



Change your Attitude: Change your Life

We all know there's more to yoga than doing our asanas or sitting long hours in meditation. Traditionally, true yoga is defined as an attitude (*bhava*) or approach, to life. Experienced yoga teacher Nancy Jackson explains the key components of attitude and offers practical suggestions to help us touch a richer, deeper life through yoga.

The ancient text on yoga, the *Shiva Sutras* says jnanam bandaha, or 'limited knowledge is bondage'. This means that our accumulation of information, memory and perceptions can be limiting and can bind us to our own habits and patterns. Although accumulation of 'limited knowledge' is useful at work, running a household or navigating in the world, it can become an obstacle to learning something new or opening to spiritual work. When our personal viewpoint gets locked, it becomes opinion and judgement. It may manifest as anger or defensiveness or just being a know-it-all. On a higher level, this limited knowledge binds us to the material world and conceals what the yogis say is the true divinity of every person within a divine universe.

According to many yoga traditions, the way to break free of imitations is through attitude. Like learning the sitar, a sincere practice of yoga requires an attitude of openness and a willingness to learn.

Attitude: how you project yourself

Its human nature to identify individuals by their attitudes or points of view and to have them perceive us by the attitudes we project. Over time, each of us has a tendency to become more entrenched in the attitudes we have created for ourselves. In a positive way, perhaps one who has experience being in charge can use that ability in any circumstance. But when that person always takes the attitude of being in charge, it can create conflict with other people.

On a personal level, the practice of yoga is the practice of awareness. Most manifestations of attitude are neither good nor bad in the proper context. It can be useful to simply notice other people's attitudes and accept them with compassion. Do the same with your own attitudes and moods. How do you present yourself? And how do your own attitudes affect the quality of your life? Here are some of the components of attitude, along with some exercises to help you become aware of your own attitudes.

- **Bhava.** The Sanskrit word for attitude is bhava (pronounced bhahva, or bhahv). It comes from the verb root bhu, meaning 'to be, become or exist'. Bhava is the state of being that defines

your emotion, feeling or attitude, both in general and in the moment. In a broad sense, you can identify other people's bhava by how they hold themselves and how they act. For example, occupations have their own bhavas. Think of the different attitudes of a chef, a paramedic, a dancer and a Reiki healer. A person's role in life can also carry a bhava, as a parent, a supervisor, teacher or friend.

Contemplation: Consider your occupation or how you spend a large amount of your time. Does your attitude match what you do? How do you project it into the world? What is your bhava?

- **Behaviour.** Attitude also manifests individually as characteristic ways of behaving. These include the whole spectrum of personal characteristics, including officious, timid, confident, reserved, outspoken, cautious, aggressive, kind, sneaky or clever. One way to consider these characteristics is to imagine them as cartoon characters, each with its own attitude.

Contemplation: Name five personal characteristics of someone close to you. What are your opinions about these? Now do the same for yourself. What would you look like as a cartoon character?

- **Mindset.** Another approach to attitude is mindset or way of thinking. Some people take on their own viewpoints to such an extreme that they manifest as attitude, for example, anger about certain issues or groups. Or they may become ingrained, like a motherly hostess serving tea and biscuits. The tradition of Samkhya Yoga emerged as a psychology and philosophy about two thousand years ago. Samkhya defines eight broad attitudes or conditions of mind: knowledge and ignorance; virtue and vice; influenced by strong emotion and not influenced by strong emotion; power and effectiveness (lordship) and absence of power and effectiveness.

Contemplation: Can you identify your own broad attitudes? More specifically, do you hold a firm mind set or viewpoint about specific issues or ways of doing things? Is there a way

to soften it? As an exercise, choose something you feel convinced about, and then look at it from the opposite point of view.

- **Mood.** Just as people can be identified with characteristics or mind set, another telling aspect of attitude is mood. In today's fast paced life, we have opportunities to face not only our own moods, but those of the people around us, and those of strangers and acquaintances we encounter in business, leisure, communication and travel. Associated with emotion, moods can be as subtle as mild euphoria or as blatant as road-rage.

Contemplation: Identify your mood. Sit quietly and focus on how you feel. Are you happy or sad; excited or depressed; anxious or calm; worried or angry? Simply identify your present mood without trying to change it.

