

# sankalpa

sowing the seed of change



potential

and efficient

resolution of others

Life is often described as being a journey. But do we have any idea about our destination, or even which direction we are heading? Swami Poornaseva discusses how we can help steer our journey in a positive direction.

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Most of us, I suspect, have some rather vague notions, rather than goals or clear ideas about what we would like to achieve in life. Swami Satyananda makes this very point in his book, *Yoga Nidra*, in which he observes that many of us are directionless in life, “floundering in the darkness, like ships without rudders”. However, he goes on to say that, “If you know what you want to achieve in life, sankalpa can be the creator of your destiny. Whether you want to become a painter, writer, orator or spiritual leader, you can train yourself through this simple technique”.

Sankalpa is a Sanskrit word which is usually defined as ‘resolve’ or ‘resolution’. To be resolute is to be firm, purposeful, and unwavering. This translation begins to convey something of the power of sankalpa. The concept of making resolutions is well known within Western culture. As each old year fades and a new one is born, we make our resolutions – and at the time, we really mean them. We tend to make them

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about life-enhancing things such as losing weight or sticking to an exercise program. Yet how many of us have actually achieved what it was we were so determined to do at the beginning of the year. Can we even remember? Somehow, that very sincere desire to start afresh slips away and we find ourselves back in the same old groove, playing the same old tune.

A sankalpa is a resolution of a different category and quality altogether – like flying first class instead of economy. Unlike first class air travel, which is available only to the privileged few, the opportunity to make a sankalpa is available to everyone.

What is it that transforms the humble resolution into something that has the capacity in Swami Satyananda’s words to, “influence and transform the whole life pattern”? There are four main aspects to the making of a sankalpa: context, intent, formulation and regularity.

#### **Sankalpa in the context of yoga nidra**

Firstly, a sankalpa is usually made during the practice of yoga nidra, which is a meditative practice of deep relaxation. Whether you are being guided through the practice by a teacher in a class or on

**[creating a sankalpa]**

Swami Satyananda gives the following examples of possible sankalpas in his book:

*I will awaken my spiritual potential*

*I will be a positive force for the evolution of others*

*I will be successful in all that I undertake*

*I will be more aware and efficient*

*I will achieve total health*

While these examples are in the future tense, they emphasise the power of the will.

*...context, intent, formulation + regularity..*

They can also be expressed in the present continuous tense (ie in the moment) as if the goal is being achieved and the sankalpa is developing, strengthening, and bringing to fullness the goal:

*I am awakening my spiritual potential*

*I am being successful in all that I undertake*

*I am achieving total health*

Or they can be expressed in the present tense to emphasise that it is a reality now:

*I am aware and efficient*

*I am successful in all that I undertake*

*I am totally healthy*

a CD at home, the teacher will invite you to formulate your own sankalpa. A variety of methods to begin the process of deep relaxation precede the making of a sankalpa.

Swami Satyananda describes the making of the sankalpa at this point as being like the “sowing of a seed”. A seed requires time to germinate before it can begin to send forth shoots; even longer before it can blossom into whatever it is meant to be. The sankalpa is repeated again at the end of the practice, by which time the practitioner is in a deeply relaxed, yet conscious and aware state; the mind is open and receptive.

It is important to understand that in the practice of yoga nidra tensions are released at a muscular, emotional, and mental level. The release of these tensions leads to a wholly different quality of relaxation than we are used to. This is the equivalent of preparing the soil for the planting of the seed. You have prepared the ground by considering carefully your purpose; and the state of relaxation in which the seed is planted ensures that the ground is fertile. The conditions are then conducive for growth.

Researchers have measured the activity of the brain during yoga nidra and this research shows clearly the depth of relaxation that can be achieved in the

practice. Brain wave activity is described as four different states. Beta waves relate to the normal active state; alpha waves to the relaxed state, theta waves to the state of dreams and sleep; and delta waves to the state of deep sleep. A study of experienced practitioners of yoga nidra in Denmark, reported in the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School periodical *Bindu*, showed a significant rise in theta wave activity, without any reduction in alpha wave activity. The researchers concluded that this indicates that consciousness during yoga nidra can remain in a deep and stable state. Drawing upon this research evidence, Swami Janakananda makes the point that by making a resolution while in this relaxed state, the sankalpa “works with an undiminished strength”. However, he goes on to say that for the relaxation to be effective, it should not be induced by suggestion or hypnosis as this is “an artificial and limited state”. Yoga nidra, on the other hand, “consists of techniques that trigger a state where one’s being is being vitalised – the result [of which] is a stable and unbroken state of relaxation in the body and entire brain”.

This claim is substantiated by research undertaken at a university clinic in Cologne, Germany, which found that the relaxed state achieved in yoga nidra

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had a more thorough effect in respect of EEG activity than relaxation based on suggestion or hypnosis. This means that the two halves of the brain communicated better in yoga nidra than techniques based upon hypnosis or suggestion. The regular repetition of a deeply felt resolve in such a state can therefore be seen to have a significant impact, particularly when repeated regularly and with strength of feeling.

sankalpa is, we can have a mini sankalpa, or more immediate goal that we are trying to achieve; and use that sankalpa to strengthen our willpower.

