Yoga for Times of Change

Practices and Meditations for Moving Through Stress, Anxiety, Grief, and Life's Transitions

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Introduction

Life is an ever-rolling wheel
And every day is the right one.
—Mumon Gensen

On Wednesday, September 9, 2020, I woke up later than usual because it was still dark outside when it should have been light. Confused, I opened the curtains and saw that the entire sky was a dark-orange color, as if it were night but an orange night instead of dark-blue one. Previously my husband Brad and I had spent many days inside our house, windows closed against unhealthy smoke-filled air from several different fires that ringed the San Francisco Bay Area. But that morning, we learned, a combination of the fog coming in from the Pacific (which brought a blessed relief from the previous days of heat) and a high-level layer of smoke from the fire in the Sierras that settled above the fog had created a barrier that prevented most of the sun's light waves from penetrating down to the earth's surface.

What could we do? We decided to simply go about our day, with me working on my book in my home office and Brad working remotely from his home office downstairs. But this dark-orange sky, which continued for almost the entire day, was deeply unsettling on two levels. First, it was so unexpected. While we know that change is an intrinsic part of nature, that the color of the sky should change so drastically had

previously been unimaginable. Everyone was saying it seemed like our city had been transported to another planet! And, second, what did this new development portend? Was every fire season in California going to be this extreme from now on? Were there more dark-orange skies in our future? Should we be thinking of moving somewhere else? Even though we were safe for the time being, it was a long and difficult day for us to get through.

For all of us, times of change include the ordinary ups and downs of life that affect us as individuals—you know, the marshmallows and walnuts in the rocky road ice cream of life. These changes can be physical or emotional, temporary or permanent, minor or major. And they include births and deaths, temporary or chronic health problems, important relationships beginning and ending, moving from one place or job to another, or transitions to a new phase in life.

Times of change also include periods of societal, political, and environmental upheaval or transformation in our communities and across the world. All four of my grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe who came to the United States as teenagers, and I often reflect on the long list of changes they experienced throughout their lives. In addition to the personal challenges of moving to a new country where they didn't speak the language, they lived through World War I, the influenza pandemic, the women's suffrage movement, the Great Depression, World War II and the Holocaust (during which my maternal grandmother lost most of her family), the Cold War, the civil rights movement the space age, and more.

And recently, during 2020 and 2021, we all lived through changes in our communities and across the world that affected us as individuals as much as the everyday events in our personal lives did. After all, the pandemic disrupted everyone's lives worldwide, causing loss of life and other hardships, forcing us to change the way we were living and working, and making us put our plans for the future on hold. That year was also a period of extreme weather and social upheaval. We quickly learned how all these types of changes are not only hard to live through but raise unsettling questions about what the future holds

All in all, change and uncertainty are intrinsic aspects of life on earth. The ancient yogis understood this, and in yoga, one of the basic principles of reality is that the material world, which includes your body-mind as well as other beings and external objects, is by its nature ever changing. As T. K. V. Desikachar says in *The Heart of Yoga*:

> Although in yoga everything we see and experience is true and real, all form and all content are in a constant state of flux. This concept of continual change is known as *parinamavada*.[1]

The ancient yogis also observed that even though the nature of the material world is that it is impermanent and in a constant state of flux, we humans often suffer when we experience change, loss, and uncertainty. In recent times, scientists who study human evolution have come up with very compelling explanations for *why* change and impermanence cause so much suffering. Basically, evolution wired us to survive and to have as many offspring as possible. So when we face times of change, we experience a variety of painful reactions, such as stress, anger, fear, depression, and grief that will prompt us to find a way to survive the "dangers" we are facing. However, what once helped us to survive during more primitive times may not always serve us in the modern world because not everything our nervous system interprets as "danger" is actually dangerous. For example, we can be terrified of public speaking, full of rage because someone takes our parking space, or humiliated after an interaction with a stranger we will never see again. In addition, many of us long to experience more peace, contentment, and happiness rather than being buffeted about by painful reactions to so many things in our environments.

