, so that we may come to enjoy the sunshine within. It is an extensive program of reeducation through which we learn, step by step, to live in the light of our true nature. Only when we have truly found ourselves will we be able to live in peace, harmony, and happiness in the world. This is what is sometimes called the sacred life.

Judith Lasater's new book is a down-to-earth discussion of how we can use the age-old wisdom of yoga in order to reconnect with the sacred in everyday life. For many people, practicing yoga means to do yoga postures once or twice a week, or even every day. Although this approach can yield many benefits, such as better health and greater vitality, the real power of yoga is unleashed only when we engage yoga as a way of life, twenty-four hours a day. Yoga is universal and applicable in all situations. It is first and foremost a mental, or

inner, discipline. Even its physical postures (*asana*) have a spiritual purpose and must be practiced with full awareness. Every single yoga technique—from postures to cleansing practices to meditation—is a tool for discovering the abiding happiness of the ultimate Self, or Spirit. In *Living Your Yoga*, the author, who has been practicing yoga since 1970, shares with readers her own experiences on the always bumpy road to self-discovery. Her honesty is commendable, for some of her disclosures are unflattering but characterize the experience of most of us: Whenever we step into the light, our shadow side also becomes more apparent. Working with our psychological shadow is a necessary task if we want to integrate our spiritual values and goals—and thus our yoga practice—into the rest of our lives.

The path toward yoga's lofty goal of Self-realization (*atma-jnana*) is not in the least glamorous. On the contrary, it is quite humbling. For we must constantly, bravely, and compassionately face our limitations in order to realize our unlimited potential as spiritual beings. Judith Lasater, speaking from her own experience, points the way for other Westerners who are eager to apply the immense wisdom of yoga to their everyday lives. I can wholeheartedly recommend this book, which combines a clear vision with invaluable practical insights forged in the fire of the author's day-to-day yogic practice.

Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Founder-Director of the Yoga Research and Education Center  
Oakland, California

October 1999

## Introduction

*Living Your Yoga* is about finding the spiritual in everyday life. I started practicing *asana*, or “yoga poses,” in 1970 and began teaching them in 1971. Throughout the years, I have continued to learn about myself through these poses. For example, when I was in labor with my first child, I thought of each contraction as a pose. I focused on my breath and on letting go, just as in a challenging *asana*. After my son was born, I wished that I could bring what I learned in *asana* not only into birthing, but also more consciously into my parenting, my marriage, my friendships, and my work. I continued to study yoga philosophy and began to explore ways to actualize these teachings in the circumstances of my daily life. I found this to be of great value and, in 1981, began to share my exploration in my teaching. Initially, I began some of my classes and workshops with a discussion of an aphorism from Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. In 1988, I began teaching *asana* workshops that focused on life as practice. I called these workshops “Living Your Yoga.” This book is the result of my ongoing personal exploration, my work with my students and colleagues, and my interactions with my family, friends, and the world around me.

## Longing for the Sacred

Yoga has become an integral part of modern Western society. In an era of increasingly sophisticated technology, this centuries-old art and philosophy has ever-increasing appeal. In fact, a 1999 *Yoga Journal* study estimates that in

the United States alone, more than ten million people actively practice yoga.<sup>1</sup>

Yoga's resurgence of popularity is a reflection of our urge to reconnect with the sacred. Most of us don't often engage in the rituals associated with worship since ancient times: we rarely sing or dance or pray. For centuries these had been a sacred context within which we connected with ourselves, one another, and the Divine. But why not turn toward the religious traditions of our childhoods? Why pick one from a far-away land that most of us will never visit?

It has been my experience that many religious traditions stress developing a relationship with an external deity. Worship is something you *do*, not something you *are*. For example, I grew up going to church two times on Sunday, as well as on Wednesday nights. I always felt that God was a very distant being who, paradoxically, was interested in even the smallest of my sins. I wanted more: a direct and personal relationship with the Divine.

I started yoga in my early twenties. I was studying dance and had developed arthritis. I heard that yoga's gentle stretching and relaxation techniques could help me. I originally planned to resume dance classes and performing after my arthritis had improved. Because I loved movement and expressed myself through it, I was ecstatic after my first yoga class. I had been taught to worship by praying or singing. But here was a philosophy that accepted the potential of human movement as sacred and worshipful—all in this very moment, here on Earth.

What I now know is that I had been seeking whole-

ness through integration of my body, my mind, and my spirit. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we all search for answers to the fundamental questions of life. As children, we ask “Who am I?”, “Why am I?”, and “Where am I?” When my son was seven years old, he came down the stairs one morning and, as if in midconversation with me, asked, “But who made God?” As adults, we know that although we may worship or practice with others, the process of spiritual understanding and growth goes on separately in each of us. I was raised in Texas, and I can still hear my mother’s homily: “Honey, everybody has to hoe their own row.” We are left with trying to understand the mystery of life with our own hearts and own minds. With yoga, Indian sages have given us a way to understand the nature of reality.

The word *yoga* comes from Sanskrit, the scriptural language of ancient India. Its root is the verb *yuj*, meaning “to yoke” or “to unite.” Yoga is actually two things. First, it is a state of being in which the individual practitioner experiences a cellular connection with that which is the Universe, the Source, or God. This state is sometimes described by athletes as “being in the zone.” For *yogis*, or “yoga practitioners,” this is *samadhi*. Contrary to popular belief, *samadhi* is not a trance: in fact, it is the opposite. It is a state in which we experience total clarity of awareness. But for most of us, *samadhi* does not seem relevant to our daily lives. Here is where the second aspect of yoga—the practices associated with that deeply connected state of being—comes in. Most of us have heard of yoga’s poses, its *pranayama*, or “breathing exercises,” and its meditation techniques. Less known is the



fact that these practices are rooted in a moral code that is the very foundation of yoga. This moral code is made up of *yama* (“restraints”) and *niyama* (“observances”). The *yamas* are nonviolence, truth, nonstealing, clarity about sexual activity, and nongreed; the *niyamas* are purity, contentment, consistency, study, and devotion.<sup>2</sup> Although we may enjoy our personal yoga practice or classes, it is only when we make yoga’s foundation a part of our daily lives that we will be transformed.

It is important to understand what transformation means in relationship to your inner life. At first blush, it would seem that transformation is about changing. However, it does not mean that you use yoga to change into something different. Rather, yoga takes you *back* to your true Self. The practice of “living your yoga” uses the psychology of yoga to uncover this Self, or what yoga calls *atman*. To do this, you must understand what it means to practice.

### **Practicing to Live, Living to Practice**

Many of us have a negative reaction to the word *practice*, probably because it reminds us of being coerced into piano lessons or some other detested activity in childhood. For me, *practice* has a different meaning. It is the consistent willingness to open to life in all of its joy and pain. This definition certainly includes what you have always thought of as your yoga practice, such as poses, breathing exercises, and meditation. But it also casts a wider net to encompass frustration with your temperamental car, the argument you had with your friend, washing your dinner dishes, and your

apprehension about an important meeting. In other words, to practice is to pay attention to your whole life: your thoughts, your bodily sensations, and your speech and other actions. As you do, you will discover that nothing is separate from anything else. Thoughts are the sensations of the mind just as sensations are the thoughts of the body. Each moment of your life is a moment of potential practice.

