

Sankalpa and Yoga Therapy

Dr Swami Shankardevananda Saraswati

A resolve or sankalpa is made during the practice of yoga nidra. It should be something of immense importance to you. Resolves are short sentences of moral significance to be embedded in the subconscious such as 'I resolve to stop smoking.' In the state of yoga nidra passivity, this autosuggestion is very powerful. Such resolves can change your whole life. They will certainly come true if you repeat your resolve with enough conviction. By this method you can change old habits and cure certain mental illnesses. Sankalpas can have a spiritual objective like 'I shall become more aware.' Your sankalpa or resolve should be repeated several times during the practice.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati

A sankalpa or resolve is an affirmation which you make to overcome any weakness affecting your body, performance and life, and to awaken any other strength you may feel is necessary to provide you with internal balance. Rather than saying, 'I am going to give up...', give a complementary thought such as, 'I am developing...' or 'I am expressing my positive nature'. In that way you can make a sankalpa according to your choice and wish. Treat the matter as if it has already happened. Be one step ahead of what you want to achieve.

The sensitivity and potentiality of the mind is increased by the sankalpa. It increases the willpower. Initially, through a form of positive suggestion, it takes you into the psychic dimension, where the mind is sensitized and where the faculties of the mind have a lot of force. In the initial stages sankalpa is used to focus the mental energies, and in the later stages it builds up the psychic energy. Initially it may seem like a form of autosuggestion, but it is preparing the ground for harmony to express itself within you and it sharpens the faculties of the mind.

Sankalpa is the capacity to harness the willpower and to harmonize forces in the body-mind. These forces are normally dissipated by inner conflicts or confusion or by the various external demands and responsibilities of life. It is a tool to focus the energy, the prana, the life force, so that it becomes like a laser beam.

Sankalpa is one of the most important techniques in yoga. It should be used every time we begin our yoga practice, not just in yoga nidra. The practice of yoga nidra allows the sankalpa to go very deep into the psyche; however, remembering the sankalpa during other forms of yoga practice or during daily life helps us to stay focused and grounded with a deeper sense of direction and purpose.

When we are sick and suffering, a sankalpa can be of particular benefit because it is often hard to remember what we are doing and why we are doing it. Moreover, the process of therapy is difficult and the road to recovery may not be straight and simple. We use the sankalpa as a way of remembering what it is we are trying to achieve. The sankalpa is a way of focusing our attention on a point in the future. It is a future-directed technique, so that we can carry ourselves through the hard times, with a view of the light at the end of the tunnel. We are all in therapy at one level or another. Yoga therapy is just an application of yoga in the medical setting, but we are all trying to heal and find a greater wholeness and we all have a sankalpa, even if we are not aware of it.

Levels of sankalpa

There are several levels of the sankalpa or resolve. There is one major sankalpa that we all have, which is the root sankalpa. This is the root desire, or the root sankalpa, of our being. The human mind operates mainly on desire. The word 'desire' here does not refer to emotional desires only, but rather to desire as a motivating force that operates in order to fulfil the basic needs of human existence. These include the desire to breathe, sleep and eat. Beneath these desires is the reason we have come into existence. This desire is totally aligned to our dharma, our purpose, and it is very difficult to know what this root desire is. It is a great blessing when it reveals itself.

The key to successful use of the sankalpa is to bring the sankalpa we make during yoga practice into line with the root sankalpa of your being. In a healthy mind all our desires are linked up to our root desire. Our many conscious desires are often an attempt by the subconscious mind to take us back to the fundamental, primal urge that motivates us as individuals, and this can be different for us all. Defining this primary desire requires finding the truth of our own being. This takes on different forms. It can be enlightenment, strength, love, or it can be knowledge. It can be so many different things. Sometimes the sankalpa is directed at a spiritual aim. Sometimes it is directed at a more psychological aim. Sometimes it is directed in a much more worldly sense. So when we create a conscious sankalpa we have to harness it to something that we really want.

The practice of sankalpa in yoga allows us to spend a little time contemplating and trying to tune into what we really want in life, what will give us deep satisfaction and fulfilment. It is a fundamental practice because it provides a foundation for everything else. In order to achieve satisfaction and contentment, which are the basis of health, we need to be aware of our core purpose, our dharma, our true nature, and what we want to achieve in life.

Finding a sankalpa

Finding a sankalpa is not easy. A sankalpa that really fits us takes time. Some people find it sooner, while for others there is confusion. Some like to add a whole lot of things together such as 'I should become stronger, more loving, wiser and richer and have a nice partner' and many other things. This type of sankalpa can create more confusion. The most important thing in phrasing a sankalpa is to make it simple. The simpler it is the more in harmony it is with the truth of what we are after. It is important not to get greedy. I am saying this from personal experience. After a while my sankalpa became so big that I would forget what it was. Was strength before love or love before strength? Then I got even more confused than I already was. So I made a sankalpa to make a good sankalpa. It took a couple of years to achieve that.