Fortunately, as we evolved to survive, we also evolved to be curious about the universe and capable of self-awareness. This means that we have the ability to observe our own reactions to what we experience, which can lead us to a deeper understanding of human nature and what causes us to experience suffering. The ancient yogis did exactly this. They systematically identified the causes of human suffering, and from there they came up with many different ways to reduce that suffering and even to liberate us from it completely. The Bhagavad Gita defines a yogi as one

> Who unperturbed by changing conditions sits apart and watches and says "the powers of nature go round," and remains firm and shakes not. (14.23)[2]

To learn how to use yoga to stay calm, steady, and content during times of change, it's very helpful to start with a basic understanding of why our human nature makes living through times of change particularly challenging. So before you dive into the

suggestions for ways of using yoga to help you cope during challenging times in chapters 2 through 8, here's some background about human nature and about yoga itself to provide you with a basic foundation for making decisions about which yoga practices can help you adapt to and accept whatever changes you're going through.

Understanding Human Nature: Attraction and Aversion

One of our most basic features as human animals is having very strong feelings about what is good for us and what is dangerous or should be avoided. And, as is true for all animals, these strong reactions to what we encounter in our environment help us to stay alive. In his book *Why Buddhism Is True*, psychologist Robert Wright says that when feelings first appeared in the living world, "their mission was to take care of the organism, specifically to get it to approach things that are good for it (like food) and avoid things that are bad for it (like toxins)."[3]

Because these strong reactions to what we encounter in our environment are so fundamental to our nature, we now experience the same strong feelings we have about the basics of food, sex, and shelter for things we encounter in modern times, whether serious, such as feeling terrible anxiety about layoffs at work or anger over a news story about the plight of people halfway across the word from you, or frivolous, such as having a crush on a celebrity you've never even met or feeling angry at someone who took the last pint of your favorite ice cream before you could grab it.

And whenever we encounter anything, whether basic or modern, that we feel is beneficial for us, we become attached to it. That's because evolution wired us to want to repeat experiences that cause us pleasure. Otherwise, we'd eat or have sex just once and be satisfied forever, which would certainly prevent us from surviving long enough to have children. So, to ensure our own survival and that of our offspring—which is how our genes stay in the gene pool—we evolved to keep wanting the things we feel we need for our well-being and happiness.

Getting what we desire makes us temporarily happy, but then that happiness wears off and we yearn to repeat the experience. And being completely unable to get the things we're attached to, well, that really makes us suffer. I remember all too well watching toddlers crying and fighting over a toy they desperately wanted. Even as

adults, we all experience that kind of heartbreak, whether over the end of an important relationship, losing family heirlooms in a robbery, or seeing your community destroyed by a natural disaster.

Ancient yogis identified attachment to pleasure (*raga*) as one of the causes of suffering. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras pleasure is included as the third in a list of five "afflictions" in sutra II.3:

> The five afflictions which disturb the equilibrium of consciousness are: ignorance or lack of wisdom, ego, pride of the ego or the sense of "I," attachment to pleasure, aversion to pain, fear of death and clinging to life.[4]

In his *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* Edwin Bryant explains attachment to pleasure this way:

> One who has experienced pleasure in the past recollects it and hankers to repeat the experience in the present or future, or to attain the means of repeating the experience; it is dwelling on past experiences that constitutes attachment.[5]

With change, there is always loss. Some change is just a loss, whether the death of a loved one, loss of your job or home, or the end of an important relationship. And losing the things that we feel we need for our well-being and survival causes suffering in the form of stressful emotions such as frustration, anger, depression, fear, anxiety, and grief. During the pandemic, I knew a number of people who cried every day because their grief over our worldwide losses was so intense.

But all change involves some kind of loss, even when it's a basically a positive change. For example, moving to a new place or changing jobs may mean leaving people you care about behind. Having a baby—especially your first one—typically means changing your way of life and giving up many activities you were attached to. So, even for positive changes, there is usually some discomfort. I remember being so nervous the day I was married even though we just did a casual city-hall thing and were already living together.

On the other hand, because we evolved to be repelled by things that aren't beneficial for us, having to do things that we dislike or that make us uncomfortable or afraid

also causes suffering. For example, for a few years my young niece used to panic whenever it was time to wash her hair because she was so afraid to get her head wet. Even as adults, we all feel that same kind of resistance, whether to taking a major exam, having to resolve a serious conflict with a neighbor, or going to the dentist.

