

Intentional Yoga...on and off the mat

By Marcia Shantipriya Goldberg

Beneath our ego desires and actions are deeper intentions. The willful practice of yoga makes these intentions conscious and enables us to create thought forms that both support our connection to Spirit and attract what we want into our life.

Intention is the thread that forms a necklace on which the pearls of our life experiences are strung. The experiences you receive on the yoga mat and in daily life are determined by your intentions. When you perform an asana or move through the interactions, decisions, and turning points of life without intention—you receive haphazard experiences. When you approach life with clear intention, you increase the possibility of receiving that which will fulfill your deepest longings and bring your unique gifts into the world.

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When you hold an intention you direct your attention to that which you want to manifest in your life. You receive ongoing guidance from Spirit about where to continue to place your attention so that your divinity may be experienced and expressed. Conscious intention places free will at the service of Spirit. It gives us true choice and influences results.

Creating clear intention begins with coming into stillness. Then ask, “What do I want to experience? What is the experience that I yearn for and want to increase in my life? You may want to experience relaxation, joy, abundance, strength, humor, peace, receptivity, or the presence of God. Once you know what you want to experience and are committed to receiving it, you have an intention. The next step is to open to receive what you want to experience through awareness and committed action—and to be willing to receive *all* experiences that come.

Intentional yoga can be practiced on the yoga mat and in daily life. I have found these specific exercises to be helpful and I invite you to try them.

Practice # 1:

Begin your practice by becoming aware of what has brought you to the mat—*what is the soul seeking through it?* When you have chosen an intention for your practice, for example peace, union, inner stillness, connection to prana, or compassion, choose a specific focus to support it. Your focus might be on learning how to do the posture, distinguishing between messages of mind and body as you explore when to release a posture, adjusting within a posture, or surrendering willful control of the mind in posture flow. Throughout your practice remain aware of your intention and focus. Imagine yourself in this flow of experience:

“Today my intention is connection. I step onto the yoga mat. I stand for a few moments, hands pressed lightly together, eyes closed. My awareness goes to the breath. I feel its steady rhythm: in, out. I let the breath take me inside to a place of physical sensation where my mind is quiet. I am going home to myself. I know the moves of the Sun Salutation, but simply performing them is not enough. They are the vehicles for the expression of my soul and I want to be present, fully there, as the receiver of the experience. My specific focus is to find the point of stillness in the holding of each posture. Before I even begin to move, I connect—I scan my body, seeking connection where it lies: the places where my fingers touch, my feet against the carpet, the air filling my lung. In this moment of holding the ready position I look within my body for places of stillness. I scan my belly and chest looking for stillness beneath the moving breath.”

Practice # 2:

Hold an intention to deeply nurture yourself. Come into a position on the floor that feels nurturing. Remain there until you begin to feel the urge to move. Notice if this urge comes from your thinking mind or a physical sensation in the body—that is your focus. Wait for the physical sensations that signal your body’s desire to adjust. Then let your body move and adjust to deepen the experience of nurturance. Open to receive nurturance from this new position. Continuing to be with the intention for self-nurturance, spend the next 15 minutes listening and responding to the messages of the body. Notice any thoughts in the mind and simply watch them as a loving observer.

Once you become familiar with the experience of setting an intention and letting the actions come from the signals of prana on the yoga mat, it becomes easier to apply this to daily life.

Practice # 3:

Identify a quality that you would like to develop more in your life. Go outside. Take some relaxed breaths. Connect with the earth, sky, whatever is around you. You may want to walk slowly or be still. Let yourself be guided by inner urges. Carry your intention with you, seeking its presence through connection with the elements of nature. Then take your intention into your life by opening to find it in daily activities. For example imagine your intention is abundance:

"I fee the abundance of sunlight on my skin and the sounds around me as I sit on the hillside. I notice that the field holds abundant blades of grass. The breeze stirs the trees and wind chime, creating nuances of sound I have never noticed before. There is more than enough air to breathe. It fills my lungs fully. The colors around me are abundant—shades of brown and green of early spring. This moment is an eternity—abundant time. As I touch, feel, see, hear, taste, smell, breathe, I am filled with the gifts the universe brings."

Intentional yoga is about listening to inner messages and creating a field from which we are able to draw on that which is already present.

I recently had an offer of a consulting job. I wasn't sure if I wanted to take it. Life seemed too complex. I felt afraid I would make the wrong decision. Instead of receiving everything as a blessing it felt like too much. My unconscious filter was fear. I was stringing everything that came to me on a thread of fear. I realized that I was so focused on fear that I was missing the opportunity to experience gratitude for the offer. I formed an intention to experience gratitude. I willfully opened to the possibility of gratitude for having this offer come to me. I looked for gratitude in the rain, the warmth of the wood stove, the delicious supper I prepared. When a fear thought entered my mind I experienced the fear and then remembered my intention and shifted my focus to gratitude for what was present. As I practiced receiving gratitude for all that was coming to me the fear dropped away and I had clarity. Nothing external had changed but my perception, the lens through which I viewed my life events. I had willfully changed the lens and aligned with Spirit coming through the intention of gratitude.

Intentional yoga is not about making something happen, resisting, or avoiding. It is about listening to inner messages and creating a field from which we are able to draw on that which is already present. The catalyst for forming intentions may be events in your daily life or you may choose to clarify your life mission and let that be the central point for intentions in all aspects of your life.

Intentional yoga enables you to identify with yourself in new ways. You come into “asana”, right position, right attitude, right relationship, with all components of the self, moving willfully toward the experience of union—of yoga, the ultimate intention.

Marcia Goldberg PCC, CPPC, is the founder of *Designing Your Destiny*, offering coaching and workshops for personal and professional evolution. For the past 30 years she has supported individuals, businesses and couples in creating in-depth change, claiming and living their vision, and developing the values, skills and attitudes for success in personal and professional life.

Marcia’s experience includes presentations at the Open Center in New York City, Esalen in Big Sur, California, and the Philadelphia Area Coaches Alliance in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. She is a past Executive and Spiritual Director of Kripalu Center in Sumneytown, PA. Marcia is currently an adjunct faculty member of Kripalu Center in Lenox, MA and a recognized Senior Kripalu Teacher. She co-created the Exploring Your Life Purpose curriculum which has been delivered throughout The United States and Canada and has also trained and mentored other coaches and seminar leaders.

Marcia brings many years of spiritual practice in yoga, meditation, and study of metaphysics to call forth the magnificence, clarity, and power of each individual in their quest for personal and spiritual development.

For information about personal coaching and workshops:

Web Site: www.designingyourdestiny.net

E-Mail: Marcia@designingyourdestiny.net

Phone: 215-529-4667.

This article is reprinted from the KYTA Bulletin Spring 2000