

CHAPTER ONE

Power Your Yoga Practice with Power Thinking

Being incarcerated, doing yoga is the only time I feel like a human being.

Rachel, serving time in county jail



The word *yoga* from the ancient Sanskrit language means “to yoke” the physical to the spiritual, creating a wholeness of being. Yoga is a practice of bodily poses called *asanas* developed in India thousands of years ago by holy men and women as a way to attain a meditative state. Psychologists call this state “the flow.” You are in the flow when you are immersed in an activity, your mind is clear of thoughts, and you are fully in the present moment. The spiritually minded view this as tapping into the real and unspoiled self that connects you to all creation as one. Regardless of how

you define it, this meditative state connects your mind, body, and spirit, and allows for the healing of spiritual, emotional, and physical trauma. This is especially true if you combine yoga with “power thinking” before, during and after your practice.

Power thinking is simply taking power over your thoughts. Research has proven the benefits: When you actively dismiss self-critical inner talk, and instead, direct positive and supportive thoughts toward yourself, you experience less stress, anxiety, depression, rumination, perfectionism, and shame. Those who cultivate positive thoughts toward themselves, feel greater satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, self-confidence, optimism, and curiosity. Power thinkers are less likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after traumatic experiences and are better able to cope with chronic health condition and life upheavals, such as divorce, death, and other losses. The resulting elevated emotions of power thinking such as joy, gratitude and love draw positive opportunities and outcomes to you.

Power thinking differs from self-esteem, which is contingent on achievement. When bad things happen, our self-esteem often collapses, while power thinking supports you during difficult times.

Understandably, some may feel that being easy on oneself is for weaklings. This is because our culture has encouraged men to be tough, independent and stoic, and women to “have it all,” and “be it all.” Both men and women are expected to “never let them see you sweat.” But life doesn’t conform to these unrealistic expectations, and suffering is universal, no matter how stoic you make yourself appear to the outside world.

Even with permission to let go of the inner critic, you may still hang onto the belief that being hard on yourself is the way to stay motivated and keep an edge. But research tells us the opposite: When you are kind and loving toward yourself, you become vastly more motivated, are more able to learn and to move on from failure, and progress through life with greater ease and enjoyment. Through reversing your thought processes, you can begin to experience moments of wellbeing, and those positive feelings can expand so that you can reestablish yourself as who you really are, begin to heal from trauma, and enjoy the benefits of a spiritual awakening. (Which, in very simple terms, is awakening to a dimension of reality beyond the confines of your ego that we will talk more about in Chapter Six.)

This isn't to say it's easy to change your thinking. In addition to the trauma you have experienced in your life, you have all of the stressors of being locked up, which lends to a deluge of thoughts, most being discouraging and judgmental, which creates more suffering. Some suffer more than others because they are better at inflicting suffering on themselves with cruel and harsh inner thoughts.

Self-critical thinking does not make you a bad or lesser person. It's simply an addiction that can be broken like any other addiction. You may be thinking, wow, addiction is a strong word to apply to my thoughts. But if you consider that an addiction is something that you *can't stop doing*, then if you're stuck in a loop of hateful thoughts that *you can't stop thinking*, well, that's an addiction.

This is how it happens: The human brain thinks 60-70,000 thoughts every day and 90% of those thoughts are the same thoughts you thought the day before

and the day before and the day before. Unfortunately, because our brains are wired for survival, we humans tend to dwell on unpleasant thoughts.

Our brains are composed of trillions of nerve cells called neurons. When you think a judgmental or not very nice thought it's communicated from one neuron to another through an electrical charge called a synapse. The thought causes a synapse to fire, which signals your body to release corresponding chemicals. These chemicals make you feel exactly how you've been thinking, which inspires more of the same thought, which again fires the synapses that cause your body to release even more toxic chemicals into your system. The process continues in a loop. Eventually because neurons that fire together wire together, they become wired together. Eventually your brain develops a neural network dedicated to that thought. As spiritual teacher Deepak Chopra aptly put it, "To think is to practice brain chemistry."

