

## The Sankalpa<sup>1</sup> or Resolve in Yoga Nidra

discovering sankalpa and our obstacles to living it.

These are the teaching notes from our workshop of the same name. If you are interested in more information or in attending the workshop, please contact us at the addresses below.

### What is a sankalpa?

*'Anything can fail you in life, but not the sankalpa or resolve repeated at the beginning and end of Yoga Nidra.'* Swami Satyananda Saraswati

*'In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn, then the door is there and the key is in your hand. Nobody on earth can give you either the key or the door to open, except yourself.'* Krishnamurti - 'You are the world'

*'Where is your self now? Lay a hand on it on your physical body? How do you know that? What sense of self do you have there now, when alone, when with friends and when at work? How do you know that sense of self?' 'How has it changed over time and between situations? What are the enduring sensory qualities of your self? Dance that, sing it, draw it, write it, paint it, sculpt in - for in there is the seed of your sankalpa'* Ziji

The juicy, precise sankalpa is the *resolve, determination and good intention* that resonates in your core and aligns sublimely with your essence. It is fluid enough to insinuate itself through the semi-conscious patterns of self-sabotage, wounded self's objections and ego discontent. It is a *will power* that is flexible enough to account for changing circumstances as the sankalpa begins to manifest in your inner and outer world. Yet it is robust enough not to be diverted by the core negative beliefs that stand against it.

In our culture we are given praise for productivity and this may extend into our inner world of the sankalpa. Doing we use to excess and damaging to our self-esteem<sup>2</sup>. We are taught to expect results in a week not in lifetimes. Being is in the science of the sankalpa. It is part of the inner work of yoga practice. Our essence is already complete. We are the fruit of many lives.

A sankalpa can be used actively at the beginning of your day, planning your activities in accordance with it. At the end of the day you can kindly assess how you went and what you might do differently. This process makes the sankalpa vigorously involved in giving meaning to your life. A sankalpa can be for this life's purpose or for all of our lives' purpose. The latter would be a satsankalpa for the journey of the soul.

What does sankalpa mean? I have placed the translations of this Sanskrit word in italics within the paragraphs. I have avoided using the common translation as 'affirmation'. I find this mixes up the yogic culture, which gave rise to sankalpa, with those western psychology approaches to therapy and healing, which use affirmations. The former was born in a sub-culture of multi generational, life service to all beings, whilst the latter was born in a consumer culture of 'service to me'. There has been some cross-fertilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Sankalpa: (Sanskrit) "Will; purpose; determination." A solemn vow or declaration of purpose to perform any ritual observance. Most commonly, sankalpa names the mental and verbal preparation made by a temple priest as he begins rites of worship. During the sankalpa, he informs all three worlds what he is about to do. He recites the name of the Deity, and the present time and place according to precise astrological notations and announces the type of ritual he is about to perform. Once the sankalpa is made, he is bound to complete the ceremony." From [www.himalayanacademy.com/books/dws/lexicon/s.html](http://www.himalayanacademy.com/books/dws/lexicon/s.html)

<sup>2</sup> When the Dalai Llama first came to the west he was reported as being surprised at the low levels of self-esteem he found. Similarly, Mother Theresa was reported as observing the spiritual poverty in the west.

## Differences between Sankalpa and Affirmations

The sankalpa is more than the development of a *statement of will* for a limited therapeutic aim, such as 'I will be free of smoking in 6 months', or a positive, widening of that kind of intent such as 'I am free of addiction'. It is nearer the core of it, such as 'I am secure in myself' or 'my vulnerability is my strength'. Sankalpa aims under the addiction to what drives it, and beneath that driver as well, to what is eternal and unites us all in our *intent* for our evolution.

For example, part of the sankalpa I have been using for about 15 years, is that 'I am a pure channel for the healing power of the cosmos'. One consequence of that in my life has been that a lot of garbage came up after I began saying it within the practice of Yoga Nidra.

Now, you could argue that it was therapeutic to purify the crap out of me, but I didn't think so at the time. I was stupidly happy with my addictions and blissfully ignorant of the hurt my behaviour was causing others. The sankalpa has bigger goals than healing this particular life. It is to bring about alignment with the greatest good in the immortal self.

