

yoga and climbing

Part 4
by Annie Anderson



Sankalpa (intentions)

An intention is what one intends to do. Aim, purpose, goal or objective are synonyms of intention. Gil Fronsdal explains intentions as follows: "Intentions are sometimes called seeds. The garden you grow depends on the seeds you plant and water." *Sankalpa* means intention, will, goal, purpose, or determination. Intention and action often conflict, resulting in confusion. This can cause many problems if it is not recognised. Many of our intentions can even go unnoticed! Clear and definite intentions are important in climbing and Yoga to give our actions direction and purpose.

"Your will is powered by the strength of your intention, and its power is fuelled by the strength of your intention." If we set an intention, our ensuing actions will be more focused. Gil Fronsdal goes on to say: "Every mind movement involves an intention. Intentions are present even in such seemingly minute and usually unnoticed decisions as where to direct our attention or which thoughts to pursue. Just as drops of water will eventually fill a bathtub, so the accumulation of these small choices shapes who we are."

Although we practise being mindful and in the moment, it is still important to have a sense of where we are heading. Joseph Goldstein tells us, "Without any sense of destination, development, or deepening of realisation, we lose a source of tremendous energy and inspiration."

Think of a climber on a route. There is a very definite intention - to reach the top of the climb. That keeps the climber moving, but she must pay accurate and precise attention to each move otherwise she will fall. She must stay aware of each move, but at the same time hold a vision of the summit in her mind. The important point is that she is attentive and mindful of precisely where she is. By setting another intention besides the top of the route (such focus on the breath, keep moving, relax your grip), each time her mind is drawn away she can bring it back to focus on a clear intention that she has set herself in the moment.

Donna Farhi writes: "Without intention, all these postures, these breathing practices, meditations, and the like can become little more than ineffectual gestures. When animated by intention, however, the simplest movement, the briefest meditation, and the contents of one breath cycle are made potent."

Mantra

"*Tajjapas Tadartha Bhavanam*." This translates as: "To repeat with reflection upon its meaning as an aid." The meaning of a mantram is 'that which keeps the mind steady and produces the proper effect.' Its repetition is called *Japa*. Yogins use Mantras to invoke a specific state of mind. If you repeat a mantra constantly, a part of the mind becomes linked to its energy. A Mantra is a good way of achieving your intention. Practise repeating a Mantra to yourself without actually making any sound. 'Strong and steady', 'breathe easy', 'keep moving', 'let it be, whatever happens it's OKAY', 'focus' or 'strength and courage' are examples of positive affirmations for a climber. Whenever your mind wanders, bring it back to focus on the chosen word or phrase.

Dharana (concentration)

Patanjali explains that: "*Desabandhas cittasya dharana*" - "Dharana is the binding of the mind to one place, object or idea". Dharana may be translated as "holding steady", "concentration" or "single focus". It is the beginning of meditation. Once we develop the steadiness of concentration, we can keep our mind focused in the present moment. We can then begin to observe the mind and the body from a different perspective. Swami Satchidananda tells us: "If your mind is unsteady and wandering, many branched and endless are the thoughts and choices. When your mind is clear and one-pointed, there is only one decision."

fear (Bhaya) or fearlessness (Abhaya)

A natural fear of falling is a major challenge not only to climbers, but

also to yogin/ins in balances and inversions. Climbing has the added fear of risk and uncertainty. When we perceive a situation to be threatening or that demands too much from us, we experience stress. If the stress increases, we experience a physiological arousal to the perceived danger, which is known as the 'flight or fight' response. It is automatic and controlled by our autonomic nervous system. How we react to the physiological arousal is based upon our cognitive perception of the situation. We can interpret the sensations of arousal as negative (making us more anxious) or exciting (enhancing the experience).