Practice, then, can be understood as a willingness to return to the reality of this very moment, that is, to observe with dispassion and clarity exactly what is—right now. Does this moment call for silence or for answers? Is the person in front of me asking for information or the reassurance of my love? Am I reacting from fear or from necessity? Obviously, there is no guarantee that I am correct. But relying on paying attention to the thoughts and sensations of the moment will give me a chance to respond to life less from my patterns of defense and more from integrity.

A point of clarification: Practicing being present with all the moments of your life does not mean that everything that happens is okay and that you just have to learn to accept it. Things happen in the world that are harmful and even horrific. The practice of being fully present may even move you to dedicate your life to changing the suffering you see in the world. I am not asking you to change into something you think is better or more spiritual. I am asking you to consider removing the layers of doubt, fear, and denial that keep you from experiencing connection with your own wholeness. One way to do this is to garner inspiration from the teachers and practitioners who have paved the way.

## Ancient Texts, Modern Lives

In our fast-moving world, the emphasis is on the latest events, the newest scientific discovery, and the hottest fashion. Yet yoga's ancient texts still offer us important and relevant insights into how to live well. One of the most important is the *Yoga Sutra*, compiled in perhaps 200 B.C.E., although scholars debate this date. The author of the *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali is generally thought to have been a physician, Sanskrit scholar, grammarian, and yogi. Each *sutra*, or "thread," is a terse phrase. As such, it is an ideal construct for memorizing sacred teachings. The *Yoga Sutra* is divided into four *pada*, or "books," that explain the nature of higher consciousness, the practices of yoga, the supernormal powers that can come from practice, and the state of final liberation. The second book in particular offers interesting and powerful insights into the workings of the mind and the obstacles to wholeness. Many chapters in *Living Your Yoga* will be based on concepts drawn directly from the *Yoga Sutra*.

Another source of inspiration is the *Bhagavad Gita*, or "Song of God," part of a larger work called the *Mahabharata*. Written in approximately the third or fourth century B.C.E. and consisting of seven hundred stanzas, it takes the form of a dialogue between Krishna, a manifestation of the god Vishnu, and Arjuna, a young man from a good family who is in the midst of a spiritual crisis. This upheaval takes place on a battlefield, where Arjuna must fight and possibly kill some of his own relatives. Their dialogue is a metaphor for the struggle we must all face between our attachments and our clarity. Throughout, Krishna advises

Arjuna to fight the good fight, to continue to live with courage, and to accept the challenges that life presents. Some of the chapters in *Living Your Yoga* draw from the wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### About This Book

*Living Your Yoga* is divided into three parts, each exploring the nitty-gritty of those qualities to be cultivated and those qualities to be transformed through awareness. Part One, "Awakening Awareness: Yoga within Yourself," has seven chapters: "Spiritual Seeking," "Discipline," "Letting Go," "Self-Judgment," "Faith," "Perspective," and "Courage." A crucial and perhaps most powerful aspect of your relationship with yourself is your internal dialogue. This is true for at least three reasons. First, how you talk to yourself reflects your thinking, which may not be truly reflective of reality. Second, it may be repeated for years, thus becoming embedded in your consciousness. Finally, it exists in the silence of your mind, unchallenged by the thoughts and insights of others. In this section, I suggest various ways to cultivate awareness of this inner dialogue and relax its hold on your consciousness.

Part Two, "Widening the Circle: Yoga and Relationships," addresses how to become more loving with your partner, your children, your family, and your friends. Because this love can spring only from your own internal clarity, this section comes second. It also has seven chapters: "Compassion," "Control," "Fear," "Patience," "Attachment and Aversion," "Suffering," and "Impermanence." Like most

of us, I have found few things more challenging in life than learning to remain truly open and aware in intimate relationships. I like to say that I have several gurus, and they share my last name!

Part Three, "Embracing All Life: Yoga in the World," has seven chapters: "Greed," "Service," "Connection," "Truth," "Success," "Nonviolence," and "Love." You encounter a challenging level of practice when you venture beyond the boundaries of family and friends. How do you practice when the environment does not support you or is even openly hostile? It would be easy to separate yourself from those who you decide are not on "the path." If you relax your view, you may see that it is all one path and that we are all on it.

Each chapter has five parts: a verse from the *Yoga Sutra* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, an essay, a guided practice, more suggestions for practice, and Mantras for Daily Living. The practice sections are intended to support your exploration of living your yoga. Some will be on your yoga mat; others will be off it. *Mantra* comes from the Sanskrit words *manas* (which means "mind") and *tra* (which means "to transcend"). A mantra is something that helps you to transcend ordinary ways of thinking. These are meant to be your life-affirming companions throughout the day. You might say that each is a modern-day sutra.

It is my hope you will find comfort in the essays, and that you will return to the practices and mantras again and again. If you are so inspired, design practices and write mantras of your own. To develop a greater intimacy with the *Yoga Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, you can recite or chant their

verses at the beginning or end (or both) of your practice or any of your daily activities. As Dag Hammarskjöld, secretary general to the United Nations (1953–61), writes in *Markings*, “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”<sup>3</sup> Use this book in whatever ways best serve your needs. *Living Your Yoga* is my gift to you.

## **PART ONE**

**Awakening Awareness: Yoga within Yourself**





1

## Spiritual Seeking

*tada drashtuh sva-rupe'vasthanam*

Then the seer abides in its essence.

—Yoga Sutra 1:3

Some years ago, I was working at my desk and realized that I had misplaced a bill that was due. While I anxiously searched for it, my then four-year-old daughter came into the room and asked for my attention. I said that I was busy looking for something important and to come back later. In a few minutes she returned and asked quietly, "Have you found yourself yet, Mommy?" I was humbled by her question. Had I found myself or anything else after years of yoga study and spiritual seeking? I had, but the "path" was not what I had imagined at the beginning of my journey in 1970.

At the outset, I believed that to be spiritual meant that I had to seek, find, and accomplish something outside of myself that would bring me happiness and fulfillment. For example, I sought the company of well-known gurus and teachers, because I was convinced that they had the answers. I practiced a rigid program of yoga poses, holding them for excruciatingly long periods of time in hopes of self-transformation. And I read every book on yoga and enlightenment that I could find.

I thought that I understood what it meant to be a spiritual person until the day when I became angrier than I had ever been in my life because of a disagreement with an

employee. I literally saw red. I found out that this is not a metaphor but an actual physiological phenomenon. In that flash, I understood how someone could murder in the heat of the moment. I was shocked by the depth of my anger and retreated to my room, where I sat in despair. After all my years of yoga practice, how could I become so incredibly angry? I felt that I was a failure, and that all of my attempts to reach a higher level of spiritual development were a joke. I could feel my ideas about myself as a spiritual person draining out of me. At exactly the same moment, something else was filling me up. It was a feeling, an understanding, an experience made up of equal parts equanimity and peace. This state lasted for three days, during which I needed almost no food or sleep. I could see clearly that it was not my ideas about spirituality that would bring peace to my life. Whether we seek something called spirituality, holiness, or enlightenment, the route to it is through our humanness, complete with our strengths *and* our weaknesses, our successes *and* our failures. You might say that we use ourselves to discover ourselves. In my case, it required a deep letting go of what I *thought* that enlightenment might be that allowed me the smallest taste of it.