But like they say on TV that's not all! Because you're also thinking *associated* bad thoughts and these thoughts develop their own neural networks. Now you've got clusters of neural networks that are all supporting these downer thoughts.

To break the addictions to these thoughts, emotions and unhappy brain chemicals, you must purposefully reject bad thoughts and instead think happy thoughts. As you continue to neglect the toxic neural networks by refusing to think self-destructive thoughts and instead think positive, uplifting thoughts, the unhappy neural networks get pruned away, and new happy neural networks replace them.

Think about how you speak to yourself. Do you put yourself down daily, hourly, pretty much constantly? Switching to positive inner commentary doesn't

happen overnight. But you can slowly make the shift, catching yourself in a destructive train and replacing those thoughts with powerful positive comments. With some effort, you can learn to speak to yourself the way you would speak to someone you love.

This is another hard concept for many to grasp, as people who speak harshly to themselves may have learned that language from someone else—most often a parent or caregiver. Schoolyard bullying is also based on mean personal comments. As children, most of us heard the saying, “Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you.” This is completely false. The truth is, sticks and stones *will* break your bones, but names can completely destroy you. Even as we mature into adults and leave mean people behind, our minds carry on with an unrelenting and incredibly creative voice that cruelly embellishes the original insults. Eventually, someone who was called “lame brain” as a child is now calling themselves a dumbass, failure, idiot, and moron, along with commentary such as, “I’m a loser,” and “I’m worthless.”

People who have been demeaned early in life often experience a cascade of self-destruction as adults and then proceed to berate themselves with self-critical talk. If this resonates with you, take heart. Spiritual teacher Dr. Joe Dispenza says, “Just because you have a thought, doesn’t mean it’s true.” You are incarcerated physically, but you do not have to live in a second prison in your mind.

There are seven powerful positive life practices that will enhance your yoga and meditation practice and give you peace, even in prison, and will provide support for the rest of your life.

Seven Powerful Positive Life Practices

1. Accept that you are on your own journey.
2. Do not allow present suffering make your situation worse.
3. Recognize that suffering is a shared human experience.
4. Become aware of your self-critical inner voice.
5. Take regular time-outs into the present moment.
6. Stop the discouraging self-talk that often accompanies suffering.
7. Remain aware.

Accept That You Are on Your Own Journey

Wherever you are in life, you are on your own journey. No one can live your journey, or “save” you, but you. Before you can make progress in living a more powerful positive life, it’s crucial to accept that you alone are in the driver’s seat of your journey.

Do Not Allow Present Suffering Make Your Situation Worse

Examples of suffering are being incarcerated, social injustice, racial injustice, economic injustice, loneliness, financial ruin, divorce, the death of a loved one, missing your children’s milestones, losing a child or having a child endure disease, betrayal by a friend or family member, chronic or acute illness, injury from an accident or violence, solitary confinement, and so on. Suffering results in torrents of emotions such as anger, sadness, regret, shame, and heartache. No matter what you are feeling, it’s normal and natural to experience corresponding emotions to physical, emotional, and spiritual insults and injuries. However, dwelling in suffering, especially when you are trying to engage in a yoga or meditation practice

is not only counterproductive, but it compounds and perpetuates suffering. Rather than complaining, blaming, criticizing, and otherwise stewing in suffering, engage power thinking! Say to yourself, I will dwell in gratitude for my yoga practice or any other positive affirmation that feels good to you.

As spiritual teacher Dr. Joe Dispenza explains what can happen when people habitually react to a stressful event. “If you don’t know how to control your emotional reactions and there’s a refractory period, and you let that emotional reaction linger for hours or days, it turns into a mood If you keep that refractory period going for weeks and months, you’ve developed a temperament. If you keep that same refractory period going on for years, it’s called a personality trait.”