"Anxiety (what we know as fear) is an emotional response which is the product of our capacity for conscious thought." Anxiety allows us to interpret and reflect on our mental states and feelings and the world around us. An important distinction to make is that 'physiological arousal' and 'cognitive anxiety' are independent experiences. By making this clear distinction, we immediately have a very powerful tool for practising mindfulness and creating more positive thoughts and emotions when fear arises.

The '*Bhagavad Gita*' tells us that "fear is a result of a lack of faith". This is true in sports as Dr Sandy Britain explains: "Anxiety is defined as the negative cognitive state that occurs when the sport's performer begins to doubt their ability to cope with the level of stress they are experiencing and becomes fixated on the negative consequences of failure."

Another important point to keep in mind is that "stressful situations cause increases in arousal and, if we dwell on negative thoughts when aroused, our brains naturally begin to associate the presence of arousal with negative anxiety." Worrying about what might happen can be a huge waste of time and energy as well as a source of unhappiness. So if you find yourself asking the 'what if?' question, realise that it is probably a repetitive and negative experience.

Elite performers almost always have high levels of self-confidence which acts to counter the negative effects of anxiety. Belief plays a large part in this. Swami Satchidananda writes about '*shraddha*' (whole hearted sincerity, complete and total interest in what you're doing, true zeal). He tells us in Chapter 17: "Here Krishna talks about *shraddha*, which is implicit faith and the application of one's will toward that in which one has faith. You believe in something and then apply your will toward that - that's *shraddha*."

Knowing the causes of fear (*bhaya*) and fearlessness (*abhaya*) and asking oneself whether the perception may be an accurate and healthy one, or imagined or irrational, can help to calm a mind that is focused on fear.

The beliefs and fears one has about a situation are often totally different from the actual outcome. I have experienced this many times when I have been in the grip of fear in demanding and challenging climbing situations. Being aware and mindful of these beliefs helped to take some of their fruitless and negative qualities away. Often we don't like the emotion of fear and try and get rid of it or even ignore it. David Bohm advises: "Well, rather we acknowledge that things which we think we ought to get rid of are actually the clue to what we need to learn. But it's necessary to stay with these thoughts or emotions despite the difficulties to learn what is really going on." So to be free from fear we have to become familiar with it, work with it and understand it, and learn to accept the situation and trust the process.

acceptance
"Swim like a duck in the water. But the minute you come out, shake everything off. All the water drops off, you come out free." Although Sri Swami Satchidananda uses this metaphor for meditation, it also applies to acceptance. The water is the holding on, and shaking everything off is the acceptance of the situation.

When fear arises in climbing, don't try to fight it or else it won't let

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with them and I was determined not to die with them. I saw it all as worldly garbage that I'd collected and been conditioned into along the way.

All of this just hit me whilst I was in this dark hole. The choice was quite simple: get myself out of it or stay in and probably die in it. All I know was that a stillness still existed within me, it was calling me somehow. I don't really know 'how' I managed to get back in touch with it. I ceased thinking - literally. I lost my psychological memory (not factual memory).

I went into a deep meditative state that lasted many months where I didn't know who I was. I had lost all concept of a past and future. Only a 'Now' existed. I can tune into the 'now' moment at will now, no matter what I'm doing. It's like I've got a switch in my head to 'tune out' anything I don't want in it.

into silenc

I went through a period where I didn't seem to have enough 'energy' to think, let alone speak and I went on a number of silences, lasting 3 to 4 months. I see those periods now as a recuperation period. I had to make space in my mind in order to heal inwardly.

I threw out everything that was of no use to me. I went back to the 'Empty Box,' the tabula rasa or the state of mind in Zen called 'mushin' and I've been there ever since. The 'Empty Box' has grown in size since then and gets bigger every day. One day it will encompass the Universe.

But 'acceptance' is the key, I feel, that gets the healing process going.

What was worse for me I think is that I should have known better. I'd been meditating for years beforehand reading about Buddhism and spiritual practices etc, and yet I'd turned my back on the path. I'd chosen to walk down a self-destructive path.