Many great teachers have pointed the way, emphasizing that they (and their teachings), in and of themselves, are not the answer. For example, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Patanjali addresses this same point in the first book, verse three, of his *Yoga Sutra*: *tada drashtuh sva-rupe'vasthanam*, or "Then the seer abides in its essence."<sup>1</sup> This important verse clarifies a core concept of Patanjali's work. He begins with *tada*, meaning "then" or

“when one is in the state of yoga.”<sup>2</sup> (It should be noted that Patanjali uses *yoga* to mean “a state of wholeness” as well as the practices associated with this state.<sup>3</sup>) And when you are in a state of yoga, or wholeness, you rest in your own true nature.

A favorite image I use to explain this verse to my students is that of a sculptor. When carving stone, the sculptor removes everything that is *not* the statue. She does not add anything to create it, except the willingness to do the work. The art of revealing beauty lies in removing what conceals it. So, too, Patanjali tells us that wholeness exists within us. Our work is to chisel away at everything that is not essence, not Self.

Many of us come to yoga because of some difficulty in our lives. For some, it is physical, such as lower back or knee discomfort. For others, it is emotional, such as depression. And for still others, the draw is philosophical, such as feeling that life lacks meaning. Most of us have a combination of reasons. However, often the dawning of yoga is coupled with an outwardly acknowledged or inwardly unexpressed expectation that yoga can solve problems, eliminate pain, and, most important, guarantee us that they will not recur. As I discovered through my experience with anger, nothing could be further from the truth.

Although yoga practice certainly can help our aching backs and bolster our spirits, it cannot insulate us from the pain that life inevitably brings, such as losing loved ones, illness, aging, not getting what we want—or even getting what we want. If yoga does not ensure a life without pain, then why

do it? I have found that being in “a state of yoga” relieves *suffering*, specifically the suffering caused by being in separation from my wholeness.

Suffering differs from pain. Suffering is caused by the emotional reaction we lay on top of our pain. By becoming aware of our emotions and thoughts about pain, their hold on us can be released and our suffering can be lessened. The avenue to this awareness is through constant attention, remembering that each moment is holy and holds the potential for self-transformation. This awareness is the *tada*, or “state of yoga,” about which Patanjali speaks.

From this perspective, spiritual seeking is not what we do outwardly, but what we acknowledge inwardly. To practice yoga in the deepest sense is to commit to developing awareness by observing our lives: our thoughts, our words, and our actions. There are many yoga techniques that can support us along the way, such as yoga poses, breathing practices, and meditation. But these are not ends in themselves, but means to the Self. The real beginning of spiritual practice is evident when we accept responsibility for ourselves, that is, when we acknowledge that ultimately there are no answers outside of ourselves, and no gurus, no teachers, and no philosophies that can solve the problems of our lives. They can only suggest, guide, and inspire. It is our dedication to living with open hearts and our commitment to the day-to-day details of our lives that will transform us. When we are open to the present moment, we shine forth. At these times, we are not *on* a spiritual path: we *are* the spiritual path.

## Abiding Practice

We begin with Abiding Practice. If there really are no answers outside of ourselves, then we must learn to turn toward ourselves and be comfortable in doing so. Abiding Practice can remind us that there is nothing we need to be whole that does not already exist within us. It combines a yoga pose with a Mantra for Daily Living. You can select a mantra from those that follow, one from another chapter, or you can create one of your own. Abiding Practice can be done practically anywhere, anytime. Set aside some time each day for practice, even if it is only five minutes. Above all, be kind to yourself. Do what you can: never force anything.

To begin, select a quiet space at home or work. Decide how much time you have, and set a timer so you do not have to watch the clock during practice. Choose a soothing yoga pose in which you are comfortable, such as lying in Basic Relaxation Pose (*Shavasana*) in your yoga practice space or on your bed, or Seated Mountain Pose (*Tadasana*, variation) at work. Make yourself comfortable. For example, you can place a rolled blanket under your knees and a rolled towel under your neck in Basic Relaxation Pose, or a stack of books under your feet and a rolled towel at your lumbar spine for support in Seated Mountain Pose. Whichever you choose, make sure that your body is placed in a symmetrical position, and that your spine is soft and long.

Once in position, close your eyes, allowing them to look downward toward your heart. If you are lying down, cover your eyes with a wash cloth. Relax your jaw and throat. Spend the next few minutes gently observing your breath.

When you feel settled, say your Mantra for Daily Living to yourself. Rest in the pose.

Most daily activities are goal oriented. In Abiding Practice, there is no objective except to fully experience your own life, free of the distraction caused by thoughts, plans, and even by moving around. We all spend most of our time forgetting to feel, to sense, and to know life—moment by moment. Abiding Practice helps you to experience each moment completely. Instead of trying to fill yourself up, this is your chance to feel empty, feel still, and feel present.

To end practice, follow the rise and fall of the breath as you did at the beginning of the exercise, and repeat your Mantra for Daily Living. When you feel complete, open your eyes and come out of the pose. Stretch and take the time you need to make the transition to your next activity, knowing that all is well within you.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- Create a sacred space. Designate a quiet area at home or work where you can practice yoga, meditate, write in your journal, or daydream.
- Write a brief account of why you began (or want to begin) practicing yoga. Reread it now and again to renew your commitment to practice.
- If you find yourself wanting to study with a teacher, notice what draws you to that person. Perhaps it is his or her generosity, compassion, or patience. Consider the ways in which this quality already exists within you.

- Embrace solitude. Make a date with yourself each week to spend time alone. You could practice yoga, take a walk in nature, listen to music, or do nothing. If you choose to do nothing, do not feel guilty about it.
- Keep a list of what is important to you about living your yoga. What needs your attention? Remember, your life is a work in progress. Review the list regularly and update it to reflect your changing needs.
- Are there some aspects of yoga, such as studying the *Yoga Sutra* or developing a meditation practice, that you want to explore, but do not know how to begin? Ask a fellow student to describe how she began.
- Begin and end each day with a Mantra for Daily Living.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- I am my own authority.
- My life is a work in progress.
- I desire wholeness.
- All the answers are within me.
- Life is practice: practice is life.
- I commit to living my life fully in this moment.

~







## Discipline

*abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah*

The restriction of these fluctuations is achieved through practice and dispassion.

—Yoga Sutra 1:12

One of the most powerful ideas I have ever encountered was one that I read at a very difficult time in my life. My three children were young, my husband's job was demanding, and I was busy teaching yoga. Additionally, I spent time each day practicing yoga and writing articles for *Yoga Journal*. Despite my seeming success, something was wrong. I couldn't seem to juggle my life so that I could not only get everything done, but also get it done well. One day while browsing in a bookstore, I picked up *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* by Scott Peck. The very first sentence simultaneously shocked and comforted me: "Life is difficult."<sup>1</sup>

Waves of relief flooded through me. Written plainly for all to see was the truth that I had been living: my life *was* difficult. As I pondered further, I realized something else: I was making my life *more* difficult. This recognition was powerful and I remember feeling a sense of physical lightness and mental freedom. Clearly, I had misunderstood and misapplied the concept of discipline.