A sure way to shorten an emotional refractory period is to immediately take charge of your thoughts when you recognize suffering. Begin by identifying the thoughts that are causing you grief—those thoughts that release toxic brain chemicals to keep you addicted to a downer way of being. The next step is to begin to rehearse new, positive, supportive, uplifting thoughts. Make a mental or a real list. When you catch yourself in a bad train of thought as a result of an emotional reaction, pull out your list and engage your powerful voice.

Practice dismissing harsh thoughts by replacing those thoughts with uplifting, supportive thoughts as often as possible. For example, “I’ve always been an uncoordinated klutz,” can be “I’m so proud of myself for practicing yoga. I feel good about myself.” Or, “My body is an old, broken-down piece of garbage,” can become, “I love my body, and my body is deserving of love.” Use your power!

Recognize That Suffering Is a Shared Human Experience

Suffering is endemic to the human experience; everyone suffers. You are not alone, different, weird, or damaged because you suffer. Even people who appear to have all the privileges, wealth, and power in the world are not immune from suffering.

Understanding this truth connects you to all human beings. When suffering strikes, resist the temptation to blame and berate yourself, and instead, accept that suffering is a shared human experience and reframe the moment by power thinking elevated states of being, such as calm, peaceful, grateful, joyful, inspired, creativity, optimistic, patient, delighted, happy, comfortable, secure, quiet, confident.

Become Aware of Your Self-Critical Inner Voice

The spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle said, “The mind is a torture instrument,” which is entirely true for many. You must become aware that you have been controlled by this disapproving voice if you are to transform your life into a peaceful place to practice yoga and meditation.

You must also become aware of exactly what your voice is saying to you. Most people have the same tape that plays over and over, incessantly. It’s normal to allow disapproving thoughts to wash over you every single day of your life until you

are numbed. But what exactly are your thoughts? If you don't want to write them down because of lack of privacy, whisper them to yourself when you have a moment alone. Chances are you are saying the same discouraging affirmations to yourself over and over and over. *This is destructive mind control.* Once you identify your disapproving inner commentary, it will become entirely clear to you that something must change. In fact, those who have the loudest voices will have the boldest epiphanies.

Take Regular Time-Outs into the Present Moment

A useful and extremely transformative practice is to take a few seconds of mindful time-outs as often as you can during the day. Mindfulness—the act of being aware of the moment and all the sensations in your body—is a form of meditation, mind clearing, and actively being in the present moment.

To enhance this experience, engage in belly breathing (see page TK) as you place your awareness on aspects of your self and surroundings:

- Air flowing in and out of your lungs
- Your arms, legs, fingers, toes
- The sensation of blinking your eyes
- The atmosphere around you
- The colors you see
- The way your skin feels when you touch it
- The sensation of washing your hands
- The act of walking, step by step

These are just a few examples. Becoming completely involved in very elementary aspects of life gives your mind a chance to rest in neutral.

Dismiss the Discouraging Self-Talk That Often Accompanies Suffering
Along with suffering comes the chastising of the mind. You beat yourself up when you fail—or even when you succeed because some aspect of the achievement wasn't perfect enough. Some who have illnesses that are beyond their control will twist those circumstances to make it their fault: They are damaged, inferior, and so on. The disapproving voice does not need a current topic to latch onto, and actually prefers repetition.

If you're still not convinced, ask yourself this: Has tearing yourself down, berating yourself, and cataloguing your faults and failures *ever* produced a single moment of happiness, self-improvement, or productivity?

