



The Warrior Sequence, I II & III



In Hatha Yoga do not measure the success of your physical performance, but rather pay particular attention to what is happening to your body, since the body is the gate of the soul. Focus on the even flow of your breath since the breath is the spirit of the pose and the measure of your inner and outer stability. Composure, patience and humility are more important than performance and achievement.

Asanas have been evolved over thousands of years so as to exercise every muscle, nerve and gland in the body. They secure a fine physique, which is strong and elastic without being muscle bound and they keep the body free from disease. They reduce fatigue and soothe the nerves. However their real wonder lies in the way they train, discipline, and *inspire* the mind.

Warrior I, II AND III – Virabhadrasana I, II and III

Virabhadra is the name of a fierce warrior, described as having a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet, wielding a thousand clubs, and wearing a tiger's skin

Warrior Poses can teach you how to act with wisdom, courage, and unwavering focus.



Over two millennia ago, one of the most essential teachings of Yoga was given on a battlefield, of all places. As recounted in the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna, the consummate warrior, becomes paralyzed with doubt and fear just as he is about to be called to action. Luckily for him, his chariot driver happens to be none other than Krishna, who proceeds to reveal to Arjuna the teachings of Yoga to liberate him from his confusion.

Trying to summarize an epic that runs to over 2 million English words is a futile endeavour, and I won't even try! The essence of the story is that there are two clans representing "good" and "evil", or more accurately, those who are aligned with a just cause, versus those who are aligned with an unjust cause.





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It is clear that the Kurus have no just claim to the throne they have usurped, not all of those fighting on their side are evil. In fact, many soldiers are bound by oaths of honour, debts of gratitude, promises made (for whatever reason), or other duty.

They have a duty to fight as well as possible, even if the cause for which they fight is dishonourable. Moreover, the Pandavas, though much abused, are not without their own faults. They lost their kingdom because one of their members gambled it away, along with everything they own, including themselves. This is why I say it is not just a battle between good and evil - it's not that simple.

What makes this war so tragic is that this is more or less a family feud - the warring families are related. The Pandavas and the Kurus grew up together, had the same teachers and preceptors. The warriors are facing their own family members - uncles, grandfathers - and facing honoured childhood teachers. They are facing men who had raised them, who taught them what they know (including how to fight) - men for whom they'd give their own lives, under different circumstances. Often the only reason someone was on a particular side was that he had made a promise to fight on that side. These were beloved family members and friends, not an unknown, faceless enemy.

Now it is the time for the battle. The armies are massed up, eager to fight. There is a strict code of behaviour for this battle, in keeping with Kshatriya (warrior) caste honour. No one can be killed, who has stopped fighting, or whose weapon is lost, or who is fleeing. A rider cannot fight an unmounted man. Fighting begins at dawn and must stop at sunset, after which warriors from both sides are free to mingle in friendship. All in all it was very civilized. Of course, as the fighting grinds on, all these rule fall by the wayside.

According to the Mahabharata, close to 4 million men were assembled on that battlefield. Most of them would be killed in the next eighteen days. It was an impressive slaughter. However, the Bhagavad Gita takes place on the first day, just before battle begins.

Arjuna asks Krishna to drive his chariot in between the two armies, so he can see them all. He is looking at the massive assembly of men, knowing that many of them will soon be dead, knowing that these are his childhood friends, cousins, beloved uncles, and revered instructors. His sadness is overwhelming - he is being called upon to fight and kill the very people who were there for him while he was growing up, who he played with as a child, uncles and grandfathers who sat him in their laps. These are the people who made him what he is today, who make life worth living. Realizing the enormity of what is about to happen, Arjuna suddenly loses his nerve. He would rather be killed, he says, than to fight against his beloved family, teachers, and friends. What joy could there be in any victory, if at the cost of killing his loved ones? This first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is called, "The Yoga of Arjuna's Sorrow".





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Krishna begins to speak, and what follows is a dialog between the two friends.

The Bhagavad Gita has 18 chapters. In each, Krishna expounds on teachings of one sort or another. Often these teachings seem out of sync, even contradictory. Frustrating to those of us who have grown up with an either-or way of thinking, this is a common feature in Indian scripture.