Yoga cultivates attitude

Yoga itself is the perfect antidote to negative moods or agitation and a powerful means of shifting rigid attitudes. In his book, *Carrot in My Ear*, Swami Shankarananda says: "The attitude of yoga is of total responsibility. We are responsible for our lives, our society, and our actions. Every moment in time is a new opportunity. You are at a crossroads with two paths. Every moment the same choice is available. Every moment wipes out the past and gives you a new possibility. If you chose wrongly in the last moment, choose correctly now. The choice is always the same-downward to ignorance and depression or upward to joy and insight. In every moment, there is hope and a fresh choice."

Everyone has experiences where attitude influences the moment. Getting aggravated while finding a parking space for example, can diminish the joy of the outing. A negative turn could become self-righteousness, anger or blame. Most of us recognise this kind of turn in attitude and do something, such as letting go of the feeling when we leave the parking area or starting the outing with a relaxing hot drink. But a long-standing negative attitude left unattended is like something simmering on the stove: a low boil that's ready to flare up.

Yoga forges and maintains pathways to an inner strength that is discriminating and firm, yet also gentle and accepting. Practices vary broadly in the areas of physical postures, philosophy, understanding and service. They might include rigorous or gentle

also consider a formal yoga or meditation weekend to rejuvenate your attitude. At home, if possible, you may want to create a space that allows you time away from daily disturbances. A positive result of this practice is you can observe yourself

yogis aspire towards the principle feelings of: shanta bhava, the tranquil mood; dasya bhava, the mood for respect, service or dedication; vatsalya-bhava, the 'calf like mood' of tender feeling; sakhya-bhava, the friendly mood; and madhurya-bhava, the sweet mood, as between lovers. Practices might include devotional activities such as formal ceremonies, chanting, reading scriptures or serving others.

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rounds of postures, self-inquiry, repetition of mantra, techniques of meditation and compassion for yourself or others. Throughout the history of yoga, all the traditions offer suggestions to embrace an attitude that is on-purpose and flexible. Here are three:

- **Become a cave yogi.** Sometimes just getting to a yoga class can be enough of a retreat from a busy life. You can

closely and can watch your own attitudes in relation to your thoughts. Spending long periods of quiet time can help calm the mind and replenish the body. The challenge of retiring, of course, is that you still have to come out and deal with the world, but perhaps with greater strength.

- **Open the heart.** In the tradition of Bhakti Yoga, or the path of devotion,

- Merge with universal consciousness. The yoga of Kashmir Shaivism recommends embracing the fluctuations of mood and working with them. Drawing from Tantric roots, this philosophy acknowledges the complete range of human experience, yet recommends effort through meditation and self-inquiry to achieve higher states of consciousness. One technique is to look inside to identify what you are thinking and shift your series of thoughts to a more positive state, if appropriate. Another technique is to focus on a mantra or uplifting concept to dissolve the chatter of the mind.

The beast, the hero and the meditator

The ancient tradition of Samkhya Yoga classifies individuals into three types, carrying three basic attitudes. These correspond to the three gunas, which are principles of nature that can also be applied personally.

- **Beast (pashu-bhava).** Pashu means beast or creature and generally describes the individual who is concerned with the physical and material. The corresponding quality is tamas, or inertia, an inability or reluctance to take action or do. In a positive sense, tamas is complete rest. As a negative attribute, tamas is lazy and ineffective. In yoga traditions, it is said that Shiva, the personification of the perfect yogi, is also called Pashupati, or the slayer of beasts, meaning dissolving the lower nature to bring an individual into the higher states of consciousness.

- **Hero (vira-bhava).** Vira means hero or warrior and generally describes the individual who is dynamic or filled with action. The corresponding quality is rajas or activity. In a positive sense, rajas is the ability to get things done. As a negative attribute, it can be hyperactivity, anxiety or highly charged emotion. All mythologies and histories are filled with stories of heroes with the ability to overcome great obstacles to benefit many.

- **Meditator (divya-bhava).** Divya means to shine, specifically in the sense of connecting with the peace and wisdom of the higher self. Along with the meditator, this type also might be the yogi, the devotee, the teacher or any 'shining one.' The corresponding quality is sattva, or pure beingness and contentment. Divya-bhava defines the individual who is inclined towards the practice of yoga and meditation, with an inclination towards devotion. It is said that the sages and those who are highly accomplished and balanced carry the harmony of sattva.

