

Being a Spiritual Warrior

# being a **Spiritual Warrior**





Images of a warrior may seem the opposite to the vision of yoga. However, some warrior qualities – inner strength, resilience and courage – are ones that can assist us on our spiritual yoga journey. Karen Nicoll discusses the cultivation of yogic values that we can draw on in difficult times.

At some point in our life, we are all faced with difficult challenges. These may include such things as coping with the loss of a loved one, a relationship break up, an illness, perhaps handling problems at work or dealing with issues of social or environmental concern. Drawing on qualities such as courage, resilience, compassion and non-violence assists us to deal with these issues, while enhancing our spiritual journey. This is the path of the spiritual warrior.

In the holistic system of yoga, the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects are integrated – each one affecting the others – no one part operating in isolation. Practising the Warrior Pose Series of asanas builds physical strength while giving us the opportunity to cultivate the qualities we associate with being a warrior, such as inner strength, resilience and courage. A key point is to repeat a *sankalpa* or positive intention while doing the asanas. This opens us to new possibilities and creates the space for making conscious changes as we focus on particular qualities.

Yoga tenets from the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* offer us some sign posts to empower us to be spiritual warriors. As well as providing a guiding light, yoga wisdom encourages us to contemplate and explore our inner truth and values, to listen to our *buddhi* or inner wisdom and follow our own *dharma* or life path in an authentic way.

The *Bhagavad Gita* suggests that to flourish and reach our potential as humans, we have a bank of universal qualities available to us to cultivate as needed. The qualities we display very much contribute to our state of mind and how we operate in the world. By consciously developing these qualities, they can then become part of our value system and can be drawn on at difficult times. With awareness, we can respond more consciously and consistently with our values, and what we pay attention to grows stronger. Our values operate in all areas of our life and do make a difference to our society. Mahatma Gandhi said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world”.

## [Warrior Poses]

- Practise the following Warrior poses regularly or when difficult situations arise.



### WARRIOR I (Virabhadrasana I)

Stand at the top of your mat with hands on your hips.

Step the right leg back while keeping pelvis square to the front.

Place the right foot at a slight angle and press the heel to the floor with the weight evenly distributed over the sole of the foot.

Lunge forward with the left leg, ensuring that the left knee does not come further forward than the left ankle, while keeping the right foot flat on the floor. You may like to engage your lower abdominal muscles to support your lower back.

Bring your arms comfortably up and forward, while dropping your shoulder blades down.

Suggested sankalpa: 'May I face my challenges with a compassionate heart', or 'I am facing my challenges with a compassionate heart'.

Repeat to the other side.

- Say the suggested sankalpa (intention) or your own sankalpa, while holding the poses to affirm the chosen quality.



### WARRIOR II (Virabhadrasana II)

Stand sideways on the mat with legs comfortably apart and hands on hips.

Turn right leg to right and swivel left heel to the left and let your pelvis naturally rotate slightly to the right to support your sacroiliac joint.

Keep the outside of the left foot on the floor as you lunge to the right.

Keep the shin, kneecap and thigh aligned and don't bring the right knee further forward than a right angle to your ankle.

Bring the arms out to shoulder height and look at your right hand.

Suggested sankalpa: 'May I cultivate inner strength and courage' or 'I am cultivating inner strength and courage'.

Repeat to the other side.

- Be comfortable and at ease as you hold the asana for up to 10 breaths.



### WARRIOR III (Virabhadrasana III) variation

Start in Tadasana (Mountain pose). Take the weight onto your right foot and stabilise your knee joint by either drawing the kneecap up or bending the knee slightly and bracing the knee, so the knee joint does not roll in.

Draw in the lower abdomen to stabilise your pelvis and maintain your natural lumbar curve.

Tilt the trunk forward and at the same time lift your left leg and bring your trunk and leg parallel to the floor.

To keep the pelvis level, turn your left kneecap and toes to face the floor.

Stretch your arms along your sides or overhead.

Suggested sankalpa: 'May I cultivate resilience and equanimity', or 'I am cultivating resilience and equanimity'.

Repeat to the other side.

### Practising non-violence or ahimsa

The yamas and niyamas, two limbs of the Eightfold path from the *Yoga Sutras*, can be interpreted as yoga's value system. They are social and personal guidelines rather than strict and rigid rules. These guidelines are helpful when dealing with difficult situations and people. Interpreting these guidelines according to our own values, as well as with regards to the particular situation, is part of developing our inner wisdom.