Most people walk down the path of self-destruction out of ignorance or habit, because they know no other way. But I'd chosen to self-destruct because I'd started to hate everyone and everything around me. Acceptance is the water that douses the flames.

I'm not sure it would have happened the way it did if I had not known about meditation. But I've always been strong willed, determined. Adversity has been my life.

no question of giving up

There was no question of me giving up, even if it came to my very last breath. It's just something I have in me. It's not a conscious thing. I think once a person has re-discovered that 'sacred thread' no matter how much they get lost in darkness, they will never lose sight of that sacred thread. Because the sacred thread is a part of us whether we like it or not. We've just got to be still enough to notice it, feel it, become one with it.

I don't know what made me get the foothold on the path. Maybe my mind has been to the edge of insanity, and fell over into darkness, and it didn't like it there. But only after it had punished the body by making it burn so the message sunk home did it allow it to pick itself back up. St John of the Cross would call the experience I went through 'The Dark Night of the Soul' I suppose.

To be continued



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you go. Instead accept it. The first step of acceptance is to be mindful. Just to see and be open. For example, if we are climbing and we begin to feel fear we often try to push the fear out of our mind. The best thing to do is to accept the fear. Instead of trying to change the energy, be open to what is there.

Lynn Hill is one of the best climbers in the world, known for the first free ascent of the Nose Route on Yosemite's El Capitan. The following quote is from her book, 'Climbing Free', when she reflects on training for the Nose. "Throughout the months of training, I practised an attitude of acceptance. No matter what the situation presented, I made an effort to remain patient and relaxed each step of the way. My intent was to pay attention to my intuitive sense and follow the natural intelligence of the body. When I made this shift in emphasis, my whole approach changed." Moving, changing, evolving and being open are all about letting go. Let go of unconscious or conscious habits, concepts, expectations, fears, anxiety and worry. Practising 'let it be' can be a great help when intrusive emotions and thoughts come into your mind when climbing or practising Yoga.

Dhyana (meditation)

One of the most difficult tasks is understanding the nature of one's own mind. Barriers can be self imposed and we are often capable of much more than we think if we are open. By dedicating time every day to a meditation practice, the mind can be trained to have more positive emotions, to be focused, less anxious and grounded in the present moment. Becoming aware of the mind (thoughts, emotions, desires, actions, intentions, perceptions, expectations) offers tremendous support to climbing.

Yoga is founded on the following Sutra: "*Yoga Citta Vrtti Nirodhah*" – "The restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff is Yoga".

When Chris Sharma climbed the world's hardest sport climb, 'Realisation', he described it as a mental, not physical, challenge. "To see the whole thing, I had to be in the moment. Meditation is important for balance. You need to rely on yourself to quiet the mind. I know having more of a mental calm has helped me when I try something that's very difficult. It makes you realise that you're not always going to be at your best, because when you meditate, you're paying close attention to your body and how it feels. As a result, you're at ease when things don't work out. You learn to appreciate the lows, just let them happen, learn from them, and go back and try again."

Research has shown that the left side of the frontal part of the brain becomes activated when a person feels positive emotions. Research studies by Paul Ekman and University of Wisconsin's Dr Richard Davidson have discovered that meditation produces the same effect, increasing activity in this area of the brain which is associated with a positive emotional state and reduced anxiety.

A metaphor for our mind could be the calm bottom of the sea at its deepest. It remains calm however high the waves on the surface may be. Joseph Goldstein writes: "The courage of a warrior is both required and developed in the practice of meditation.....It's inspiring to become a warrior. There's no one else who can do it for us. We each have to do it for ourselves. Be aware, moment to moment, paying attention to what's happening in a total way. There's nothing mystical about it, it's so simple and direct and straightforward, but it takes doing. That's what the meditation is all about."

Patanjali clearly says: "*Yathabhimata Dhyanaad Va.*" - "You can meditate on anything that will elevate you".

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