

Gratitude

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Yoga to Cultivate Compassion, Gratitude and Joy Parts 1 & 2

While the asanas are a great place to start, adding other yogic tools may help deepen spiritual growth and well-being.

By Timothy McCall, M.D.

One reason yoga is a powerful means to build mental health is because its aim is higher than traditional psychology's. Psychology, like its counterpart modern medicine in the physical plane, tends to view mental health as the absence of negative states such as depression or anxiety. In contrast, yoga, as a holistic science, views health as representing a high level of physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. (Luckily, there is a movement afoot, led by such pioneers as psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, to bring more focus on what they are calling "positive psychology.")

Rather than simply help you feel less sad or anxious—which yoga can also do (see Yoga for Depression, [Parts I](#) and [II](#) and [Yoga for Anxiety and Panic Attacks](#), the practice can put you in touch with *sukha*, a deeper sense of calm or ease. Yoga teaches that joy, or *ananda*, lies deep inside each of us, and its various tools are simply a means to get at what's already there, so you can experience it fully. Yoga also addresses such issues as meaning, life purpose, and your connection to others and the world around you, which can have profound effects on happiness and health.

But beyond personal well-being, yoga seems to facilitate the development of qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, equanimity, and a desire to help others. Spiritually evolved beings seem to have boundless compassion for the suffering of others and a remarkable ability to forgive those who trespass against them (think of the Dalai Lama or Nelson Mandela). Just looking into the eyes of some yogis, you can sense their inner gratitude and joy. The question is, how do you get there (or closer to there)? And for [yoga teachers](#) and therapists, how can you help your students reach this state?

While the asanas are a great place to start—and almost everyone would benefit from including at least some asanas in their practice—I believe that combining the physical postures with other yogic tools is an even more effective way to grow spiritually. Tools as diverse as pranayama, [meditation](#), philosophical understanding, and selfless service (or [karma yoga](#)) help you grow in joy, compassion, and equanimity, working synergistically to deepen the effects.

The Breath

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The mind, according to yogic teachings, is the cause of most suffering. Yogis began systematically studying the mind, and the tricks it plays, thousands of years before the field of psychology was even invented. Probably the most important tool the ancients uncovered for taming the runaway mind was the breath. Simply slowing your breathing and making it smoother and more regular can relax the nervous system and, when the nervous system is relaxed, the mind often follows. In sutra I.34, [Patanjali](#) suggests that by focusing on the exhalation in particular, such spiritual qualities as cheerfulness, equanimity, and compassion can be developed.

People who are stressed, as well as those who are unhappy, angry, or worried about "getting theirs," tend to live in a state of physiological arousal. Their sympathetic nervous systems ("fight or flight") may be activated most of the time. Slow, regular breathing tends to shift the balance to the more relaxing and restorative parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which all by itself can help people tap into the joy that lies at your core. Prolonging the exhalation relative to the inhalation can be an even more powerful way to increase PNS dominance.

Suggest students with less experience gradually lengthen their exhalations, slowly working toward a 1:2 ratio, with the exhalation twice as long as the inhalation. For those who are ready for it, add a brief retention after the exhalation to deepen the effects. Be cautious, though: If you push [pranayama](#) farther or more quickly than you should, it can agitate the nervous system, potentially exacerbating precisely what you are trying to help.

Warn your students that although [pranayama](#) techniques may not look like much, they can do serious damage to the nervous system and to the psyche when they are improperly applied. Particularly dangerous are fancy ratio breathing and prolonged breath retention—the very tools that may be most intriguing to enthusiastic new students. Any straining, air hunger, or gasping during the practice signals they are pushing things too far. Likewise, restlessness, agitation, or difficulty sleeping in the hours or days after practicing are warning signs of overaggressiveness. When practiced with patience and care, however, yogic breathing can be a doorway to peace of mind and personal transformation.

In Part II, we'll discuss a variety of other yogic tools to foster compassion, gratitude, and joy, starting with meditation.

Part II—Growth of these qualities is a sure sign that your students are on the right path in their spiritual practice.

By Timothy McCall, M.D.

In [Part I](#), we discussed how breath work can help facilitate becoming more joyful and compassionate. In this column, we'll explore a variety of other yogic tools—from [meditation](#) to chanting to figuring out your life's purpose—that are likely to be synergistic in their benefits.

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Meditation

If you believe the ancient yogis, meditation is the key to spiritual transformation. In the quiet that can result from a sustained meditation practice, a sense of connection to others naturally unfolds. Although we tend to see ourselves as discrete entities separate from the surrounding world, through the practice we come to understand that those boundaries are indistinct, that everything is densely interwoven, and that we are all part of some greater, unified whole.

The Dalai Lama said that "through compassion you find that all human beings are just like you." It can work the other way, too: by realizing through your meditation practice that others are just like you, part of the same thing that you're part of, you develop compassion. Indeed, the growth in qualities like compassion and equanimity is a sure sign you're on the right path in your practice.

Keep in mind that meditation, like the rest of yoga, is strong but slow medicine. Your students may not feel like they're getting much out of the practice early on, and they may be frustrated by their perceived lack of progress or their inability to slow their inner verbal parade. Encourage them to hang in there, and mention that scientific studies suggest that the health and psychological benefits of meditation accrue even to those who don't feel like they do it well.

One trick to ease your students into a regular sitting practice is to have them try a few minutes—or even just a few cycles—of alternate-nostril breathing, [nadi shodhana](#), immediately before they [meditate](#). They may discover that doing so helps calm the mind and makes the practice easier and more enjoyable. Research suggests that alternate-nostril breathing helps balance the activation of the two hemispheres of the brain, and this may be why it's a particularly powerful prelude to meditation.

Other Yogic Tools

Service ([karma yoga](#)) can be a wonderful tool for building compassion and gratitude. When you work with others in need, your own problems may not seem so severe. Encourage your students to consider volunteering in a soup kitchen or for a community group, or perhaps helping elderly neighbors who need assistance with errands. As with forgiveness (another spiritual quality that yoga encourages), it is the giver, not the recipient, who tends to benefit the most from service.

Gratitude can be cultivated by thinking about all the people who have helped you in your life: those who cared for you, clothed you, educated you, cooked for you. Think of the statistical miracle that you were even born. In working with students who are depressed, my teacher Patricia Walden suggests that they write down and review all they have to be grateful for, every night before bed. Count your blessings every day, she says.

Bhakti yoga—prayer, chanting mantras, and devotional singing (be it gospel or kirtan)—can be a powerful way to connect to something deeper. You don't necessarily have to believe in God for this tool to work. Some people prefer to think of honoring their connection to the universe rather than praying to a deity, but how you conceptualize it really doesn't matter. Ultimately, bhakti practices are more about the emotions than concepts.

Faith is another powerful tool for spiritual transformation. Understand, though, that faith in yoga is different than the kind of faith that many religions encourage. In yoga, you are not meant to take anything blindly but simply to do the practice, and then watch the results. Try to get your students to make an initial commitment to practice, and let the fruits of that practice instill faith. While you can encourage them—and your faith and your example may be infectious—ultimately it's their own practice that must convince them to keep it up.

Finally, yoga can build spiritual qualities and well-being by putting practitioners in touch with their life purpose, or dharma. Yoga teaches that when you quiet the mind using the various tools outlined above, you gain access to an inner wisdom that—with sustained practice—becomes progressively subtler. When you learn to listen to what your heart tells you, you'll know what uses of your life energy feel most meaningful, what you find fulfilling and what you don't. Steer your life as best you can in accordance with that ever-deepening wisdom, and greater access to joy, compassion, and gratitude are likely to follow.

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