

THE MONTH OF COURAGE

I often times say that yoga is the oldest system of self-development. It's said yoga was created by Shiva as a way of dealing with the pains and struggles in life in a strong yet compassionate manner. I've experienced this directly and I know it to be true. I began my yoga practice during a time of intense and personal struggle. I felt like I was in a fog. Everything felt vague and unsatisfying. Somewhere deep inside I knew that something had to change. Something in me was demanding that I stand up and live as if my life depended on it.

One of the reasons I feel so strongly about practicing, living, and teaching yoga as a tool for self-development is because it's been such a powerful and transformative instrument in my life.

Shiva is thought to be the very first yoga teacher and historically created eighty four asanas (postures) as a means to purify and keep the body healthy in order to be able to sit still in meditation. All of that work you do on the mat is the prep work for what many ancients would consider the "real work", which is meditation.

The Indian tradition provides us with many epic stories filled with saints, sages, and heroes. Like any wisdom tradition there is much debate about what did and didn't occur, what is true and what isn't. I choose to view and interact with the stories and the characters as archetypes. Carl Jung has even suggested that each of us has a certain archetype, or a mythical personification that guides us (hello Beyonce, aka "Sasha Fierce").

In these rich Indian epics we find many characters that represent aspects of our mind. Not only are the stories entertaining, but they are offered as another tool for us to use for inquiry and reflection.

If you've attended a yoga class and the teacher says the names of the postures in Sanskrit you may have noticed that each posture ends in "asana". One of the most traditional postures is Virabhadrasana, or Warrior Pose. You probably practice at least one, if not all three of the warrior poses in your yoga class. All three are really challenging poses! With a name like Warrior, how could it not be?

Before I explain more about the posture's name you must get a visual of Shiva, The Lord of Yoga. He had long dark hair that hangs as dreadlocks. He is covered in ash, wears a garland of snakes, and usually has a troop of ghosts and demons by his side, surely a sight to see.

Before you go jumping to conclusions, know that this is just one aspect of Shiva. With the snap of a finger he can shapeshift into a radiant and handsome fellow. Shiva is also The Lord

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of Destruction. But what he destroys is that which is false and negative. He destroys illusions and the other things that hold us back, helping us to move forward in creating an even more fulfilling and authentic life.

It was Shiva who created Virabhadra out of rage and grief when his beloved wife Sati was taken from him in an unfair way. He ripped out a chunk of his long dreadlocked hair, and hurled it onto the ground. When he opened his eyes he saw a Warrior standing there. This Warrior represented Shiva's emotions of rage and righteous anger. He nodded to Shiva before flying away to take care of Sati's unjust death and defend the innocent.

Thus Virabhadrasana is born. In the three Warriors we can see a progression. In Warrior I the arms are overhead to represent an offering to a higher power. In Warrior II the arms are outstretched in preparation for battle, and in Warrior III we step forward to charge with both arms reaching forward. Intense, yes?

This month we will access Shiva to burn away the fears and illusions holding us back from our true desires and we'll access Virabhadra to move forward with courage. If thinking in these terms does not work for you, then simply summon up the part of yourself that can see the light of truth and the part of yourself that can act with faith and courage.

Courage is defined as the “quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear”. To be courageous is to be brave. When we are courageous we have the confidence to act in accordance with our values and authentic beliefs.

What are some times in your life when you had to summon what Shiva represents, which is destruction in order to transform and re-create?

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What are some thoughts, beliefs, and/or fears you once believed to be true, and then realized they were false?

What are your current fears?

Can you think of a time when those fears served you in some way? Allow yourself to view your fear from this perspective. There are fears that we've held onto for years, since childhood even. Have a conversation with a fear. Write the dialogue here:

What fear(s) are you now ready, really ready to let go of, or at least lessen it's grip?

