

The yoga tradition offers a profound formula for realizing your heartfelt desires—without asking you to change who you are. **By Kelly McGonigal**

Inspired Intention

The Nature of Sankalpa

ALMOST EVERY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION starts with two words: "I will." We summon our willpower and pledge to change not just what we do but who we are. We set goals and imagine how happy we will be when we get what we want.

But if there's one thing yoga teaches us, it's that there's a world of difference between "I will" and "Thy will." Most New Year's resolutions spring from the misguided desires of the ego, senses, and conditioning. They almost always fail

because they start from the assumption that who you are is not good enough, and reinforce the mistaken belief that your happiness depends on acquiring what you want.

The yoga tradition offers a refreshing alternative to the New Year's resolution: the practice of *sankalpa*, or resolve. A *sankalpa* practice starts from the radical premise that you already are who you need to be to fulfill your life's *dharma*. All you need to do is focus your mind, connect to your most heartfelt desires, and channel the divine energy within.

Beyond Resolutions

Rod Stryker, founder of ParaYoga, explains that the chief architect of life is the mind. To create the life we are meant to live, we must draw the mind again and again to our *dharma*, our deepest intentions, and the qualities of the Divine within.

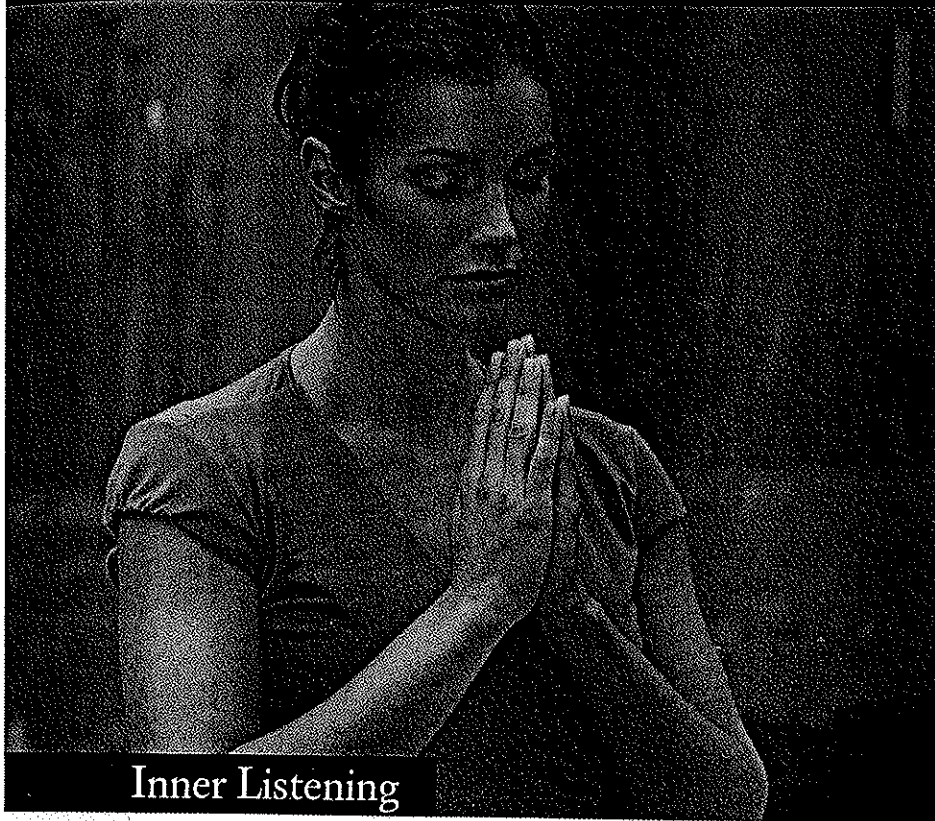
A *sankalpa* is a statement that does this for us. Stryker explains that *kalpa* means vow, or "the rule to be followed above all other rules." *San*, he says, refers to a connection with the highest truth. *Sankalpa*, then, is a vow and commitment we make to support our highest truth. "By definition, a *sankalpa* should honor the deeper meaning of our life. A *sankalpa* speaks to the larger arc of our lives, our

dharma—our overriding purpose for being here." The *sankalpa* becomes a statement you can call upon to remind you of your true nature and guide your choices.