Ancient yogis identified aversion to pain (*dvesa*) as one of the causes of suffering. In sutra II.3 from the Yoga Sutras quoted earlier it is fourth in a list of five "afflictions." Edwin Bryant explains aversion this way:

> Aversion, *dvesa*, after all, is the flip side of the same coin as attachment. When we resist or resent something, or are angry or frustrated over something, it is because of a remembrance that this thing has caused us pain in the past.[6]

Some changes mean that we will need to do things that we're afraid of or that we dislike. Divorce might entail, for example, sharing custody of children and splitting up your possessions, and for some just the thought of living alone can be frightening or depressing. The pandemic, of course, brought a whole host of changes we all disliked, from not being able to visit friends and loved ones to having to wait in line at the market. But even ordinary changes can mean doing things we're averse to—I mean, who likes packing up their house to move?

All in all, attachment and aversion create very basic and strong emotions in human beings that challenge our equanimity and sense of contentment when we experience any kind of change. With this understanding, you can start to question your attachments to the way life used to be and your aversions to some of the effects that change brings.

Counting on the Future

Be in peace in pleasure and pain, in gain and in loss, in victory or in the loss of a battle. (2.38)
—*Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro

Another basic characteristic we have as human animals that affects our experience of change is the urge to plan for the future. This basic impulse is triggered by our memories of past failures and successes as well as our expectations about times to come.

> All organisms capable of long-term memory are necessarily oriented toward the future. A feature of memory apparently unique to humans, however, is the degree to which the decisions and plans that we make are based on representations that are future oriented—imaginings of specific events located forward in time.[7]

Our ability to plan for the future is one of the qualities that made us so successful as a species. During the hunter-gatherer era, concern about the future helped us stockpile food for the winter and eventually led to the development of agriculture. And we also made plans to avoid repeating dangerous mistakes, for example, by organizing a hunting party to take down a large animal instead of hunting solo. In fact, this ability to plan for the future is said to be the basis for most—if not all of—modern civilization, including the development of writing and our various systems of laws and forms of government. And all this planning for the future allowed us to stay alive long enough to have offspring, who themselves stayed alive long enough to produce their own offspring, and so on.

The powerful urge to plan is as beneficial to us for our survival in the modern world as it was in more primitive times. For example, we benefit from stocking up on supplies and boarding up windows in advance of a big storm and from saving money for retirement. Our urge to make plans for the future does tend to be associated with stressful emotions, however. Of course, anxiety, fear, and anger in the present motivate us to make plans for the future. But also memories of our past experiences, especially painful ones, such as shame, guilt, regret, anger, and grief, teach us not to make the same mistakes and to take steps to create a future with potentially different outcomes. Then because planning is so important to us, we become very attached to the plans we make and to the outcomes we're hoping for.

But, as you know, many of our plans don't work out because circumstances that our plans depend on can change. When that happens, because of our attachment to our plans, if we have to revise the way see our future, we can experience very stressful emotions. For example, before the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, many EU citizens who were living and working in the United Kingdom—and who thought of the country where they were living as their home—had plans for the future that depended on them staying in the United Kingdom. But, after Brexit was

enacted, many of these people had to move to different countries, where they needed to search for new jobs, find new homes, and start their lives all over again, all of which are major stressors.

Sometimes changes make things so uncertain that we can't even make plans! Then because we're so oriented toward the future, living without plans—being in a state of uncertainty—is uncomfortable for us. All we can do is wait to see how things play out, and waiting isn't anyone's idea of fun. Right now, like a lot of people, I can't yet make actual plans to see close family members who live far away, but I often find myself fantasizing anyway in ridiculous detail about what I'll do when I do see them.

In addition, our orientation toward the future may even cause us to overlook what's happening in the present. For example, I knew someone who was so focused on the milestones they had mapped out for the future—the list was literally on the refrigerator—that they failed to see how unhappy they were making their partner until it was too late.

So both our basic urge to make plans and our feelings of attachment to the plans we make need to be balanced with an understanding that the future is always uncertain. From there, you can start to accept that even when you make carefully thought-out plans, things often don't turn out as you hope. Then you're ready to use your yoga practice in new ways to become more comfortable with the ever-changing nature of reality and the uncertainty that your future holds.

Yoga and Change

> For the pleasures that come from the world bear in them sorrows to come. They come and they go, they are transient: not in them do the wise find joy.
>
> But he who on this earth, before his departure, can endure the storms of desire and wrath, this man is a Yogi, this man has joy.
>
> He has inner joy, he has inner gladness, and he has found inner Light. (5.22–24)
>
> —*Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro

Developed in India, yoga is an evolving body of spiritual values and techniques—both ancient and modern—intended to "liberate" practitioners from the suffering caused by life in an ever-changing material world. The yoga tradition includes many widely

differing paths to achieve this state of liberation or permanent "enlightenment." But in all these paths achieving liberation is a long and arduous process, attainable only to those who are very committed and willing to make many sacrifices, with the possible exception of a very few people who experience an instantaneous awakening. You can think of this goal of liberation as the very peak of the yoga mountain, a peak that only a very few will reach.