For as long as I could remember, I had spent my days accomplishing a series of "have to's," things that I required

myself to finish before going to bed. Parents, teachers, and friends had commented positively on my ability to do so. I had incorporated their reinforcement into my self-image. In reality, my way of living my life was unsustainable. My attachment to my idea of discipline drove me to work constantly. I had confused “getting things done” with the real meaning of discipline.

Beginning with the simple wisdom of Peck, I worked with my thoughts and my behavior. I realized that although life is difficult, I did not have to approach life by becoming difficult myself. I decided to simplify my life. I began by giving up working at my desk after the children were in bed, even though it seemed as if those hours were the only quiet time I could find to write or keep up with other paperwork. Our after-dinner time became more leisurely. I actually spent some time with my husband, got more rest, and, paradoxically, began to feel that I was accomplishing more in my day.

Next, I realized that I could either pay a therapist for a once-a-week session to complain about how I was overworked, or I could pay a teenage helper to come in for a few hours four afternoons a week. I chose the latter option and ended up saving money as well as contributing to my peace of mind. It has been a road of trial and error for me, and I have learned that discipline has less to do with accomplishment and more to do with intention and with commitment.

In the *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali discusses discipline in the first book, verse twelve: *abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah*, or “The restriction of these fluctuations is achieved through practice and dispassion.”<sup>2</sup> To elaborate on this teaching, yoga, or that state in which fluctuations (or agitations) of the mind

are resolved, can be achieved by practice (or discipline) and detachment. (Detachment, or letting go, is the subject of Chapter Three.) Practice, then, is discipline in action. This is different from task-oriented behavior. Discipline is truly expressed by my intention to stay present in each moment. Whether it is driving my children to school, standing in the grocery line, paying bills, interacting with coworkers, finishing a task on time, or practicing yoga in a formal way, if I do it with a deep intimacy with each moment, then I am truly disciplined. Without that intimacy, I am merely performing a series of mechanical actions.

Several years ago, I met a woman who told me that she had begun to meditate for five minutes every morning. My initial reaction was judgmental. What a joke!, I thought. How could five minutes make any difference? In truth, she had a realistic and balanced attitude about her life and her practice. She had declared her intention, and she lived her commitment to meditate every day. She interpreted discipline as doing what was possible with consistency. I had interpreted discipline as quantity. I realized that I thought two hours of yoga practice indicated a disciplined life, whereas five minutes did not. In time, I came to realize her wisdom: Do what you can and do it fully.

Patanjali describes this as *abhyasa*, which comes from the Sanskrit roots *abhi* and *as*, and means literally “to apply oneself.”<sup>3</sup> From this viewpoint, all of life is practice. Practice is not about what you get, it is about what you give. Whether you are driven or resistant, the medicine is the same: do what is truly possible with unwavering commitment to giving your-

self to the moment. Without this intention, practice becomes another task to be completed and it loses its ability to transform. And transformation, or freedom, is the reason for all discipline.

## Discipline Practice

In trying to be disciplined, you might force something unpleasant on yourself or think that you must give up something. The true spirit of abhyasa is neither. In the following exercise, you will experience how discipline and freedom are intertwined.

To begin, make a list of things that you have always wanted to do, but never seem to find the time to try, or things that you already do but have resistance to doing. You might choose meditating, writing a book, playing the piano, practicing yoga poses or breathing techniques, reading a good book, or taking a daily walk. It could be something else. What is important is that you pick something and commit yourself to doing it for fifteen minutes a day. I suggest that you do this one thing only and not combine it with another activity. Further, I recommend that you do it at the same time and in the same place each day. If this is not possible, do it where and when you can.

To support your commitment, set a timer. It is important to continue for the full fifteen minutes. It is also important to stop after fifteen minutes, so that you do not become obsessive about the activity. Some days you will want to do this exercise; other days, it may be difficult. In either case, do it anyway, acknowledging that it is something that you have chosen.

At the beginning of each day's activity, spend a few moments breathing quietly, declaring your intention to stay present throughout the activity. At the end of each day's activity, express gratitude for having taken the opportunity to practice. You might even write down the thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations that you experienced during practice. Keep them brief. Carry on for one month, and then review your experience. At that time, you may want to continue the activity, change it, or drop it all together. In any case, you will have had the opportunity to experience consistency and commitment without rigidity. In addition, your energetic experience of this activity may be softer, smoother, more expansive, and more integrated with your other energetic experiences than when you were just thinking about doing it, forcing yourself to do it, or avoiding doing it.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- Do one thing at a time.
- Commit yourself to doing what is possible. Make a list of what you have to do tomorrow; eliminate activities that are unnecessary and reschedule those that can and should be postponed.
- Take a nap every Sunday.
- Slow down. Begin each activity, such as driving, speaking at a meeting, or walking onto your commuter train, with one gentle inhalation, followed by a calm exhalation.
- Ask for help with a task.
- If you are experiencing resistance to doing yoga, begin with

the Abiding Practice from Chapter One, "Spiritual Seeking," or schedule a practice date with a friend to help you get started. If your practice feels stale, take a day off.

- Take a lunch break every day.
- Where does the time go? No one thinks he has enough of it to take time out for himself. As I wrote in my first book, *Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times*, write down what you do in one-half-hour increments, from 7:00 A.M. to 9:30 P.M., for the next three days. This exercise will help you discover free time. Rather than dragging yourself from one duty to the next, take a break. Think how restorative it would be to relax, or to practice yoga, or to paint watercolors. I guarantee that you will be more productive for having done so.
- When you notice that you are pushing yourself to complete a task, soften and be merciful with yourself. Inhale quietly and exhale gently, extending the very same kindness to yourself that you would extend to another in the same situation. Begin again.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- I give myself fully to each moment.
- Discipline is quality, not quantity.
- I can always make a choice.
- There is enough time.
- My yoga practice is discipline in action.

## Letting Go

*abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah*

The restriction of these fluctuations is achieved through practice and dispassion.

—*Yoga Sutra* 1:12

One of the most frequently studied principles of yoga's sacred texts is the concept of letting go. Also called detachment or surrender, letting go is an action carried out in relationship with a religious figure or guru, with a particular teaching, and, most important, with the nitty-gritty details of the present moment. Letting go is difficult for most of us to understand and to practice.

While I was discussing surrender and detachment several years ago with a few yoga students, one of them stated emphatically, "I tried that surrender thing once and it didn't work." Her response gave us all a good laugh, but it was the truth. Trying "that surrender thing once" will not do much. It is a lifetime practice that must be built on deep understanding.

Verse twelve of book one of the *Yoga Sutra* addresses detachment: *abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah*, or "The restriction of these fluctuations is achieved through practice and dispassion."<sup>1</sup> Here Patanjali teaches that wholeness comes from *abhyasa*, which means "to apply oneself"<sup>2</sup> (discussed in Chapter Two, "Discipline"), and from *vairagya*, or "supreme detachment."<sup>3</sup>

Why is detachment so difficult to understand?

Perhaps the problem lies in confusing being detached with being uninterested. Actually, they are opposites. If you are uninterested, you withdraw, you turn your back on life, which, in a way, denies the difficulty of life. To be detached is to stand in the middle of the marketplace, with all its confusion and noise, and to remain present to yourself and to all that is. No wonder my student was pessimistic about being able to surrender.