How about a person who avoids or denies their vulnerability, perhaps unaware of it and who always keeps out of the way of trouble. Just say they choose a *declaration of intent* such as 'I am clear and strong'? In my experience, that kind of life attitude is an accident waiting to happen and that person may not find the will for a sankalpa until some time after the accident. But just say, they had the awareness to come to one of our workshops and were gob smacked to discover that real people have accidents. Then they might just tweak their intention in the direction of a sankalpa by affirming 'I am clear, strong and open to whatever life brings me'. Just say they did one of our exercises below on sankalpa and experienced the beginnings of a 'no' such as 'open to life! only if it brings me what I want'. In witnessing that objection or condition on their intention, they might then begin to get alongside their fear. Then they might be okay to take 'my vulnerability is my strength' home.

Another example is a person who has a strong fear of their illness, fatigue or their pain and so chooses a *declaration of intent* such as 'I am well', 'I am full of energy' or 'I am pain free'. Into the subconscious mind that fear will be sent, along side their affirmation. To turn it into the direction of sankalpa it would need a statement, which both befriends the fear and allows even the illness, fatigue or pain to be an expression of wellbeing. Paradoxical? Contrary?

I am reminded of the book titles like 'love your disease it's keeping you alive', 'feel the fear and do it anyway' and 'death, the final stage of growth'. That hopefulness, embedded in a sankalpa, will then be sent alongside the *statement of will*. Getting alongside the fear will prevent the person opposing it. The aikido of sankalpa is to use the strength in the fear to aide rather than hinder. So in the examples above, a sankalpa might be 'I am alongside my fear in being well' or 'all in me is becoming well'. And then there is the layer beneath that of enduring spirit teaching through the illness, fatigue or pain, which might be expressed as 'I am a spirited woman' I am a spirited man'.

I have a box of affirmations on my desk. Any of them, like today's card 'I am patient and loving with my fearful thoughts', could make a fine sankalpa. However, I don't say it three times at the commencement and conclusion of Yoga Nidra. If I say it to myself at all, it's unlikely to be with the reverence and sincerity I use in Yoga Nidra. It is more likely to be with an evaluation such as, 'wow that's amazing, it's so right for today' or 'that doesn't fit'.

I look at the affirmation once, get a feeling about it and put it at the bottom of the pile, so that I have a fresh one next time I look. I don't even consider that I may have embodied objections, like a gut level no to the affirmation, just below the surface of my everyday awareness. These objections will make their presence known in the deep relaxation and concentration of Yoga Nidra but not in the flash card process.

My sankalpa stays at the top of a pile of one. I say it exactly the same way every time I practise Yoga Nidra. It has evolved over the years. Some people are tempted to use the sankalpa like I use the affirmation cards, with a different one each time and even a different one at the start and finish of Yoga Nidra, depending on what has come up for them during that day's practice. I know that this is

despite instructions to the contrary. It might signify that the person has not settled into the practice, doesn't know how to align themselves with their will or are unsure of their own core values and beliefs.

## How to honour the sankalpa waiting to be born

In circumstances where someone is rightly dissatisfied with a 'sankalpa' that changes every day, we have recommended 'It is okay not to know my sankalpa' or 'it's okay to take time inquiring inside for my sankalpa'. These are sankalpas about sankalpa. They affirm that you have one but may not be ready to hear it from the quiet, deep stillness of mind. When that suggestion doesn't fully satisfy you, try exercise 1 below. It is heading in the direction of giving voice to your core, essential self. It is a great exercise to do at any stage of satsankalpa – development of the will.

Most of us have to struggle to hear our own true sankalpa. We develop it or not, often in the practice of Yoga Nidra, without dialogue with our yoga teacher, without truly knowing our essence or the obstacles to its expression. It is difficult to know what the 'right' sankalpa might be. We might have had suggestions or given general examples in a class or discussed them.

I accept that even a messy, queer or crazy sankalpa will sometimes work its way through the mind better than a simple, tidy one. Students of chaos theory will not be surprised that for some people a fuzzy one can navigate the tangled tricks of their self-sabotage and through the obstacle course of personality, far better than a simple one.

One way to explore the sankalpa is to think and feel what is the direction in your life. What would give it meaning. Such as, 'I live to bring joy to myself and those around me' or 'I am love, I am light'. One person told me that meaning for them is in the sense of awe they experience seeing the sunrise, or when a shaft of light burst onto the road ahead. If you are unsure, think of other people's lives that inspire you. This can include what inspires you in your parents' lives.

Another way is to inquire into the unique qualities that we have. What are we growing inside ourselves? Each plant, even of the same species grows uniquely. We have distinct qualities intrinsic to our soul. Think of how others affirm you, they may have a clue.