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It's my hope that through this reflection you can witness some of the challenges you have overcome. You can see the strides that you've made, the burdens you've dropped, the beliefs you've let go of. You can witness the changes you've made, give yourself a pat on the back, get a glimpse of what your life can be, and give yourself permission to keep going. Breath by breath, day by day, one step at a time, awakening your dreams and living with fierce courage. And so it is.

Five months into The Journey of Bliss, have you set intentions, made changes, experienced setbacks, developed healthy habits? If you've done any of this you've already called upon this month's theme of courage.

One of the things that I feel so very strongly about is that living a life you love is your birthright. Yes, your birthright. It's not optional. It's not reserved for a chosen few. It's not only for the rich and famous. It's not just for those that live in the house on the hill, or drive the fancy car or wear the fancy clothes. It's not only for those that meditate for hours, or deemed as enlightened. No matter who you are, no matter your background, or your circumstances, no matter your failures...you deserve a life you love.

For me and who I am as a teacher, this is what it's all about. It's not just about the perfect yoga pose. It's not just angles, alignment, and asana. It's about life. What good is a Warrior on the mat, if we can't invoke up the courage of a Warrior off the mat?

It's time to get to the nitty gritty. To name what exactly it is you want for your life then get to claiming it. It is your birthright after all. Then one of two things needs to happen:

1. You either change your perception about your current life.
2. You begin to make changes. Slowly but surely you move towards a life that you truly love.

When I use the word "love" I am not referring to always ecstatic and giddy type of happiness. I've learned that's not sustainable. When I speak of a life you a love I mean a life that feels satisfying and fulfilling. You feel joyful and content from the level of your heart and soul. This satisfaction comes not from expensive trips and material objects but from knowing yourself, doing what you love, and making a difference. All of the other things are a bonus. The travel, the cool yoga pants, new ring, the things that make life easy and enjoyable, it's all icing on the cake.

For some of us fear stops us dead in our tracks and we never even get the opportunity to put on the courage pants. The gremlins get to us before we even give ourselves permission to dream, to think that thing could look and feel a lot different. I find that reflecting on these questions often help me to stay clear on my life path:

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1. How do I want my life to look?

2. How you I want to feel?

3. What's important to me?

A perfect day: I love this exercise and have seen it used both by Abraham Hicks and Julia Cameron. The idea is to envision your most perfect 12 hours. It doesn't matter if you think it's possible, rational, or crazy. Your job is simply to ponder what bliss would look and feel like for you and these 12 hours.

The last time I did this exercise it looked like this:

Wake at 6:30. Watch the sun rise. Connect with my body. Appreciate my body.

Read something inspiring, write something inspiring, teach something inspiring.

Prepare a delicious meal. Connect with nature. Study something inspiring.

Connect with loved ones over a healthy, decadent, and delicious meal. Enjoy great drinks and conversation.

Catch a flight to Tulum. Wake, watch the sun rise. Repeat

Journey to Bliss

think you are? You really think you can pull that off? Things are safe now, why rock the boat? Ha, remember the last time you tried going out on a limb?"

In Mary Oliver's poem *The Journey* she says:

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --

In the past I've always interpreted "the voices" as other people, voices outside of you giving you their bad advice. Now I'm seeing this is a new light and knowing that our very own inner voice is just as loud as and many times more critical than anyone else. We silently say things to ourselves that we would never say in public. Things we wouldn't dare say about anyone we remotely cared about, especially when we get the urge to try something new or different.

The gremlins and negative inner voices can get really loud and they can be very persistent. Simply nod and smile at your gremlin friend and remind yourself that ultimately she is trying to protect you from the unknown and from getting hurt.

In Pema Chodron's book, "When Things Fall Apart" she shares a story on courage and fear:

"Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn't want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her the instructions for the battle.

The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went toward fear, prostrated three times and asked, "May I have permission to go into battle with you?" Fear said, "Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission."

Then the young warrior said, "How can I defeat you?" Fear replied, "My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don't do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can even be convinced by me. But if you don't do what I say, I have no power."