While the typical New Year's resolution is abandoned within weeks, if not days, as enthusiasm and willpower run out, a *sankalpa* requires none of the ego-driven willpower we typically summon to make changes. According to Richard Miller, PhD, a clinical psychologist and teacher in the Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir nondual traditions, a *sankalpa* arrives with everything needed to fully realize it. This includes *iccha* (tremendous will and energy), *kriya* (action), and *jnana* (the wisdom of how to deliver that action). "These are all aspects of the Divine, and they live within us. When the true *sankalpa* comes in, we awaken these three qualities of the Divine," Miller says. "You don't have to ask where you'll find the will to do it. The energy and will is already there. The *sankalpa* informs us of the action we're willing to take into the world."

Two Types of Resolve

A *sankalpa* can take two forms. The first is what Miller calls "the heartfelt desire," a statement that reflects your true nature. This type of *sankalpa* is



Inner Listening

To discover your heartfelt desire, reflect on or write about the following four questions. Before you dive into self-inquiry, spend a few minutes in quiet meditation. Let the mind settle and become spacious. Cultivate an attitude of listening, and welcome whatever feelings, images, and thoughts might arise in response to these questions.

- **What is something I really want in my life?**
How do you think having it will make you feel? Looking back over the course of your life, has some form of this desire always been present?
- **What is the most important goal in my life right now?**
What have you been working toward? What desire is behind that goal?
- **What should I be devoting my energy and resources to?**
At this stage of your life, what direction do you find yourself being pulled toward? What stands out as the biggest opportunity or responsibility in your life?
- **What is my biggest dream for myself and my life?**
Is there a dream so big, a vision so bold for your life that you wonder if it is possible? Is there a deeper longing that feels a bit risky to the conditioned mind, and makes you feel vulnerable, open, and tender?

To translate this desire into a specific intention, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What actions can I commit to that are consistent with this heartfelt desire?**
- **What needs to happen in the next 6 to 18 months to move me forward on my path? What is the first step in this direction?**

far more all-encompassing than a New Year's resolution, and requires no change or action. It is literally and simply a statement of who you are, such as "I am already whole, and already healed," or "I am peace itself." According to Miller, it doesn't come from the intellectual mind. "The resolve comes from deep within us, directly out of the mystery of who we ultimately are. It then informs our mind of a particular direction that we need to take, or are taking in our life."

A sankalpa can also take a second form—that of a specific intention or goal. Brenna Geehan, a certified ParaYoga instructor in the San Francisco Bay Area, explains, "When you discover your purpose, not everything happens all at once. To live your soul's mission, you need to reach milestones." Setting specific intentions can help you align your moment-to-moment choices with your heartfelt desire. Geehan suggests looking forward into the next year and asking yourself what specific things need to happen to move you forward on your path. Your specific sankalpa will describe what you need to do, and where you need to direct your energy, to make progress on your larger life goals.

Discovering Your Sankalpa

Discovering your sankalpa is a process of listening. Your heartfelt desire is already present, waiting to be seen, heard, and felt. It's not something you need to make up, and the mind doesn't have to go wildly searching for it. (See sidebar for practice.)

Miller describes three stages of the listening process delineated in the Vedanta tradition. The first, *sravana*, is the willingness to hear the message of the heartfelt desire. It can take courage to listen to the heart, and a quiet, settled mind—one cultivated through meditation—will best be able to hear this innermost call. The second state, *manana*, is the act of turning to and welcoming the messenger in. When you hear the call, you must be willing to sit with it, feel it, and deeply reflect on it. The final stage, *nididhyasana*, is

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the willingness to do what the heartfelt desire requires of you. "It will call you into action, into the world," says Miller. "You must be willing to respond."

What if you sit down to listen, and don't hear anything in response? Or what if the answers you hear—new car, new job, better relationship—sound more like the endless desires of your ego, senses, and conditioned mind than like the wisdom of your heart?

Anne Douglas, a yoga therapist in Banff, Alberta, specializes in navigating her students through the sometimes difficult process of answering the question, "What do I really want?" She encourages students to simply start where they are. Douglas has found that any goal can be an entry point, including a typical New Year's resolution. "Even a desire that might be interpreted as simple or shallow can lead you to the heart's desire. It might arise out of conditioning, but if you trust the practice and keep following the heart's desire, it will take you to the essence of your being."

To get to that deeper yearning, work with whatever goal arises, but also ask yourself what's underneath it. For example, one of the most common goals Douglas hears in our culture is, "I want to get fit" or "I want to lose weight." When working with her students, she asks them to imagine how life will be, and how they think they will feel, as a result of losing weight and getting in shape. Is it a sense of self-love, physical well-being, or freedom? What is the feeling they are striving for? What is the longing in the heart that is pointing them in this direction?