If we accept the importance of detachment, from what, then, do we detach? Patanjali introduces the important concept of *avidya* in the second book, verse three: *avidya-asmita-raga-dvesha-abhiniveshah panca-kleshah*, or "Nescience, I-am-ness, attachment, aversion, and the will-to-live are the five causes-of-affliction."<sup>4</sup> *Avidya* has three parts: *a*, the negating prefix, *vid*, "to see with the inner eye,"<sup>5</sup> and *ya*, the activating suffix. In literal terms, *avidya* means "actively being in the state of not seeing the true nature of reality."<sup>6</sup> The classical translation of *avidya* is "nescience" or "ignorance."<sup>7</sup> Patanjali teaches that we are caught in *avidya*, that is, in seeing reality from our own particular point of view.

A story can help to clarify this point. In *An American Tragedy*, novelist Theodore Dreiser writes about a young man in search of his missing father. Along the way, he visits a Native American chief and asks for his help in understanding his situation. The chief points to the woven rug covering the floor. Turning it over to reveal the myriad threads lying in a confusion of color, the chief says that this is how the world looks to us. Turning the rug right side up, the chief tells the young man to see the intricate and beautiful pattern now



apparent. The chief suggests that this is the way the world looks to God.

The lesson here, of course, is that truth is a matter of perspective. So if you ask yourself from what exactly are you to be detached, the only possible answer is that you are to give up your attachment to the way you *think* things are. When you do, you get out of your own way and can experience another perspective. All the spiritual traditions talk about enlightenment or realization. One way to view enlightenment is as a radical shift in perspective. Nothing outside of you has changed: *you* have changed. And yet, paradoxically, you have *not* changed, but rather have become what you already are. You have just removed the smoke screen of ignorance so that what always had been present has become apparent.

Another aspect of surrender is that, yes, eventually we must give up everything. Some years ago, while filling out a form, I stared at the blank space in which I was to indicate my permanent address. Being in a philosophical mood, I was momentarily stumped by this question. I asked myself, What is permanent? The next question was, Do you own or rent your home? Own?, I thought. If I am honest about the answer to this question, I must admit that I own nothing. I have to give back everything when I die: my body, my feelings, my mind, my thoughts, my experiences, my education, my husband, my children, my family, my friends, my profession, and even my yoga; in short, absolutely everything that I think I am.

Patanjali's "detachment" beckons you to cultivate the willingness to surrender as you go along, right here and now, but not because you despair or are uninterested. On the con-

trary, detachment requires total engagement. When you allow yourself to see things as they really are, then—and only then—can you love yourself and others without hidden expectations. Detachment is the greatest act of love.

Learning the lesson of vairagya is a daily one. Recently, I took my daughter to see her orthodontist. While in the waiting room, we looked together at a book of holograms. She turned through the twenty-page book, exclaiming about the beauty of the hidden designs. I could not see even one, although she patiently explained how to do so. When she went in for her exam, I became more and more agitated and impatient because, try as I might, I still could not find the hidden images. I was angry with myself for failing. Then I felt sorry for myself for being so stupid as to have been, once again, outsmarted by technology.

In resignation, I tried one more time and, for some unknown reason, relaxed my intense focus on the pictures. At once, the hidden design jumped out at me, and I was drawn into another world, one of depth and beauty. I excitedly turned the pages, vowing not to leave until I had seen every design. Later that night, as I retold the day's events to my husband, I was struck with the power of what had happened. This was a living teaching: When I let go, I was able to see what had been there the whole time. Patanjali would have been proud.

### Letting Go Practice

Learning to live with detachment is, to say the least, a challenge. I find that paying attention to those very moments

when I feel attached to be an effective technique of letting go. For example, when I find myself in a surrender struggle, instead of trying to detach from whatever it is, including the struggle, I allow myself to feel my attachment completely. When I shine the spotlight of awareness on this attachment, I actually discover something else: perspective. As I become aware of my attachment, it has less power over me.

This practice can be done both on and off the yoga mat. It is difficult but rewarding beyond belief. The next time you feel yourself caught in the grip of attachment, such as wanting something to turn out a certain way, take time out—right then and there—to notice what is happening in your body. How does your belly feel? Has your breathing changed? Is your jaw tight? Your forehead drawn? Notice your bodily sensations. They are the manifestations of your attachment.

Stay present to your bodily sensations. If you try to pull surrender to you or push discomfort away, you will create even more agitation. Engage life by accepting the sensations as they are. As you continue, you may notice that you begin to relax and that your mind is not gripped so tightly around the outcome. And if this does not happen the first time you practice this exercise—or even the thirty-first time—that is okay. Just keep practicing. This, too, is surrender.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- If you notice that you have a strong desire to be right, try not venturing an opinion the next time someone else expresses one.
- If you are in a situation in which you notice your attach-

ment to the outcome of a problem, offer your help and then step back; this will free others to do the same.

- When the occasion arises, go along with what your partner or friend wants. Let her pick the restaurant or movie. Or, if you always rely on her lead, you pick. Relinquish the habit of having to be in charge or the habit of giving in.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- Detachment is the greatest act of love.
- I am willing to engage life.
- This moment is the perfect moment to let go.

~

## Self-Judgment

*sthira-sukham asanam*

The posture should be steady and comfortable.

—Yoga Sutra 2:46

The definition of *asana*, or “yoga pose,” is found in the second book, verse forty-six, of the *Yoga Sutra*: *sthira-sukham asanam*, or “The posture should be steady and comfortable.”<sup>1</sup> To some, this verse is surprising, because it does not jive with what is generally understood about this physical aspect of yoga. What could Patanjali possibly mean by “comfortable”? What about sweat, twenty-minute Headstands (*Salamba Shirshasana*), and the exercise mantra of “No pain, no gain”?

Throughout the years, I have noticed the tendency in myself and others to think that we must practice boot-camp yoga, that is, the poses must be difficult, even painful, to be beneficial and worthwhile. Sadly, we do not practice to find the comfortable, but to overcome ourselves and conquer the pose. In reality, our thoughts about the poses reflect our thoughts about ourselves. It is not uncommon for students to berate themselves with self-judging internal dialogue during practice.

I saw this tendency more clearly in myself after listening to an exchange between a friend and my daughter, who was three years old at the time. My friend asked her if she did yoga, meaning asanas. Looking up from her play, my daughter shook her head no, declaring that she did “traumayama.”

(*Pranayama* is the term for “breathing exercises.”) Out of the mouths of babes!, I thought. Her answer reminded me that I, too, practiced traumayama. Many times in my practice, as well as in other areas of my life, I responded from a place of judgment. Often my internal dialogue was negative and pejorative, causing me to inflict my yoga practice upon myself. And if I was doing that to myself, what was I teaching my students? How was I interacting with family and friends?

I began to pay attention to how often I judged myself. I was appalled to learn that *most* of the time my inner dialogue was self-judgmental. But what really shook me was when I discovered something even more disconcerting: there was no way that I could be harsh toward myself and, at the same time, be compassionate to others. I realized also that the process of silently putting myself down was actually a form of egoism.