In that way, the student warrior learned how to defeat fear.

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I love this approach to fear. We've all heard the sayings, "face your fears", "overcome your fears", "ignore your fears", and "silence your fears". Not all fear is bad. Fear is what keeps us safe many times. Fear is what tells us not to walk down that alley alone. Fear is what advises us not to walk too close to the fire. The challenge is to begin to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy fears. To know the difference between what is real and what is unreal, what is truth and what is fiction.

Fear will most likely occur when you take a risk and try something new or different. We've all gone out on a limb before and come crashing to the ground. Every single one of us has failed at one time or another. You my friend are not alone. It's ok. I still feel fear a lot.

One of the simplest yet profound questions that I've asked myself time and time again when journeying into new territory and confronting fear is this:

"What is the worst thing that could happen?"

This single question has shed a lot of light over the years. It's given my fear a chance to voice itself. It allowed me to think about what might actually happen if I failed. It allowed me to see that this vision, this desire, this dream was indeed possible.

When I was toying with the idea of opening Barefoot Works, the gremlins were coming at me full force, saying to me, *"Who do you think you are? You have no business running a business. You don't have any connections in Lexington. You have no money. How the hell do you think you're gonna pull this off? Do you really think you can earn a living teaching yoga?"*

I shushed the gremlins long enough and asked, "What's the worst thing that could happen?" It was, "You and Andy won't have a place to live and you'll move in with Rhonda (my sister) and all the kiddos. It will be cozy to say the least. But that is the worst possible scenario." Thank god that didn't happen. I'd probably be divorced and not speaking to my sister.

When I was pondering leading my first retreat overseas the gremlins went wild. *"You haven't even been in business for a year. Who do you think you are (I get that one a lot)? Where exactly are you gonna find students to go to Mexico with you? Shoot, you haven't even been to Maya Tulum. What is you hate it? What if it's a disaster? Who is gonna run the studio while you are away? You can't go "work" in Mexico. Who does that anyway?"*

Again I asked, "What's the worst thing that could happen?" It was, "You don't get enough people to go and cancel the retreat. Maybe you spend a week in Mexico." That wasn't so terrible. I could manage that.

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I confidently and lovingly said to the gremlin, *“You’re right this is really scary stuff. But we’re gonna do this. So you can either buck up and come along for the ride or get left in the dust. Regardless of what happens, we’re gonna be fine. It’s time to cowgirl up.”*

The honest truth is that a lot of us are used to playing it safe. Not just on occasion, but always. Fearlessness is a beautiful and strong thing when we apply it towards living a soul satisfying life.

So let’s play. Think of four things you would love to have happen. List those as your dreams on the next page. Next, feed your lil gremlin. Let it go wild and have its say. Ask, “What’s the worst thing that could happen?” Lastly, if you decide your dream is worth the risk then list an action step.

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Dream

What the Gremlin says:

What's the worst scenario?

Action Step

Dream	What the Gremlin says:	What's the worst scenario?	Action Step

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The truth is, even if you fail, you will survive. You'll be ok. You might thrive even more.

Ways to explore and express courage this month:

- Be fierce in your Warrior pose this month.
- Dance wildly in your car at a stoplight. Bonus points for singing to the top of your lungs.
- Stand up for yourself. Stand up for someone else.
- Wear an outfit you wouldn't normally wear.
- Turn yourself upside down. Stand on your hands. Stand on your head.
- Do something that scares you. Jump in head first in the deep end of the pool (of course). Sign up for a singing class. Take a yoga teacher training. Sign up for a marathon. Climb a tall mountain. Go surfing.
- Forgive someone. Forgive yourself.
- Do something you're not good at.
- Pay for the person's coffee behind you in line.
- Write a love letter to someone you admire. Send it to them.
- Wake up and do one thing that makes you feel uncomfortable, that nudges you to your physical or emotional edge.
- Express your unique self by the ways you dress, act, speak, and live in general.
- Take the next step towards your dream.
- Speak out for a cause you believe in even if it's an unfavorable position.
- Do one thing daily you think you can't.