Another common intention is to quit something, such as smoking, shopping, or eating meat. To investigate the heartfelt desire behind this kind of intention, ask yourself what desire that behavior is currently trying to satisfy. Are you seeking peace of mind, freedom from pain, or the feeling of being accepted? "See if you can find a deeper hunger, a longing that's asking to be nourished," Douglas encourages. That hunger may point you

toward what the heart really yearns for. "If someone starts with, 'I want to quit smoking,' as they work with it, they'll start to feel a deeper desire, such as, 'I want to take care of my body.' Even further down the road, the sankalpa might become, 'I love my body,' or even 'I am love itself.' It's an evolution, but it still has that feeling of the initial intention to quit smoking."

Stating the Sankalpa

It's natural to identify a desire as "I want" and an intention as "I will" or "I won't." But these phrases lack the truth of the commitment that comes from heartfelt desire and connection to one's dharma. "A sankalpa isn't a petition or a prayer," Miller says, "It is a statement of deeply held fact, and a vow that is true in the present moment."

For this reason, your sankalpa—both the heartfelt desire and the specific intention—should be stated in the present tense. For example, rather than saying, "I want to be more compassionate," your sankalpa might be, "Compassion is my true nature" or "I am compassion itself." Rather than setting the intention, "I will not eat meat," your specific sankalpa might be, "With compassion for my body and for other beings, I eat a vegetarian diet." Stating your sankalpa in present tense acknowledges the tremendous will, energy, and truth that arrive with the discovery of your heartfelt desire. It also reminds you that whatever is required of you is already within you.

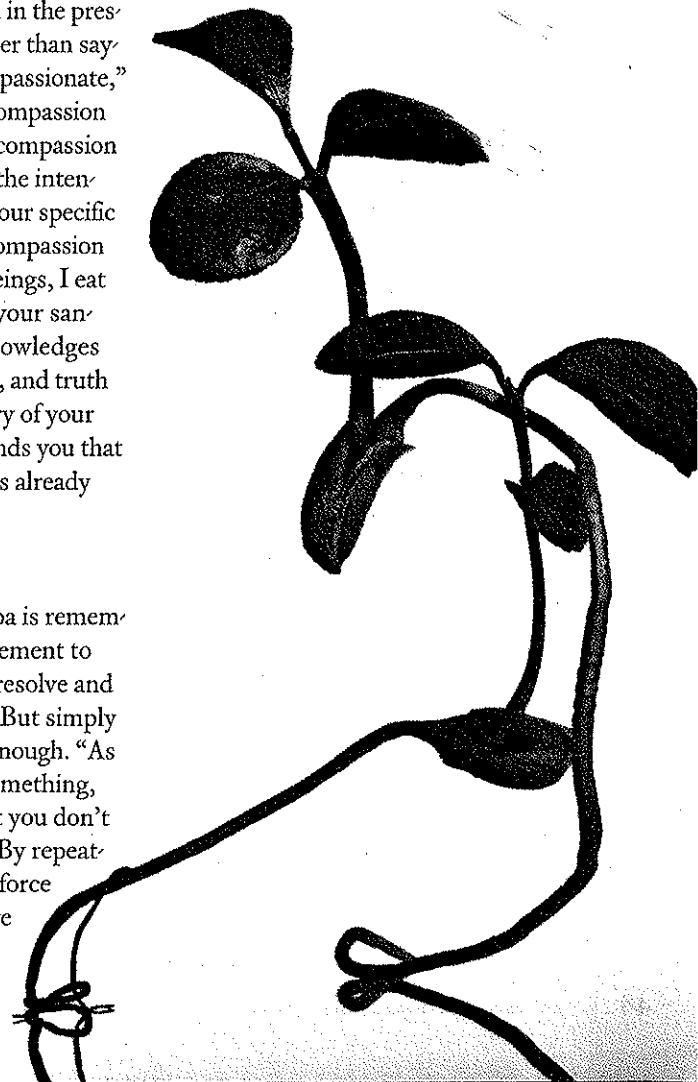
Planting the Seed

The core practice of sankalpa is remembering. By bringing the statement to mind, you strengthen your resolve and honor your heartfelt desire. But simply reciting the sankalpa is not enough. "As soon as you say you want something, a part of you recognizes that you don't have it," Stryker explains. "By repeating what you want, you reinforce the belief that you don't have

it." When the unconscious mind operates from a place of lack or perceived inadequacy, the energy that supports your resolve is weakened.