We have designed the meditative exercises offered here to discover inner meaning in our lives. They will assist in developing that robust *declaration of intent* we call the Sankalpa. Our primary drive is the search for meaning.

## Exercises

### Preparation

These exercises will help to refine your thought further into the precise, juicy sankalpa. Exercise 1 develops a body sense of the resolve. We go into the positive sense of the resolve we are bringing to birth in our life. This sankalpa may well evolve over time, even over the time of doing these exercises, but start with at least a first approximation of your essence or the core issue with which you are working such as an addiction or a fear.

For instance you might sense you are developing a sankalpa that has 'something to do with peace'. It then can be shaped into a simple, clear, present time statement as if the desired outcome was already manifesting such as 'I am relaxed and at peace with myself'. Another example, something to do with isolation can be shaped into 'I am interdependent, connected to all and whole.' To help you find words for your essence try this exercise. The exercise will improve if it is taken off the page and spoken slow and gentle onto an audiotape and played back whilst you rest on the floor.

### Exercise 1 – body sensing

1. In a calm and quiet place in body and mind, bring back to life a moment in the past when you felt everything was right with you, aligned, simple and you were at one with the universe. When all felt well, at peace, when you felt clear, safe and strong.
2. Now, embody this feeling more deeply by breathing into it, expanding it with each in breath as you would in Yoga Nidra.
3. Where is the most interesting sensation or feeling in your body?
4. Bring full awareness to that part of the body. What words or images appear? Let them float up into clear feeling or appear across your visual screen, or come as a soft, truthful voice. Be kind and curious with whatever comes up and gently ask the feeling, the inner voice or the image, 'what is the positive essence of you?' Pause and witness for a moment as some words, images or feelings emerge in response to this. Just let it happen, don't interfere. Initially, all you may get back is a body sensation, a movement or a feeling. This might take some days or months to evolve into the full certainty of a word or a phrase. Whatever happens, make a mental note or draw a picture or make a gesture. Bring all this knowledge with you into 5. below.
5. Then come back to awareness of breath and say to yourself with sincerity and reverence 'I am' and allow whatever feeling, sensation, inner voice or image may fall into the space following 'I am..'. In many languages the name of God is formed from the verb 'be'. Tyllich describes God as 'the ground of all being'.
6. Invite the full effect of whatever your body/mind placed in the space after you affirmed 'I am' to begin floating down like a leaf through the still autumn air, or like a drop of colour spreading into the clear water that surrounds it. Surrender to this as the body and mind welcomes this essence of you.

## Exercise 2

### Preparation

This exercise works at a couple of levels to deepen and widen the truth of your sankalpa. It will improve as an exercise if you take it off the page and place the questions in the exercises onto an audiotape, with long pauses between and spoken in a soft, neutral voice. Maybe ask someone to speak them to you while you do the exercise, ideally your yoga teacher and in a yoga class.

Do whatever works for you to get into a calm, quiet frame of mind. The introverted state that is reached during asanas or in Yoga Nidra or with Antar Mouna, are excellent frames of mind for hearing these questions.

The idea is to hear these questions while holding your sankalpa in mind and wait for a response from the body/mind, without analysis or interference. The response may be a deepening sense of relaxation or tension, an image of a beach, a childhood dream, tingling in the fingers, a blank screen, silence – whatever comes is useful. Just take a note of it mentally, without judgment, or make a jotting or a quick drawing. Then let it go and listen to the next question, witness the response, take a note, and repeat the process for the each question. The process could take twenty minutes to complete.

### The Exercise 2

Whilst thinking of your sankalpa or a fuzzy beginning to it, allow each of these questions to rest quietly in your consciousness at the same time as you are holding your sankalpa in mind. Then, gently wait for an inner response to evolve over some minutes.

1. Does the sankalpa resonate with acceptance and consent in your guts?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO. TAKE A NOTE

2. Is it congruent with your beliefs, values and your being?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

3. Can its outcome be self-initiated and self maintained?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

4. What will you see, hear and feel as the sankalpa manifests?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

5. What will this development gain for you?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

6. Might the sankalpa evolve, if so in what direction?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

You may find that the full answer to some of these will take days to evolve. Sometimes the answers are not verbal or literal. They can be as way out as a heightened sense of smell or taste for something only vaguely connected to the sankalpa. They can come in a dream or within a doodle while you talk on the phone. Sometimes an advertising hoarding says it to you or you find yourself giving the very piece of advice you need to hear.