I realized many years ago that even though yoga was so helpful to me for adapting to and accepting change in the real world, I wasn't going to even attempt to reach yoga's highest peak. Instead, I set my sights on an important way station on the path to yoga's highest peak: equanimity. Although equanimity in everyday life wasn't the ultimate goal of traditional yoga, the ancient yogis understood that focusing on your spiritual practice isn't really feasible if you are constantly being buffeted about by intense emotions or your personal life is in complete disarray. So they came up with many different practices to help you stay steady and calm during ever-changing circumstances, and to be more content with what you have and what you don't have. These practices run the whole gamut from yoga's ethical guidelines and the asana practice to breath practices, concentration, meditation, and yogic tools for working with your thoughts.

Although there is a very wide range of definitions for exactly what yoga is, the Bhagavad Gita, an early yoga text and one of the most popular of all time, actually uses the term "equanimity" in stanza 2.48: "Yoga is called equanimity."[8] The original Sanskrit word here, which Georg Feuerstein translates as equanimity, is *samatva*. Feuerstein explains the meaning of *samatva* in this context: "The Sanskrit word *samatva* means literally 'sameness' or 'evenness' and has all kinds of overtones, including 'balance' and 'harmony.' Essentially it is an attitude of looking dispassionately at life and being unruffled by its ups and downs."[9] I like this particular definition because it reflects my personal experience with yoga. As my longtime friend and yoga buddy Melitta Rorty always says, "We practice yoga because it makes our lives better." And while "sameness" and "evenness" might not sound that exciting, the Bhagavad Gita in the quote above tells us that cultivating equanimity ultimately leads to "inner joy" and "inner gladness."

The thing is, it's important for us all to recognize that yoga comes from India and that it originally developed there as a spiritual practice, not as a fitness system or wellness program. But just as when you take a walk in nature and find delights

and surprises around every bend in the trail, you don't have to climb the whole yoga mountain to find gems of wisdom that will help you in your everyday life. So if achieving a state of complete equanimity, or "being unruffled" by life's ups and downs, feels like an impossible goal, you can just head toward the equanimity way station at your own speed. As the Bhagavad Gita says: "No step is lost on this path, and no dangers are found. And even a little progress is freedom from fear" (2.40).[10]

In *Why Buddhism Is True*, Robert Wright says something similar about why he practices mindfulness meditation: "The object of the game isn't to reach Liberation and Enlightenment—with a capital L and E—on some distant day, but rather to become a bit more liberated and a bit more enlightened on a not-so-distant day."[11] "A bit more enlightened" sounds like an excellent goal to me!

Although I've been quoting primarily from the Bhagavad Gita in this section, the yoga paths described in that text are not the only ones that can help you cultivate equanimity, be more content with what you have and what you don't have, and lead you to "inner joy." In chapter 8, I'll provide some basic information about some of these paths and how they differ from each other. But whatever their differences, all types of yoga recognize the existence of suffering due to ever-changing circumstances in the material world, and all provide ways to alleviate that suffering. And in all paths, important positive side effects of alleviating your personal suffering and learning to be more content with what you have and what you don't have are that you'll also cause less suffering for others and be a better citizen of the world.

This is why over the years I've found it helpful to open my mind to a variety of yoga paths and why this book presents techniques and ideas I've gleaned from many different teachers and yoga texts. In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Bryant refers to combining elements from different yoga paths as "a kind of *kitchorie* Yoga" (*kitchorie* being a traditional Indian dish of rice, legumes, spices, and other ingredients, the recipe for which varies not only from region to region but from cook to cook).[12] He says that this approach is not only "understandable" but is perhaps "inevitable," because the same type of approach occurred within the Indic culture itself throughout its own history. However, because I want to prevent confusion about which practices are ancient and which are modern as well as about what came from which yoga text, as I discuss various techniques and concepts, I'll let you know where they come from.