If you expect more from yourself than from others, you are saying that you are better than others and, therefore, must perform at a superior level. I do not mean that you should not set goals for yourself. Rather, the question is, how do you react if you cannot meet these goals? Honestly admitting that you may have not done your best is not judgment. It is judgment when you draw a conclusion about yourself based on your ideas about failure. Honesty involves taking responsibility; judgment has to do with blame. To view yourself as bad or a failure because you did not accomplish what you set out to do is judgment. To state clearly and simply that you did not accomplish your plan is taking responsibility.

Another of my children taught me a great lesson about self-judgment. Recently, I was having difficulty in

replacing paper in my fax machine. As my difficulty escalated, so did my inner chatter of criticism. I make it a practice to verbalize these judgments whenever possible. Hearing them makes them obvious, even ludicrous, and this helps me to let go of them.

As I continued loading the fax paper, I stated my judgments out loud: "Why am I so stupid? Why can't I do anything right?" Unbeknownst to me, my teenage son was cooking in the kitchen, and he overheard me. In the past, he had come to my aid when I needed "in-house" technological support. This day, he came into my office and said with a grin, "Mom, don't be so self-deprecating. You *can* do something right. You had me." It was a joke, but he said it with such love that I immediately started crying and hugged him. Although I may think that my critical inner dialogue is harming only me, it does affect others, in ways both direct and indirect. The power of this moment stayed with me for several days.

What Patanjali teaches about "comfortable" has relevance to the practice of yoga poses, which are not different from the practice of life itself. Learning to live in a way that is comfortable, or agreeable, to others and to the Earth is crucial. It begins when you can bring a sense of the comfortable to your inner life, to your thoughts, and to how you frame your reality by how you speak to yourself.

The translation of the first word in Patanjali's verse is interesting. The word *sthira* means "steady."<sup>2</sup> Although not the same Sanskrit word as discussed in Chapter One, "Spiritual Seeking," for me, *sthira* also has a feeling of "abiding."<sup>3</sup> *To abide* is "to remain present with a sense of fullness."<sup>4</sup> When you

resort to self-judgment, you are no longer present, you are no longer practicing. Learning to be present with yourself and to abide in that which is “steady and comfortable” does not allow space for self-judgment. When you live this way, you are practicing yoga: you are living fully.

Finally, another family incident taught me about the power of self-judgment. When our three children were small, their tradition was to create a whole bag full of brightly colored and glittering homemade Father’s Day cards. They would “surprise” their dad while he was still in bed, ceremoniously handing him the cards, one by one, until several dozen had been given out. One year, after the oldest had learned to write but not to spell, they presented him with a big card that said, “Happy Father’s Day, Dad. We love you. Just be your *slef*.” Of course, they could not have known how endearing this misspelling was, and how important it was to us that they understand this life message. Since that day, I have reflected on being my *slef* many times as I have wrestled with my lack of self-acceptance and my continued self-judgment.

### **My *Slef* Practice**

If you are to free yourself of thoughts of self-judgment, then first you must be aware of them. Try this exercise. Taking your physical limitations and health into account, pick a yoga pose that is difficult, if not impossible, for you to do. Practice, or rather attempt to practice, this pose every day for one month.

To begin, say silently or out loud, “I am attempting something difficult, and I appreciate myself for trying.” Then pay close attention to your internal dialogue as you practice



the pose. At times, you may even talk yourself through the pose out loud. Listen to the instructions you give yourself about the physical aspects of how to do the pose. Whose instructions are they? Your own? A teacher's? What do you say to yourself when you succeed? When you fail? When you are somewhere in between? Can you do the pose just to do the pose? Can your dialogue become agreeable? Is the pose quiet and steady? When you come out of the pose, say aloud, "I have tried something difficult, and I appreciate myself for trying."

When you feel comfortable in the pose, pick another one and repeat the process. Then try something that is difficult in another area of your life. Remember, the difficulty might never change, but your attitude and inner dialogue can.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- You can write down your internal dialogue right after the *My Slef Practice*. Keep your jottings brief. Do not try to interpret them. It will be interesting to note if or how the dialogue changes throughout time.
- If you find yourself forcing in asana (or in any other part of your life), ask yourself, Is this in the spirit of yoga or is this traumayama?
- If you notice that someone else is judging you, don't be quick to agree or to internalize the judgment. Think about what happened and agree only if his assessment aligns with yours.
- If you are going into a situation about which you feel anxious, tense, or afraid, say to yourself, I am perfect just as I am.

- Rather than approaching your yoga practice from an attitude of no pain, no gain, how about no pain, no pain?
- Do not criticize yourself, anyone else, or anything for one hour. If this feels like too much, commit to doing this for the next five minutes.

### Mantras for Daily Living

- I commit to just being my *slef*.
- No pain, no pain.
- Perfection is an illusion.
- I am attempting something difficult,  
and I appreciate myself for trying.
- I am perfect just as I am.
- Am I practicing yoga or traumayama?
- I am choosing to let go of my self-judgment now.

~

## Faith

*shraddha-virya-smriti-samadhi-prajna-purvaka itaresham*

Wholeness is preceded by faith, energy, mindfulness, union, and awareness.

—Yoga Sutra 1:20

As children, my brother and I waited on Christmas Eve with agonizing intensity for the arrival of Santa Claus. We had total belief not only in Santa's existence, but also that he would leave packages under our tree, even though we did not have a chimney. Unlike some kids who learned suddenly that there is no Santa Claus, we were lucky enough to gradually realize on our own that he is not a real person, but represents the spirit of giving that is Christmas.

Years later, when I had my own children, I began to think more philosophically about the power of belief, not only in relationship to Santa Claus, but also to the rest of my life. I noticed that when I used the word *belief*, my perception was controlled by a set of predetermined ideas about the situation or the person at hand. I came to see my beliefs as filters through which I interpreted everything around me. I began to pay attention to the times I used "belief." It seemed that when I did, I was thinking or talking about something that could not change. For example, I had certain beliefs about my physical abilities, especially in relationship to yoga poses. When I began practicing yoga, I would look at some of the more exotic poses with the belief that I could never do them.

After many years of diligent practice, I find that I can do them and have been able to side-step my so-called beliefs.

As I studied the *Yoga Sutra*, I noticed that Patanjali used the word *faith* rather than *belief*. Why? I decided to read one sutra at a time from different translations and let the meaning sink in throughout days or weeks. From this practice, I came to understand that belief is a preconception about the way reality should be; faith is the willingness to experience reality as it is, including the acceptance of the unknown. An interesting way to understand the difference is to use the words interchangeably in the same sentence: I believe in Santa Claus. I have faith in Santa Claus. Belief can impede spiritual unfoldment; faith is supremely necessary for it.

In verse twenty, book one, of the *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali states the importance of faith to spiritual practice: *shraddha-virya-smriti samadhi-prajna-purvaka itaresham*, or “Wholeness is preceded by faith, energy, mindfulness, union, and awareness.”<sup>1</sup> The practices of yoga, which include poses, breathing, meditation, and self-awareness techniques, are difficult in and of themselves. It is also difficult to practice consistently in the midst of our busy lives. In order to commit ourselves to practice, we must have faith that they will be fruitful and accomplish their intent, which is to help us turn toward ourselves and recognize our essential wholeness.