Stryker points to the *Tripura Rahasya*, a tantric text which teaches that the quality of the mind reciting the sankalpa determines its effect. To fully realize your resolve, the mind must shift from dualistic thinking to nondual awareness. This is why meditation is the most fertile ground for sankalpa practice. It returns the mind to a state of present-moment wholeness. "The longer we are able to effortlessly rest in that place of oneness, the more rapidly we are able to fulfill our sankalpa," explains Stryker. "The mind becomes a more powerful agent to help us fulfill our intentions."

The most supportive state of mind for remembering your sankalpa is the direct experience that you are already open, timeless, and perfect—



Yoga Nidra

The following yoga nidra practice is adapted from the teachings of Richard Miller, PhD, author of Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga. Use this practice to strengthen your resolve and awaken to your true nature.

Set the stage for yoga nidra by choosing a quiet place to practice. Come into a comfortable and relaxed position, such as shavasana (corpse pose). You can also practice yoga nidra in an upright seated position or supported restorative yoga pose.

Intention. Begin by setting the intention to give this practice your wholehearted attention and to stay awake and aware rather than drift into identification with a dream state. You may experience dream-like phenomena, but it is possible to maintain a witness awareness throughout such states.

Inner resource of pure being. Your inner resource is the source of peace and happiness that exists within you and can't truly be disturbed. Spend a few moments connecting to the sense of fullness and peace that exists in this moment.

Heartfelt desire. Welcome your sankalpa, the full heartfelt desire, into your conscious awareness. State it in words, and allow yourself to feel its resonance in your body.

Body sensing. Begin to rotate your attention around the body. Start from the sense organs of the mouth, nose, ears, and eyes, and work your way down the arms, hands, trunk, hips, legs, and feet. You don't need to dwell for long on any given part of the body; allow your attention to linger briefly at each location, and then move on to the next. Notice any sensations that are present, and notice who is noticing the sensations.

Breath and energy sensing. Now bring your attention to your breath. Notice how it feels to breathe in and breathe out. Sense the flow of the breath in and out of your body. Notice the sensations of energy flowing in the body as you breathe. Notice any other flows of energy present, and experience the full energy body.

Embody the heartfelt desire. Bring your sankalpa back to mind, but this time, really bring it into your body and sensations. When you are fully connected to the desire, how does it feel in your body? Are there images, sounds, or smells that can express and support your intention? From this feeling of embodying the heartfelt desire, ask yourself what it would be like to live in the full awareness and strength of the desire. How would you act in the world? If there are specific actions you would like to take, see yourself and feel yourself taking those actions.

You can repeat this cycle several times, cycling between the state of pure being, stating your sankalpa, sensing the body, and bringing the sankalpa into the body and senses. With each cycle, the mind becomes better able to rest in awareness, and you can spend a little more time in each stage. Finish the practice by resting in the knowledge of the truth of your heartfelt desire.

what nondualism describes as the state of pure being. "If that's not in place, ego gets involved," Miller says. "You will come at the intention from a place of 'there's something wrong with me that I need to fix.' You must connect to the quality of being that is already complete and whole."

One of the most powerful practices for finding this state and planting the seed of sankalpa is *yoga nidra* (see sidebar for practice). While *nidra* means "sleep," it is actually a process of awakening to your true nature. Yoga nidra systematically relaxes the body and mind and guides you into deep awareness. You are aware and awake, but you experience a disidentification from the body and mind. In this way, the confusion between *prakriti* and *purusha* dissolves, and you come to rest in the peace, wisdom, and love of your true nature. Anne Douglas explains, "In yoga nidra, we discover a profound level of openness. Our self-imposed limitations dissolve, and we are pure being." When you recall your sankalpa in the waking state, it might trigger doubts or the ego's striving. "When you recall your sankalpa in yoga nidra, the heartfelt desire arrives as a felt sense in the body-mind. It is absolutely alive and true in that moment."

Nourishing Your Resolve

Once you have identified and planted the seed of your sankalpa, you can begin the process of strengthening *sankalpa shakti*, the energy to take the action required by your resolve. According to Geehan, every choice you make either supports or undermines your resolve. This is true even for the decisions that don't seem directly related to your specific intention. "Let's say you're aware that sugar disrupts your energy and sleep. But time and time again, you 'forget' this awareness and eat sweets anyway. Each time you do this, you reinforce the part of you that says 'screw it' to awareness and intention. You're giving power to the part of you that goes against your consciousness."