When we are facing illness, often it is very simple to find a sankalpa, such as 'I will become healthier'. Implicit in this resolve is the fact that to achieve this goal I have to start to do something about my health right now. It is also an open-ended sankalpa because it means that we simply get healthier and healthier and there is no limit to how healthy we will become. Ultimately a good sankalpa will come back to one primal thing that is important to us and if we achieve that thing we will get everything else at the same time. That is the ultimate curative sankalpa. On the way to achieving that primal aim, however, it can be good to have mini sankalpas that can be used day to day. We can have a sankalpa that 'Today I am going to be focused', or 'Today I will get through my meditation without sleeping'. That is the way to a greater holistic health for body and mind.

Phrasing the sankalpa

When I was in England I had a very thought provoking and animated discussion about the phrasing of the sankalpa. This was about the

use of the present or the future tense. I have always gone on the premise that the present tense is much more of an affirmation of what already is and that the future tense is used to achieve something we want. The difficulty in English is that the word 'will' refers to the future tense as well as to willpower. So, for example, when I make a sankalpa and use the future tense, what this means to me is that I will do something, I will do it using all my willpower, and I will complete it. There is no doubt in my mind of this. That is what the word 'will' implies here – 'I will do it'. I engage my willpower and if I put my mind to it, I will make it happen.

In order to make such a sankalpa, however, I will do a lot of research first. Is this a wise thing to want? Is it possible for me to achieve it? What would I have to do to achieve it? Once I am sure of what I want, I make the sankalpa and go for it. The wording is less important to me than the feeling and the knowledge that I can achieve this goal.

The phrasing of the sankalpa can be either in the present or the future tense, whatever works for you. I come from the future-oriented school because that is what works for me. My position is to emphasize willpower, not the future tense. The sankalpa reminds me that I am guiding my own life as much as possible within my dharma and according to a higher purpose. For example, when I was doing my medical training my sankalpa was 'I will finish my training'. I did not say 'I am finishing my training' or 'I am doing everything in the moment to finish my training'. That felt too complicated.

If the word 'will' does not work for you then use the affirmative and bring it into the moment. However, we have to be careful that we are not simply creating rules such as 'Never use the future tense'. Sometimes when people phrase their sankalpa in the present tense, for example, 'My immune system is fighting my cancer', underneath that there is a doubt. They are not sure. When this happens they do not hook into their will and do not connect with their energy. They just repeat a phrase in a hopeful way. They hope that the phrase is going to work and I do not believe it does. This means they have not formulated a sankalpa which hooks them into their psyche, willpower, inner strength, or a deep body sense of what they need in the moment.

Power of the sankalpa

The power of the sankalpa arises when we tune into our desires, into what we really want to achieve. When confusion and doubts arise they undermine the process, like a worm burrowing into the brain. There needs to be congruence in the phrasing of the sankalpa between what we want to achieve and our feeling state, because we want to get away from the confusion, doubt and conflict.

When helping people to formulate a sankalpa we fine-tune their sankalpa until it feels right for them. Then we can see a certain energy forming. The person has clarity about what they want and where they are going. They may change their sankalpa somewhere down the track when they need to, but they have a feeling of real conviction. Experimentation and individuality are the keys. Find your own way with it.

I am sure we all have made sankalpas and achieved things. Last year I made certain sankalpas which have come to pass. I said 'I will do this', and now a year later these things are happening. I was over-whelmed by doubts, but I said 'I will do it', and that worked for me. What I want to do is to help people experience their own power for themselves and sometimes in creating a formulation in only one way we create confusion, because that way does not work for everyone. So, personally speaking, whatever way suits you is best. Whatever works should resonate and be inspiring.

When we have been practising yoga for a long time there is a tendency to occasionally get hazy around the edges. Then we need to think 'What I am forgetting?' and it is the sankalpa. It may be that life takes us to many different places, even appears to take us out of yoga for a while, but if we remember our sankalpa then perhaps we are practising a higher yoga and being more true to ourselves. If you keep your sankalpa you carry yoga wherever you go and whatever you do.

For therapy you can have a sankalpa like 'I will become stronger', 'I will be healthier', 'I am making myself strong and able to overcome all obstacles', 'My immune system is becoming stronger every day', or something that helps you to feel your own power and your strength. So think of a sankalpa and repeat your sankalpa every day. Anything in life can fail you, but not the sankalpa made with determination, will, perseverance and sincerity.