Faith is a recipe made up of part trust in ourselves, part experience of life working out, and part intuitive connection with the Divine. There is a knowingness about faith that instills assurance in the faithful. One day, while walking in the woods, my then three-year-old daughter asked me who had

made the trees. I responded that God had made them when he had made the world. She whirled around, hands on her hips, cocked her head to one side, and said in that supremely confident way so common to the very young, "Mommy, don't you know that God's a she, too?" Faced with such pure faith, I could do nothing but respond, "Of course."

Faith has an innocence and a certainty that I find an alluring quality in others and comforting one in myself. Faith is the quiet cousin of Courage. Faith is willing to put its foot out when there is no guarantee that there will be a step to support it. Without faith, we cannot make the most important decisions of life: when and if to become a parent, whether to move across the country to take a new job, when a relationship should be ended, and myriad others.

But in what are we to have faith? Basically, we are to have faith in just about everything. The mystery of the Universe and our existence in it demands faith in everything from the mundane to the spectacular: from the workers who built our house so that it will stay up over our heads during the night while we sleep to the cycling of the seasons. There is a comforting Japanese folk Zen saying that poignantly reminds us of the necessity of faith:

Everything  
Changes in this world  
But flowers will open  
Each spring  
Just as usual.<sup>2</sup>

For those practicing yoga, Patanjali states that we must first have faith in the efficacy of the practices of yoga. Unless

we have faith in the ability of these practices to facilitate self-transformation, we will be unable to continue them when the going gets difficult, boring, or demanding. Next, he suggests that we have faith in the teachers, both living and dead, who can share their experience with us through their living teachings and, more significantly, through their examples. Finally, faith in ourselves is the *most* important prerequisite to the study of yoga. Having faith in yourself honors that inner knowing that guides you unerringly home to the Divine.

### Faith Practice

A dear friend and teacher of yoga died recently. At her memorial service, it was said that during her life she “made the hard decisions with a soft heart.” To me, this is the essence of faith. When we have faith in ourselves and others, we are able to make difficult decisions when necessary. But at the same time, we do not lose the compassion and softness inside that connects us to others. When I lose faith in myself or in the Universe, my decisions are more likely to be made out of fear or anger. If I try to make life’s difficult decisions without connecting with my heart, I do not act in the best interests of all concerned. My faith is most apparent when I have the courage to act from my heart and the compassion to stay open. This is the ultimate expression of faith. I am reminded of another Japanese folk Zen saying:

Fish live in streams  
Birds nest in trees  
Human beings dwell  
In warm hearts.<sup>3</sup>

To keep the faith, recite both Japanese folk Zen sayings in this chapter. They will help to soothe you during trying times and strengthen your resolve in lighter moments.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- Using complete sentences, write down the things in which you believe. Rewrite the list, replacing *believe* with *faith*.
- Do you have a favorite nature spot in your garden or in the park near where you work? Visit it as often as you can. Notice how the plants, trees, and even the sky overhead changes with the seasons. Depending on where you live, the changes may be subtle. Nevertheless, all is as it should be.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- I have faith in myself.
- I have the courage to act from my heart and the compassion to stay open.
- I have faith in yoga.
- I am willing to make the hard decisions with a soft heart.
- I have faith in my willingness to have faith.
- Faith is the quiet cousin of Courage.

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## Perspective

*viveka-khyatir-aviplava hana-upayah*

The means of attaining cessation is the unceasing vision of discernment.

—Yoga Sutra 2:26

In Chapter Three, “Letting Go,” I described how my trying to see the holograms in a book actually prevented my discovering them. Although necessary in yoga practice and in facing life’s challenges, effort can actually also be an obstacle. In book two, verse twenty-six, of the *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali writes, *viveka-khyatir-aviplava hana-upayah*, or “The means of attaining cessation is the unceasing vision of discernment.”<sup>1</sup> His teaching implies two important things about effort. First, whatever we need to see is right in front of us. How often do we forget to look homeward for answers to the questions of life? As I discussed in Chapter One, “Spiritual Seeking,” many of the great teachers have told us that the answers can be found within us. Sadly, we often forget to trust the whisperings of our own hearts.

Second, Patanjali teaches that the power of discrimination helps us to better understand the nature of reality. Another way to describe this is to say that we can benefit from maintaining perspective about what is happening in life—right here, right now. Even though I finally could see the holograms, nothing about the holograms had changed. The holograms were there and I was there. However, I benefited from shifting my

perspective, first by relaxing and then by changing my visual focus. When we cling to one point of view, we limit our ability to see what is before us. Enlightenment, in fact, is nothing more and nothing less than a radical change of perspective.

Life will continually challenge us. If we pay attention, these challenges can broaden our perspective. One day, I walked into my son's room and asked him to pick up the things that cluttered the floor. I told him that he needed to create some order out of his chaos. Turning to look at me, he said dryly, "But, Mom, don't you know that order is just chaos repeated twice." Speechless, I quietly left the room. I certainly learned an interesting lesson that day in the power of perspective!

So much of what we call wisdom is really the clarity of perspective. When we step back and allow perspective to be part of our process of perception, we are using the discrimination of which Patanjali speaks. With our willingness to have perspective, not only do we increase our ability to distinguish the important from the unimportant, we also increase our capacity for compassion toward ourselves and others. By paying attention to how we lose perspective about little things, as I did in my escapade with the holograms, we can create a habit of opening our perspective to accommodate the more important things. We will be more likely to understand what is actually permanent and lasting and what is not.

A story illustrates the point. One day, a monk was walking by the banks of a lake and found an abandoned rowboat. He spent several months lovingly restoring it. Finally, the day came to launch it on the clear waters of the lake. As he began to row, he noticed that it was getting foggy, but he continued

nonetheless. Suddenly, swiftly cutting through the fog came another rowboat, which rammed into his boat. All of his work—the new wood and the paint job—was damaged. The monk got angry and strained to see who had done this thoughtless thing to his beautiful boat. And then he saw that the other boat was empty. His anger collapsed in the moment.

So much of our suffering is linked to effort and to reactions that are tied to an iron-clad perspective. When the monk took a good look at what had happened, he moved from reaction to having perspective. Perhaps Patanjali is trying to teach us that at least some of the annoying events and people in our lives are simply empty rowboats.

### **Perspective Practice**

Let me tell you another story. A villager lived in a small house with his wife, mother-in-law, six children, a cow, and some chickens. It was driving him crazy. So he went to the village rabbi and asked for help. The rabbi said that he could solve the problem: he advised the man to buy a goat. Overjoyed, the man immediately went out and bought a goat. Now he had a wife, a mother-in-law, six children, a cow, some chickens, and a goat. The house was even more chaotic than before. The villager returned to the rabbi and described the increased chaos. Once again the rabbi said that he could solve the problem. He told the man to sell the goat. Obediently, the villager went home and sold his goat. Suddenly, all he had in his small house were his wife, his mother-in-law, his six kids, a cow, and some chickens. Things were positively peaceful without that goat.