## Self-Sabotage

We give these exercises in the hope that they will deepen your experience of yourself, your communication with others and the effectiveness of your practice. The three steps in Exercise 3 are designed to bring the shadow side of your personality into the picture in a creative and nurturing way. We encourage you to find a way to care for this possibly forgotten or rejected part of your own soul. We can reject the 'good' and the 'bad' sides of our nature, the bright and the dark shadow.

It helps to be curious about the ways in which you generally sabotage your own best intentions. It can be more than just annoying when you get tripped up by some part of yourself lurking in the shadows. Especially behaviour or thoughts that only come out when you're tired, cornered or upset. They can be crystallized as a negative belief about yourself. A belief such as 'I can't be kind to others because they will perceive it as weakness' or 'it's bad to feel sad and angry'. Knowing that a core belief drives self-sabotage is liberating. It will turn a negative into a positive, and be understood as a gift from mind that when cared for and included, can guide you to a greater truth and intimacy with yourself.

Some core negative or unhelpful beliefs are: 'I am an idiot', 'I was never good enough', 'I am unlovable', 'I'm only acceptable when I'm a door mat' or 'I can either be financially successful or true to myself'. We are not born with these. They develop out of the actions or omissions of authority figures in the past and they are embedded in the dominant culture (especially the last example).

Whilst your sankalpa might be 'I am love', 'I am good and true to myself' or 'I am deeply happy and content', the power and prior authority of those core negative beliefs and the unrelenting mainstream message to the contrary, can conspire to make the inner working of sankalpa more difficult.

Another type of self-limiting belief is that drawn from the aftermath of trauma. Physical and emotional trauma, and other human rights violations, shatter previously secure and shared values and beliefs about safety and vulnerability. The result can be that 'I am not safe when I relax' or 'affirming myself is dangerous to me' or 'even thinking the truth will get me killed'. These beliefs may put a floor of basic distrust underneath the *resolution*, diverting its journey to the soul, as if there were a painful saboteur at work. This article and the exercises that follow are about finding your sankalpa and caring for its saboteur.

You might like to try getting to know your saboteur by writing her or him a letter and then writing or drawing back a response. You can try using your non-dominant hand for the saboteur. Support this process by asking for a dream about this process, as you begin to fall asleep. These invitations can result in an ongoing, fruitful exchange of ideas and the chance to re-negotiate the terms of your coexistence with the saboteur.

If you are unsure about the shadow side then consider how you are able to maintain contradictory beliefs simultaneously. For example, holding a belief that 'I love the world, and the world loves me' and simultaneously being scared when love comes close because it feels like an invasion of privacy or a threat of attachment or future loss. Exercise 3 guides a re-definition of love perhaps to include the protection of privacy or to dealing with the grief of attachment. This leads to acceptance of internal qualities where there may have been avoidance, both in your own life, in other relationships and in the world.

### Exercise 3

Continuing on from where you left the last exercise now let these questions rest gently in your mind as you hold the sankalpa in awareness.

1. What is the core negative belief against my sankalpa?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

2. How might you sabotage your resolve?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

3. How can you care for the saboteur and the core negative belief?

PAUSE A MINUTE OR SO & TAKE A NOTE

Consider your sankalpa in the light of your internal fears. Is there a way to address both light and shadow, the positive and negative in a loving way? The inclusion of both makes our sankalpa meaningful to us in the darkest times. It can also give us guidance and inspiration relating to the darkness in others. Go back through exercise 1 and 2 till you are satisfied.

### Questions on sankalpa and our answers

1. "Should I teach Sankalpa in my Yoga class for Eating Disorders? I'm concerned some might use it to resolve to become their ideal or perfect size, which is life threatening for a person with Anorexia."

It is in response to questions like this about high performance compulsions, which are self-injurious, that we wrote this article on the Sankalpa. There you will discover that in working with the sankalpa you have to both allow growth in the resolution to have, for example, 'a perfect body, only 38 kilos' and the desire that ultimately stands against it for example, 'I don't want to die'. Often one desire is approved of by the intellect, the other by the heart and body. The intellect may see the heart and body as saboteurs of the will.

In our workshops we show ways of including that disavowed part of ourselves, even of nurturing that place in us so that it may join in the light of yoga. Too often our unrecognised saboteur or shadow, sneaks up on us and undoes our resolutions just as they are about to be fulfilled. It is easy to hear the sense of that when the saboteur is potentially life saving (do I want to die?) and the resolve is life threatening, but not in every case is it so obvious. It takes kind, patient, self-inquiry in meditation to uncover both our true sankalpa and the core belief, which stands against it.