Practice: cultivating harmony

One yogic method to achieve balance is to cultivate what you need more of. Here are a few asanas (postures) to increase the attitudes of these three types.

- To enhance your beastly nature: Lion Pose, Cobra Pose, Upward Dog/Downward Dog

- To encourage your hero nature: Warrior Pose, Bow, Triangle
- To increase your meditating or shining nature: Half lotus, Corpse Pose, Standing Tree Pose

Attitude in yoga practice

One of the most fun aspects of yoga postures is that they often mimic an attitude, or bhava. Think of the postures known as the cat, the tortoise or the eagle. Consider your bearing or carriage when you move into these asanas and hold the position.

Likewise, yoga instructions are about approach, outlook and stance. If you have attended yoga classes for even a short length of time, you have probably heard comments about working with your physical or emotional attitude in the moment. Consider contemplating them over time. Then choose the ones that might work for you. From time to time, look back and see if you have been able to change any unwanted tendencies or patterns.

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- **Hold the alignment.** Once you have placed yourself in a posture, make the effort to remain steadfast mentally and physically. Align yourself in the pose with gravity, with your body and with the universe. When you carry this with you outside of class you move with greater ease and stay aligned.

- **Don't use harsh judgment.** Yoga teachers are always reminding students to do only as much as you can, press a little and don't strain. If you severely criticise yourself or others you generate tension. When you accept where you are, you relax and flow.

- **Make the extra effort.** Getting to yoga class or doing your home practice is already a triumph and is all the extra effort you need. For more intensity,

making the extra effort means to take another step in all aspects of practice: moving further into each posture, meditating regularly, reading yoga philosophies and keeping good company.

- **Save your energy.** A bad attitude, towards yourself or someone else, is a huge drain on energy. Notice how you can lose energy through negative states such as anger or worry. Likewise you can build energy when you feel peaceful and relaxed. One technique to maintain positive energy is to be aware of how your own energy ebbs and flows and why.

- **Is there another way to look at this?** There are always days when your body is tight, your mind slow or your heart indifferent. These are the best opportunities to take a broader perspective to discover new stand points or attitudes to operate from.

- **You are the one in charge of your life.** Steady practice in all areas of yoga clears inner pathways. Over time, your mind and your body cooperate. They

follow these pathways into more positive states of energy and connection with your higher self. Even if you stop your yoga practices, when you get back, your body remembers how the postures feel and your mind relaxes.

- **Unlearn habits that don't serve you.** As you observe your actions, you will notice patterns or habits. Some of these, of course, are good, while others are no longer useful. To drop bad habits consciously do the opposite. For example, if you usually speak up too often, then stay silent. Or if you tend not to speak up for yourself, force yourself to say something.

- **Appreciate your own unique essence.** In studying attitude, it's important to be gentle. Fundamentally there is no

right or wrong attitude, no right or wrong characteristics. Yoga is the practice of discovery and acceptance.

Bhava as spiritual disposition

Just as attitude can become the essence of a feeling or person, the concept of bhava, or how you hold yourself through attitude, moves into pure essence. The attitude of strength becomes the pure

union, or yoga, with the divine. This is also known as rasa, meaning pure taste or pure essence, the tasting of the essential bliss of yoga through inner connection.

By applying the yogic practice of vigilance we can increase the level of our awareness of attitude and with it, the sense of unity. The quiet moments of inner awareness connect us to the

For further reading

Swami Shankarananda, *Carrot in My Ear: Questions and Answers on Living in Awareness*, Shaktipat Press, Mt Eliza, VC, 2004.

Jaideva Singh, *Siva Sutras*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, India, 1982.

Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of Yoga*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, USA, 1974.

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essence of strength. The attitude of devotion becomes the pure essence of devotion. The attitude of peace becomes the pure essence of peace.

The great yogi Sri Ramakrishna was known for his spiritual bhava, or attitude. In the maha-bhava, or great mood, he would dance in ecstasy in his

higher, spiritual reality. These moments may invoke a sense of inner freedom, insight and inspiration that opens to experiencing the divine presence in the world around us.

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