For instance, even though ahimsa or non-violence may be the preferred option, many would also accept that some level of resistance is acceptable as self-defence. What is important is our attitude in managing a situation and taking appropriate action without hatred or hostility. Ahimsa is not just refraining from harming others physically; it also includes not using hurtful or hostile words. This is linked with satya or truthfulness, which reminds us to speak

appropriately and be truthful in as kind a way as possible. Approaching a situation in a non-hostile way, may involve stating facts while not blaming others (though the other party of course may not like our stance and disagree with our words or actions). It does not necessarily mean staying silent or not taking action over injustices or inappropriate behaviour, but responding to the situation with understanding and compassion.

Krishna reminds Arjuna in the Gita that, although there are times when we might prefer to ignore challenging situations, we may need to face our fears and take skilful action to the best of our ability, even if this involves rocking the boat or upsetting the status quo. Krishna advises us to have a clear intention but to be unattached to a particular outcome, as ultimately we are not in control of other people or the outcome of situations. Being open to other possibilities creates space for situations to be resolved in an amicable way or for us to be pleasantly surprised by something even better than we had anticipated. Think of a scenario where some residents are unhappy about some trees being removed by the local council. The residents might take various forms of actions to try to save the trees. The outcome may not involve saving those particular trees, but instead having them replaced with more suitable trees that will not damage the road and footpath.

Not being attached to a particular outcome is also part of one of the niyamas – ishvara-pranidhana or spiritual

## [Practising being a Spiritual Warrior]

- Take time to reflect on the values that inspire you. These might include ahimsa (non-violence) and satya (honesty).
- Ask yourself what qualities you need at the moment and consciously foster them. Remember that universal qualities such as courage, resilience, patience, equanimity and compassion are available to all of us.
- Observe and admire these qualities in other people.
- Say a sankalpa or intention while practising the Warrior pose series and at the beginning of your yoga nidra or meditation.
- We also develop courage by acting courageously.
- Seek out the support of others.
- Remind yourself “This too shall pass.”
- Be open to different possibilities.
- Be a warrior not a worrier.

### The Warrior Pose Series

All of the Warrior Poses build strength in the legs and ground us, helping us to stay connected to our body and to this precious moment. Bringing our awareness back to this moment and centring ourselves is a way of encouraging resilience. This teaches us to deal with each moment as it arises, rather than continuously hooking into our fears about the future. Stretching the arms out to the sides or over head expands and opens our heart and brings awareness to our compassionate self.



surrender. This is not the same as giving up or giving in, but is a recognition that there may be a point where we have done all we are able to do and need to let go. For some people this may be interpreted as surrendering to grace or to the divine. Part of surrendering is trusting that we will be able to deal with whatever outcome eventuates. Ishvara-pranidhana includes accepting things as they are in the moment without having a defeatist attitude. For instance, when we accept that a relationship has changed, we can still ask ourselves, “How can I best deal with this situation?” Facing our fears and dealing with unresolved situations is not easy, and cultivating another one of the *niyamas* can help. *Tapas* or self-discipline helps to develop determination, stamina and perseverance when the going is tough. When coping with something like chemotherapy treatment, utilising *tapas* brings perseverance while taking one day at a time.

### Modern day spiritual warriors

Examples of socially engaged spiritual warriors include Martin Luther King

Jnr, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi. On some level, they have all displayed courage and compassion, while proposing non-violent solutions to very problematic situations.

Martin Luther King Jnr is also known as the ‘love warrior’, because while he struggled for civil rights he was able to maintain an attitude of love and kindness. He maintained this attitude even while being vilified and threatened by many detractors. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela rose above hatred and imprisonment to lead his people to democratic elections. When standing up to the British colonial powers, Gandhi used non-violent tactics to help bring about an independent India. At the moment, Aung San Suu Kyi opposes Myanmar’s brutal military rule. Because of her aspiration for democracy and human rights, she remains under house arrest. Despite her situation, Aung San Suu Kyi still maintains a non-violent and compassionate response to the regime. Similarly, the Dalai Lama supports this type of approach toward China, even

though he is in exile because of his desire for an autonomous Tibet.

The human mind has the capacity to be adaptable and resilient, and it is empowering for us to cultivate new ways of being. Dealing with thorny challenges can become part of our spiritual transformation, so that we learn to reflect the values and qualities that inspire us. As we are all part of the tapestry of life, social action is also part of our spiritual journey.

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