As Krishna speaks, Arjuna's confusion and dejection ease somewhat, but he still has doubts. He is uncertain - what Krishna says makes sense, but... Finally, in Chapter 11, Krishna reveals himself in his supreme manifestation, after giving Arjuna the eye he needs to behold such a thing. Arjuna is suitably impressed. His hair stands on end and he is filled with dread.

After this, though, Arjuna is no longer beset by doubts. He sees clearly that he must choose the right course of action, right here, right now. He asks for some clarification, and Krishna obliges; but now Arjuna is without any doubts. He knows he must fight, that this is his duty - his 'svadharma' - and that it's OK.

Without trying to force too much meaning into all this, I would suggest that the battle can be viewed as the sort struggle we may face at some point in our lives - a fight between two sides, pulling us in different directions. Like Arjuna, we may be called upon to say goodbye to some beloved friends, traits or habits we learned early and that have served us well. The struggle may not be between 'right' and 'wrong', but more between what furthers our growth, and what holds us back. We may find ourselves deeply troubled and confused when we realise that there needs to be a battle, that we've got to choose sides and fight. Like Arjuna, we may lose heart and decide that the fight isn't worth it.

We may also wend our way through various philosophical concepts, hearing about this or that technique, not convinced that any of them are useful or relevant.

One of the first words of the Bhagavad Gita offers a hint as to the spiritual nature of the text. It begins, "Dhritarastra said, 'Dharmakshetre'...". That word, 'Dharmakshetre', means 'in the field of Dharma'. While it could be just another name for the field on which the battle was fought ('Kuruksheetra'), it seems to me to make more sense if we take it to mean, 'in the field of honour, truth, what is right'. The word 'Dharma' has many meanings. We don't have a single English word that covers them all. It can mean truth, righteousness, religion, law or lawfulness, the way of righteousness, and similar concepts. 'Dharmakshetra' can mean the place where one seeks to do what is right. That place is often within us.

Krishna defines Yoga as "wisdom in action", *Yogah karmasu kausalam*. He guides Arjuna to reflect upon the source of his actions and find his internal center, where he is free from the fluctuations of the mind.





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Many centuries later Mahatma Gandhi would take these teachings of the Gita as guiding principles for his life.

In the holistic system of Yoga, the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects are integrated – each one affecting the others – no one part operating in isolation. Practising the Warrior Pose Series of asanas builds physical strength while giving us the opportunity to cultivate the qualities we associate with being a Warrior, such as inner strength, resilience and courage. If suitable we can choose to repeat a sankalpa, or positive intention, while doing the asanas. This opens us to new possibilities and creates the space for making conscious changes as we focus on particular qualities.

Yoga tenets from the Bhagavad Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras offer us some sign posts to empower us to be warriors. As well as providing a guiding light, Yoga wisdom encourages us to contemplate and explore our inner truth and values, to listen to our buddhi, or inner wisdom, and follow our own dharma or life path in an authentic way. The Bhagavad Gita suggests that to flourish and reach our potential as humans, we have a bank of universal qualities available to us to cultivate as needed. The qualities we display very much contribute to our state of mind and how we operate in the world. By consciously developing these qualities, they can then become part of our value system and can be drawn on at difficult times. With awareness, we can respond more consciously and consistently with our values, and what we pay attention to grows stronger. Our values operate in all areas of our life and do make a difference to our society. Mahatma Gandhi said, **"We must be the change we wish to see in the world"**.

Krishna reminds Arjuna in the Gita that, although there are times when we might prefer to ignore challenging situations, we may need to face our fears and take skilful action to the best of our ability, even if this involves rocking the boat or upsetting the status quo. Krishna advises us to have a clear intention but to be unattached to a particular outcome, as ultimately we are not in control of other people or the outcome of situations. Being open to other possibilities creates space for situations to be resolved in an amicable way or for us to be pleasantly surprised by something even better than we had anticipated. Think of a scenario where some residents are unhappy about some trees being removed by the local council. The residents might take various forms of actions to try to save the trees. The outcome may not involve saving those particular trees, but instead having them replaced with more suitable trees that will not damage the road and footpath.