A Meditation for Courage:

Find a comfortable place to rest. You can lie down on your yoga mat, in your bed, or sit in any comfortable seated position. Bring to mind a current challenge you are facing. This is a challenge that will require you to think, act, or speak in a courageous way in order to create change.

For a few moments feel this challenge in your body. How does your body feel? Does it feel heavy or light? Do you feel any tension or straining in your body? Allow yourself to make the observations without any judgments.

Feel this challenge in your breath. When you are holding onto the energy and feelings of this challenge how does your breath feel? Does it flow smoothly and easily? Does the breath feel choppy and stuck? Is the breath shallow, or is it deep?

Allow yourself to reflect on this particular challenge. What are the thoughts that you have about this challenge? Are they positive or negative? What is the tone of the mind? Do you feel despair, do you feel hope? What do you feel?

Now envision a strong and powerful Warrior. A Warrior that holds true to their convictions and ready to confront their fears. You are this Warrior. You stand strong, you trust yourself, and you have courage.

You center yourself. Gathering all of your energy, bringing your body, breath, and mind into the moment. One by one this Warrior destroys your fears.

You inhale and breathe in hope. Hope fills your entire body. You exhale and let go of despair. Breathing this despair down your body, out your feet, and into the earth.

You inhale and breathe in courage. Courage fills your entire body. You exhale and let go of fear. Breathing this fear down your body, out your feet, and into the earth.

You inhale and breathe in light. This is the light of the sun, moon, and all the stars. Light fills your entire body. You exhale and let go of darkness. Breathing this darkness down your body, out your feet, and into the earth.

Breath by breath you move away from fearful thoughts. You connect to your highest truth and wisdom. You ask your higher self, "What do I do next?" You patiently listen, again without making judgments. [Give yourself several minutes here.]

Feel your body resting on the earth. Connect with your most natural and easy breath. Begin to awaken your body and make easy movements. Come back to seated and commit to one action step you can take today to move closer to your heart's desires.

Mudra

Abhaya Mudra – A mudra for fearlessness. To practice: raise your right hand shoulder height, arm bent, and palm facing outward. Practice anytime you need to summon your fierce self.



Quotes/Readings

I have to begin with the one that has been the most influential for me. Oprah’s magazine was my introduction to a poet that I hold dearly in my heart, Mary Oliver. “The Journey” inspired me in ways that I can’t begin to express. Mary Oliver’s words gave me a sense of courage. They awoke a fierce desire in me, challenged me to save myself, put me in the driver’s seat of my life and set me on the path that I’m on today. I hope they do the same for you:

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver

Journey to Bliss

“I will not die an unlived life. I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire.

I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid, more accessible, to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise.

I choose to risk my significance, to live so that which came to me as seed goes to the next as blossom, and that which came to me as blossom, goes on to fruit.”

~ Dawna Markova

“Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.”

~ Dalai Lama

West of doubt where you fear your greatness and embrace it anyway. We join hands and listen for the whispers of how we each make a difference.

~Jennifer Louden

"When one door closes another door opens; but we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us."

~Alexander Graham Bell

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us most."

~Marianne Williamson

"If I get stuck in who I am now, I will never blossom into who I might yet become. I need to practice the gentle art of letting go."

~Sam Keen

It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.

~Alan Cohen

There are people who put their dreams in a little box and say, "Yes I've got dreams, of course I've got dreams." Then they put the box away and bring it out once in a while to look at it, and yep, they're still there. These are great dreams, but they never even get out of the box. It takes an uncommon amount of guts to put your dreams on the line, to hold them up and say, "How good or how bad am I?" That's where courage comes in.

~Erma Louise Bombeck

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

~Anais Nin