Borrowing from this story, I decided to make a Mantra for Daily Living this chapter's main practice. When you find yourself in a situation that could be made better if you were to step back to gain perspective, inhale gently and on your next exhalation, say to yourself, Sell the goat. Consider posting the mantra in places where it would be helpful to be reminded to soften your grip on your point of view: in your datebook, in your yoga practice space, inside a file folder that you must take into a meeting, near the telephone, or on the edge of your computer screen. Your life is as it is. How you feel about your life is up you.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- Make a two-column list. In one, list some things or people that you experience as difficult. In the other, write down simple ways to help you gain perspective. For example, you have an upcoming social event that you dread. In column one, write down all the reasons that you anticipate the difficulty, such as the reason for the gathering, some of the people who will be there, or something else. In column two, note what is important to you about the event and at least one thing that you like about each attendee. Although this exercise cannot guarantee smooth sailing, it can help you soften your dread and widen your perspective.
- As you practice yoga, notice your intention and your degree of effort. Are they helpful? Do you need to step back and reevaluate?

- Make a trade agreement with a friend. Wash his dishes and let him wash yours. Someone else's dishes are always more interesting.
- Lie on the bed with your child and "hang out." Just be there as she does her homework or reads a book. Imagine the stresses of being a kid today. Tell her that you appreciate the difficulties of her life.
- Cultivate gratitude. Write a list of all the things about your life or about someone you love for which you are grateful.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- The rowboat is empty.
- Soften and be merciful.
- Sell the goat.
- It won't be this way forever.
- The worse could happen; the best could happen.  
Life is usually somewhere in between.

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## Courage

*avinashi tu tad viddhi  
yena sarvam idam tatam  
vinasham avyayasyasya  
na kashcit kartum arhati*

Yet, know as indestructable that by which this whole world is spread out. No one is able to accomplish the destruction of that which is immutable.

—*Bhagavad Gita* 2:17

I find it interesting that we believe that both love and courage reside within the heart. I am reminded of the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz* who discovered that the path to courage was through the heart, and of how we tell people who are afraid to “take heart.” I think that, after the ability to love one’s self and others, courage is the second most important quality to cultivate in life. I have been taught repeatedly the importance of true courage, which I have come to see as equal parts knowing what is possible for me and understanding my interdependence with the world around me.

Each summer, I visit the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, in Carmel Valley, California, where I teach the yoga portion of a workshop that integrates the disciplines of Zen and yoga. My family likes to accompany me, and my children spend their days in nature. One year, when they were still fairly young, they hiked to the rapids, an old-fashioned swimming hole where there were large boulders from which to jump into dark, cool waters, far from the dry heat of the Tassajara summer.

My daughter was five and very determined never to be left out when her two older brothers plunged ahead in life. After the boys jumped off the largest rock, she climbed up and jumped, too. When asked where she got the courage when even adults found it daunting to jump off that rock, she replied, "I have a girl's courage." "What is that?", I asked. "Brave, but not foolish," came her reply. I intend no disparagement to boys or men by telling this story. However, I guess that she had seen her brothers do other things that she considered foolish. She saw the difference between doing something foolish just to appear brave and doing something that actually required courage. This is, of course, a crucial distinction.

In yoga classes, there are times when you are challenged by the teacher to try something that, either for physical or for emotional reasons, is frightening. The challenge may be what the teacher thinks you need, and to meet it, you must call upon your courage. But how do you choose action? How do you differentiate between taking care of yourself and your need to overcome resistance or fear? One way is to take an inventory of where you are in the moment: What is possible for me? What is in my heart? Do I want to do this? Is it appropriate for me? Do I trust this teacher in this situation? Do I need more help than what is being offered? Do I understand that I am not alone and can ask for help? Whatever you decide, know that courage is not forcing yourself to do something because you want to be accepted, or don't want to look like a coward or be embarrassed. You express foolishness when you simply acquiesce, unwilling or unable to find your voice to object or decline.



You can strengthen your courage muscle by acknowledging to yourself how many times a day you choose to act from true courage.

In book two, verse seventeen, the *Bhagavad Gita* states, *avinashi tu tad viddhi / yena sarvam idam tatam / vinasham avyayasyasya / na kashcit kartum arhati*, or “Yet, know as indestructable that by which this whole world is spread out. No one is able to accomplish the destruction of that which is immutable.”<sup>1</sup> Lord Krishna tells the hero Arjuna, metaphorically speaking, that there is no reason for him to cower under the bed, hiding from life and duty. He assures Arjuna that all is pervaded by Spirit and there is nothing to fear. Krishna wants Arjuna to forge ahead, trusting in his oneness with God. The *Bhagavad Gita* describes this connection as “immutable.”

I resonate with this teaching because those times when I have been the most afraid were when I felt disconnected from God, from Spirit, from the Universe, from family and friends, and, most important, from my own heart. Courage cannot exist in isolation. Just as a flower needs sun, air, soil, and water to bloom, your courage depends on your interdependence with people and things. You must contemplate deeply to understand that when you do what is possible, you are not in a free fall, but are cradled by your interdependence with the world around you. For example, you may decide to marry or to have a child, quit a job, risk an investment, explore your emotional past, or sign up to go back to college after many years' absence. Your work is to distinguish what is important enough to require your commitment and what is not worthy of

your courage. You can rest assured that when you act from true courage, the people, the tools, and your own inner knowing needed for the heroine's journey will be available to you.

### Courage Practice

Many times I think that I lack courage because I feel that I must accomplish a difficult task without feeling afraid. The most important thing to know about courage is that it cradles your action *even though* you are afraid. To understand your relationship with courage, pick a yoga pose that you find somewhat frightening, but one that you are physically able to do. For many, this may be an inversion, such as Handstand (*Adho Mukha Vrksasana*) done at the wall.

Practice this pose every day, but begin slowly. How long you hold the pose is not important. On the first day, simply find a place in your house where you can practice. On day two, go to your practice area and work with the beginning of the basic variation of Handstand. Sit on the floor with your feet touching the baseboard. Put your hands by the sides of your hips. This is where your hands will be when you practice the variation. Next, turn around and position your hands at that place on the floor and kneel down. Lift your knees slightly and then lift *only* one foot and place it on the wall. Allow your hands to bear some of your body weight.

The next day, repeat day two, and add a little more weight. Repeat this for as many days as you need to until you are able to lift first one leg, and then the other. In the final position of this variation, your body should be in the shape of an L, with your feet on the wall and your hands on the floor.

As you work with the pose, notice when fear arises and when your courage helps you. Notice, too, when you feel ready to reach out for help from a qualified yoga teacher to work on full Handstand at the wall.

Keep up the rhythm of your practice. Remember, the point is not to do something just because it is scary. The point is to choose to do what is possible in the face of fear. That choice defines courage. And with it comes a sense of freedom.

### **Other Practice Suggestions**

- Pick one person and, when appropriate, tell her something that you have long wanted or needed to say to her. Do this with love and compassion. Listen to her response in the same spirit.
- Remind yourself about how much courage it takes just to live in today's world. Spend a quiet moment in active appreciation of your courage.
- Refuse to tell a lie, even a small one, today. Don't agree when you don't. Remember to speak from love and to listen with compassion.

### **Mantras for Daily Living**

- I will do what is possible.
  - My courage is an expression of my love.
  - Courage is the willingness to act in the face of the unknown.
  - Living fully in each moment is a radical form of courage.
  - Letting go of what I cannot change celebrates my courage.
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