On the other hand, every conscious choice you make is an opportunity to strengthen sankalpa shakti. This is the basis for a ParaYoga practice called “the departure point.” The instructions are simple: pick something nonconstructive that you do on a regular basis and commit to not doing it for 40 days. Biting your nails, drinking coffee, watching television—it doesn’t matter what you choose, as long as it’s habitual. It could be related to your sankalpa, but it doesn’t have to be.

This might sound a lot like the typical New Year’s resolution, but the departure point practice isn’t ultimately

moment.” Once you’re fully in that feeling, imagine not giving in to the habit. Pull up the power of your sankalpa, and let yourself feel the heartfelt desire in your whole body. “Then go back to remembering the feeling of compulsion. Surf back and forth, making the feeling of the heartfelt desire stronger each time.”

You can apply the same approach not just to the behavior you choose for the departure point practice but for all of your choices. Miller advises a daily review of your actions from the perspective of your resolve. For example, let’s say that your heartfelt desire is, “I am filled with divine compassion,” and your

would that have felt like? See yourself in action and feel it in your body. Envision this response until it feels as if you had actually done it. According to Douglas, this practice “helps dissolve the conditioning that keeps us from our dharma and from awakening to our true nature.”

Being and Becoming

When you first begin to work with sankalpa, the practice can seem full of contradictions. You start by identifying what you want, but the only way to realize it is to acknowledge that you already are it, and already have it. You set specific goals, and you commit to breaking

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about the habit you’re trying to break. When you come to that moment of impulse, instead of following your usual instinct, bring your sankalpa to mind. In this way, the habit becomes a reminder that points you back to your resolve.

In the space between the impulse to act and reciting your sankalpa, it’s important to pause and invite the mind to settle into a state of oneness. Enjoy a few mindful breaths, and find the pause between the breaths. “Take a moment to remember your true self-nature. In that state—a place of wholeness and unity, not a place of confusion or lack or even hope—remember your sankalpa,” Stryker says. This is the key to the departure point practice. “The sankalpa is not being reintroduced to a mind that thinks it doesn’t have what you think you want to have. It empowers the sankalpa in a completely different way.”

Even instances when you forget your intention can be transformed into support for your sankalpa. Anne Douglas uses the memory of these missed opportunities to prepare students for future choices. “Go back in time to a point where you lost it. Go back to that sensory feeling of compulsion, reimagine it, and recreate the

specific sankalpa is “In every encounter, I treat myself and others with kindness.” Looking back over your day, ask yourself: How was I unkind, mean-spirited, or hard-hearted? Conduct this review not with harsh self-criticism but with a sincere interest in seeing how it happened. What was the situation? What were your thoughts? How did it feel? What did you say and do? How did that feel?

Miller doesn’t refer to these missteps as failures, but simply “moving away from yourself.” The momentary lack of compassion isn’t who you are. “The sankalpa really describes who we are and how we move in the world when we’re in harmony with ourselves.” Life just happens to be the process of learning how to align with that true nature, which means we occasionally lose our way.

Once you see how you moved away from yourself, imagine how you could have responded. What might you have thought, said, and done that would be more consistent with your resolve? What

habits. But at every opportunity to act in line with these goals, you must first acknowledge that you are already perfect and whole.

According to Rod Stryker, this apparent contradiction is the essence of both sankalpa practice and nondual teachings. “It all goes back to this idea that each of us is both being and becoming. There’s the part of us, *para atman*, that is transcendent, inherently one, and doesn’t need anything. We also have a *jiva atman*, that part of us that comes into life with a purpose and a destiny and is always becoming.” Stryker explains that to fulfill your dharma, you must find a way to integrate these two seemingly opposite aspects of being. “It’s vital for happiness that you walk both paths simultaneously. Direct your energy with intention, but be mindful that your nature is unchanged whether you achieve your goals or not. Live as contentedly as possible in between the goal and realizing the goal.” ■

❶) The *Shiva Sankalpa Sukta* is a powerful six-verse hymn from the *Rig Veda* that entreats the mind “to dwell on the auspicious will of the Divine,” and helps you cultivate conscious resolve in alignment with your dharma. Learn the *Shiva Sankalpa Sukta* at YogaInternational.com/shivasankalpa.