Kindness is not the main game in high performance compulsions ['pain is just another break though'] and so that too is a challenge. We cautiously recommend Tonglen as a way to enter the realm of kindness to oneself. It is also a challenging practice, but more likely to save a life than destroy it. Take care with these suggestions. They are not a quick fix. It takes years to build up the duality with the saboteur. It's like a partnership and one of the most intimate as it is life and death in many high performance, compulsive behaviors. The saboteur may run a mantra, like an audiotape humming in the background, such as 'I am no good'. That story also needs to unfold, be cared for and treated with compassion. Sometimes this will not happen in the absence of an external relationship of trust, congruent safety and a tough love containment of the powerful emotions bound up in that place.

### Response from the questioner to our answer:

Thank you for your answer to my question about Sankalpa and my teaching yoga to young women with eating disorders. It is a very loving and wise answer, which has brought up a number of issues for me, which also relate to your teachings of the weekend. At the weekend I realised that I had used

my sankalpa much more like the affirmation cards on the desk that you mention in your writing. Why? Because they were what rose to mind quickly and easily and I assumed them with an attitude of 'that'll do for now until I can figure out something better'.

An insight is unfolding that the 'affirmation card' allays the fear of having nothing, the thought 'but what if I haven't got one at the core of my being'. The 'affirmation card' is a holding pattern, which I now recognise, stops me from ever seeking something deeper. One of my reactions to reading your teachings on sankalpa was that it was far too long and complicated a process to find one's sankalpa. Now I am realising my mind's grasping for the quick and the immediate, and that a practice of loving patience is required.

Another one of my insights about sankalpa relates to my own experience of bulimia. When I had bulimia I made promises or 'affirmations' to myself almost daily—manifestations of will to control my eating and other perfectionisms I aspired to. These self-promises were invariably broken with the binge, and what gets internalised is 'I can't keep a promise to myself', 'I can't trust myself', 'I can't trust my body'. I think this experience has made me very wary of making 'affirmations' and I haven't yet distinguished between the sankalpa and the iron will of the eating disorder. So your comment about the intellect seeing the heart and body as saboteurs of the will resonates loudly for me, and that the duality with the saboteur is still there. The saboteur has something to do with my resistance to going deeper. I have had enough experience in yoga and therapy to draw up what I can only describe as a large 'mud map' depicting the big and the obvious. Now what is coming is the invitation to know the subtle.

My question about sankalpa and eating disorders just casually popped out one evening at yoga. I was not something that I had been pondering on, but now I am recognising the surfacing of deeply held issues. Teaching what I also need to learn is one of the great challenges and also enrichments of being 'the wounded healer', the yoga teacher.

2.' I want to hand this article out to my beginner yoga class, but without the question and answer above. I think it will frighten them and they will miss the value of the article.'

Some questions are also a statement. I think this one states 'your article is complicated, can I have one just for beginners without the heavy stuff'. We have since improved the article, but the question remains – is it suitable for beginners. At times, we can all feel like beginners in knowing our life's purpose, loving our inner self, walking our talk and wisely developing our will. One of our resources for dealing with the knowledge in an article like this is to approach it with a beginner's mind and just chuck out what doesn't make sense.

There isn't an easy recipe for getting a life – but as one investment advisor told me good advice is expensive, poor advice is more expensive. Poor advice could lead a beginner to the quick fix of affirmation cards. But can you trust a beginner to be left to understand the article?

In the tradition of mentoring in the west and guru/disciple in the east – there is an ongoing, reciprocal relationship between teacher and student. Both are also learners. A teacher who does not grow with their student will soon lose their allure, their spontaneity and the freshness of life will be absent from their teachings. Remember high school? The terminal teacher hands out sanitised formulae that don't apply to life as she is lived. You might as well go to the doctor for another prescription of antibiotics.

Perhaps the solution is to make sankalpa and this article your own, to bring it to life for your students and offer them this version as another's teacher's view of the topic.

I came to write this article after hearing Swami Satyananda many times over the last 20 years or so, telling me 'anything in life can fail you but not the sankalpa repeated at the beginning and end of yoga Nidra'. In effect, all of the above is my translation of what he said into my context and my life experience. I made it meaningful for me, but it may be of no use to any one else until they can make it their own.