How Yoga Helps in Times of Change

> Yoga has helped me through everything—divorce, widowhood, financial disaster, and so on. I never thought about it like that because I've practiced yoga (not just asana) for over fifty years so it's like breathing.
>
> —Beth Gibbs, yoga therapist and author

During the afternoon of what I'm now calling the Dark-Orange Sky Day, I practiced yoga. I meditated and practiced a stress-management pose to help me maintain my equanimity. And because I couldn't take a walk that day, I also practiced active yoga poses for exercise, to release physical stress, and to help lift my spirits a bit. In this way, I was using my yoga practice to adapt to changes I was experiencing that very strange day and also to accept the new reality that I was facing. At the same time my friend Bob, who lives a few blocks away, turned to yoga breath practices (pranayama) to relieve his feelings of anxiety. He chose breath practices because he has learned that in general pranayama helps him to "regulate acute moods."

Yoga is especially powerful for helping you adapt to changes because it includes both ancient and modern techniques that enable you to move back into balance when you're experiencing challenges and to fortify yourself for the future. And the large number of options allows you to choose the poses and practices that work best for you, for your particular needs and in your particular situation.

Here are the main ways that yoga can help you move back into balance when changes big or small are throwing you off:

- Choosing yoga poses to balance you. Various yoga poses can affect your moods, stress levels, and energy levels in different ways. When you're experiencing feelings of stress, anger, anxiety, depression, or grief, you can choose poses to relax you, uplift you, quiet you, stimulate you, or release your pent-up energy or emotion. And the poses themselves can easily be adapted to your current physical abilities and energy levels.
- Selecting breath practices to balance you. Yoga's breath practices provide you with a key to your nervous system, allowing you to calm yourself, balance yourself, or stimulate yourself when you want to stabilize yourself during times of change. That in turn can help you regulate your moods.

- Meditating to quiet your mind. Yoga's concentration style of meditation provides you with the ability to quiet your mind as well as to reduce your stress levels. The deep peace you experience during practice can be a refuge that you can rely on during times of change.
- Using yoga's guiding principles to help you make skillful decisions. The *yamas*, yoga's ethical guidelines for conducting yourself in all your relationships, within your community, and with the world at large, are all intended to help you live with greater equanimity and can guide you in making decisions that will reduce your own suffering as well as that of others.

As important as it is to adapt to change, learning to accept change is essential for staying calm and steady through the ups and downs of life. People who refuse to accept that change is an intrinsic part of life will always suffer because when what they were hoping for doesn't happen or when they find they can no longer do things the way they used to, they may end up "fighting" against their new reality instead of adapting to it. I think we all saw examples of that throughout the pandemic and after the 2020 U.S. election. But when you make peace with change, you not only experience greater contentment, you're also be able to pivot as needed to accommodate whatever your future holds.

Here are the main ways that yoga can help you learn to be content with whatever is arising and to move through times of change with more equanimity and contentment:

- Practicing yoga poses mindfully. Practicing yoga poses with awareness—and without judgment—teaches you to listen to what's going on with you mentally, emotionally, and physically on any given day and to let go of attachments to what you think you *should* be experiencing.
- Using breath practices and meditation to be present. Both of these train you to be present as you practice, a skill you can then bring into your everyday life. During times of change, being present helps you respond skillfully to what is happening in the moment rather than focusing on what you've lost or panicking about the future.
- Meditating to learn about your thought patterns. Observing your thought patterns during meditation can teach you about your automatic reactions to changes both big and small and help you to learn about which of

your thoughts are actually untrue or are not serving you. During times of change, this understanding can help you to let go of habitual thoughts that cause you suffering and to adopt new points of view that foster more contentment.

- Meditating to foster positive emotions. Focusing on cultivating a particular feeling in your meditation, such as compassion, gratitude, joy, forgiveness, or relaxation, can train your mind and heart to respond with those feelings more often in your daily life. This not only increases your personal happiness, but also improves your relationships and encourages you to take actions to help others.
- Using yogic tools to work with your thoughts and emotions. Yoga provides tools to allow you to listen to your emotions and thoughts and to respond skillfully to them. Responding skillfully can include taking actions to help yourself or others or using yogic tools to let go of thoughts and emotions that aren't serving you. This can help you navigate more adeptly through life's transitions and times of change.
- Studying yoga philosophy. Learning about yoga philosophy provides you with alternative ways of thinking about your life, enabling you to be more content with what you have and what you don't have, and to become more comfortable with change. This in turn can make you a better citizen of the world.

I will be covering all these topics—and more—in this book.