Gandhi saw the battlefield as a metaphor for our internal conflicts and Arjuna as the archetypal warrior within one who sees through illusions to the truth and is able to act with courage and unwavering focus. Perhaps as a beginning Yoga student, you have already encountered a glimpse of this warrior spirit in the standing pose Virabhadrasana II. In the deep lunge and open arms of this Warrior Pose variation, there is a challenging





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intensity, a marked contrast to the images of Yoga as a passive practice intended for relaxation.

You may ask, "Why is there a Warrior Pose, when Yoga is a practice of nonviolence?"

As a strong pose, Virabhadrasana II can teach modern yogis a lot about the dynamics of bringing wisdom into the actions of our everyday lives. It is a powerful pose, no doubt, but as you explore the pose's alignment and inner attitude, the heart of the peaceful warrior begins to reveal itself.

As we go about our daily lives, we often speak of feeling "off-centered" or of needing to "get centered." Being "centered" is a feeling of being balanced and at ease on all levels physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually.

It is the clear space of awareness from which the wise action within any moment can be found.

As a metaphor for living, Yoga can help us see how unnecessary tension within our actions shifts us off-center. To maintain Warrior Pose, we often harden our eyes, hold our breath, or shrug our shoulders.

Like a Zen archer spotting a bull's-eye, who practices just holding a bow for two years before ever releasing an arrow, find balance within by focusing and withdrawing the senses.

Let the backs of your eyes look inside while you stay totally present. Feel the power of your energy radiating freely from your center. Find the balance between working to your full potential and completely relaxing, mirroring the effortless stillness of an eagle hovering over a current of wind.

As you explore this dance between being active and receptive, you can contemplate Krishna's paradoxical teaching, "**One who can see action within inaction and inaction within action is the wisest among all beings.**"

As you look out from this still point and open your inner ears, you may hear your internal warrior teacher giving you insights to bring you into balance not only in this moment, but in your life as a whole. Like Arjuna as Krishna whispered over his shoulder, you may be given confidence to face your fears, courage to move forward, compassion to embrace another, and wisdom to surrender to the one who holds the reins.





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Modern day Yogic Warriors

Examples of socially engaged warriors include Martin Luther King Jnr, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi. On some level, they have all displayed courage and compassion, while proposing non-violent solutions to very problematic situations. Martin Luther King Jnr is also known as the 'love warrior', because while he struggled for civil rights he was able to maintain an attitude of love and kindness. He maintained this attitude even while being vilified and threatened by many detractors. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela rose above hatred and imprisonment to lead his people to democratic elections. When standing up to the British colonial powers, Gandhi used non-violent tactics to help bring about an independent India. At the moment, Aung San Suu Kyi opposes Myanmar's brutal military rule. Because of her aspiration for democracy and human rights, she remains under house arrest. Despite her situation, Aung San Suu Kyi still maintains a non-violent and compassionate response to the regime. Similarly, the Dalai Lama supports this type of approach toward China, even though he is in exile because of his desire for an autonomous Tibet.

The human mind has the capacity to be adaptable and resilient, and it is empowering for us to cultivate new ways of being. Through dealing with thorny challenges we grow and transform, we learn to reflect on the values and qualities that inspire us. As we are all part of the tapestry of life, social action is an important part of our journey.

Physical Benefits of The Warrior Sequence:

Virabhadrasana I

- Stretches the chest and lungs, shoulders and neck, belly, groins (psoas)
- Strengthens the shoulders and arms, and the muscles of the back
- Strengthens and stretches the thighs, calves, and ankles

Virabhadrasana II

- Strengthens and stretches the legs and ankles
- Stretches the groins, chest and lungs, shoulders
- Stimulates abdominal organs
- Increases stamina
- Relieves backaches, especially through second trimester of pregnancy
- Therapeutic for carpal tunnel syndrome, flat feet, osteoporosis, and sciatica

Virabhadrasana III

- Strengthens the ankles and legs
- Strengthens the shoulders and muscles of the back
- Tones the abdomen
- Improves balance and posture

Yoga is wisdom in action, *Yogah karmasu kausalam*