The formulation of the sankalpa is very important, as is the sincerity and strength of will with which it is made. Do you really want to achieve your goal? Is it what you really want, or is it a half-hearted stab at something that would be nice if it happened, but

during the practice, or after much thought and careful consideration. Some ideas are given in the sidebar. We must each formulate our sankalpa so that it makes sense and feels just right for us – and this may take some time. What is important is that the sankalpa should be succinct, positive, and phrased in such a way that it engages the willpower. It should be repeated mentally in a way that leaves no room for doubt that this goal is of fundamental central importance to your life and will be achieved. Be clear, resolute and firm.

It is also important to make only one sankalpa in yoga nidra, so that the substantial energy of the mind can be directed towards a single goal and not wasted or scattered. It is also likely to be more effective if made simple.

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### The intent of your sankalpa

The intent is also crucially important in making a sankalpa powerful. You cannot make a sankalpa without having given some thought to what it is you are trying to achieve – to which direction you want the ship to sail in. This might mean that you practise yoga nidra for a long time until you discover what it is that you are actually trying to achieve. The sankalpa should not be used in a negative way for the eradication of bad habits such as giving up smoking. Rather, Swami Satyananda says that it should be used to create a positive habit: “to transform the life pattern”. He is making the point that the sankalpa is of such value and significance that it is wasting an opportunity to restrict it to the elimination of a bad habit. If a sankalpa is made that will work to transform the whole life pattern for the better, then the bad habit will disappear anyway.

### Formulating a sankalpa

Identifying the goal or the direction – knowing what it is that we want to achieve – can be the most difficult part of the process. I suspect that many of us think we have a sankalpa but later find that it has faded or shifted and is not really the sankalpa that is going to help to create our destiny. But when it does emerge, we know it. We feel it. We are on track. We can instead have what are often called ‘mini sankalpa’s’. While we are determining what our major

if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t really matter anyway.

It is also of primary importance that the sankalpa is chosen only by yourself. It should never be suggested by anyone else. A teacher will invite you to formulate your own sankalpa. They will never suggest what your sankalpa should be; only that it be made with sincerity and strength of feeling.

So how do you go about formulating a sankalpa? Firstly, it should be framed in positive terms. It should not be framed in negative terms such as,

## It is also important to make only one sankalpa in yoga nidra, so that the substantial energy of the mind can be directed towards a single goal...

“I will stop being irregular in my meditation practice” or “I do not want to be sick”.

Your sankalpa should be about whatever is important to you, whether that be related to improving your health, developing a positive attitude in life, regularity in practice, or indeed whatever is of most significance to you. It may be that the sankalpa arises spontaneously

### Practice makes perfect

The more often we practise something, the more proficient we become. The regular repetition of the sankalpa in yoga nidra, imprinting it upon the subconscious mind, can only serve to further the resolve as a reality. The beauty of yoga nidra is that it can be easily practised outside of the yoga class. There are many CDs available so that the practice can become a part of everyday life.

Swami Shankardev makes the point that the sankalpa can be used every time we begin our yoga practice as it “helps us

to stay focused and grounded with a deeper sense of direction and purpose”. He goes on to say that the sankalpa then becomes “a tool to focus the energy, the prana, the life force, so that it becomes like a laser beam”.

This laser beam concept can then be applied as required. It is a powerful tool helping to create an attitude to life that is positive and uplifting, rather than

pessimistic and negative. Sankalpa serves to remind us that we have choices in life. The glass can either be seen as half full or half empty. The making of a sankalpa regularly, with clarity, strength of purpose, and belief that it will come about, trains the mind into a more positive outlook. When the seed is planted in the fertile soil of the mind with the right intent and is nurtured regularly, it is a very powerful force in life. This can be clearly seen in the life of Swami Satyananda. When he established himself in a rural area of one of the poorest states in India, the local people were living a life of extreme poverty. He made a sankalpa for peace, prosperity and plenty. Now, through the efforts of Sivananda Math, a charitable institution he founded, the villagers have seen their standard of living and quality of life improve dramatically. Anyone who has visited the ashram at Rikhia in the northern Indian state of Jharkhand will testify to that.

Yoga nidra is of particular value in a world dominated by stress and

tension. It is a simple, easily accessible practice that is beneficial to everyone. It provides a wholly different and superior quality of relaxation, while at the same time engaging the consciousness and awareness. By making a sankalpa, we are harnessing that heightened awareness of what it is we are actually trying to achieve in life. A sankalpa can indeed become the creator of our destiny. In the words of Swami Satyananda, "When sankalpa becomes the driving force, everything you do in life becomes successful".

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*Note:* Yoga Nidra referred to in this article is Satyananda Yoga Nidra™. Satyananda Yoga Nidra™ CDs are available from [www.satyananda.net](http://www.satyananda.net)

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