But just because you are now aware of the inner voice doesn't mean it will simply fade away. Neural networks have been formed and are in full swing firing synapses and causing your body to release toxic downer chemicals into your system. Until you prune the undesirable neural networks away, your inner voice (addiction) will persist until you are worn down, or until you take a stand against it. If you have ever quit an addiction such as tobacco, caffeine, drugs or alcohol, you are familiar with the voice in your head that comes up with myriad convincing arguments for you to continue your addiction. This head noise can be extremely loud, chaotic, unrelenting, and insistent. You may have to be rather forceful with the voice. For example, if the voice says, "You're stupid and no one cares what you think," immediately respond with a power thought come back such as, "I'm fun and people

enjoy talking with me.” The voice will of course move on to another criticism so you must stay on top of it. It’s work, but the effort is worth it. Dr. Germer says, “A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day. A string of such moments can change the course of your life.”

That is really something to think about.

Unsupportive thoughts can be replaced with power thoughts—*even if you don’t believe them to be true*. One of the most fascinating truths about the human brain is that it does not know anything about your reality that you don’t tell it. For example, if you ruminate on something bad that happened to you, your brain will go *there*, reliving the actual event. Correspondingly, it releases a torrent of chemicals that make you feel *as bad* as when the event happened. But if you tell your brain (through your senses, as in “being there”) that your wildest dreams just came true, *that* is your brain’s reality. Your brain will then release positive, excited, happy brain chemicals causing positive, excited, happy emotions to flood your body,

“If you don’t talk to yourself, your self will talk to you!”

Televangelist, Pastor Joel Osteen

So, go for it! And the really nice thing is that no one can read your thoughts. You are free to think whatever is good for you. Research has shown us that 80% of people are nicer to others than they are to themselves. Try an experiment of speaking to yourself in a powerful supportive way for one minute, one hour, then one morning, one afternoon, one entire day, one week. Catch yourself when you fall back into judgmental thinking, forgive yourself, and try again.

Talk to Yourself as If You Are Your Best Friend

I am loveable and worthy of love.

I blew it, but my mistakes don't define me.

I love myself no matter what.

I am valuable.

I am a good father/mother.

I am perfect the way I am.

I replace self-doubt and judgment with self-love

I forgive and accept my flaws.

I am worthy of love, even with my mistakes.

I will begin all over with forgiveness

I accept myself as I am.

I send myself kindness and accept my failings.

I have made mistakes but am on a new path in life.

I forgive myself.

I am beautiful inside and out.

I am an intelligent person capable of learning and growing.

I am safe and free in my own mind and spirit.

I deserve empathy and will give myself compassion.

I release all bad feelings toward myself.

I direct self-love toward myself.

I am proud of myself for doing yoga and meditation.

I'm doing the best I can in yoga and meditation.

I'm seeing so much progress in my yoga practice.

I feel the joy of life.

I celebrate my life.

My body is responding and growing in my yoga practice.

I send myself blessings.

You can also simply speak to yourself exactly the way you talk out loud. However you choose to speak to yourself, do so in supportive terms. It may take some time for you to reprogram your mental dialogue. That's okay, it took a long time for your brain to develop all of the undesirable neural networks. Give yourself credit for trying. Eventually you will find yourself dwelling in a state of elevated emotions such as: courage, honor, dignity, confidence, appreciation, gratitude kindness, care, love, compassion, tolerance, patience, enthusiasm, joy.



Give Yourself a Hug While You Talk to Yourself

Hugging yourself may sound corny and a little silly, but it's something you can do to change your hormone balance to feel reassured, calmed down, and more secure. Physical touch releases the calming/nurturing hormone oxytocin, which is why physical touch is craved and appreciated by all mammals. Oxytocin actually calms your cardiovascular system.

Physical touch is bonding and is often an automatic reflex when we feel empathy toward another human being. Who better to feel empathy for than yourself? Leading self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff, PhD suggests hugging, stroking, and physically comforting your body to increase feelings of love and tenderness toward yourself. Our brain doesn't know the difference between a hug from yourself and a hug from someone else. It releases oxytocin regardless.

When you feel tense and stressed or you can't get a grip on disapproving thoughts, wrap your arms around yourself and squeeze and pat your shoulders. If you don't have a private space, you can pretend you're stretching. Try hugging for a couple of weeks and see how better it makes you feel.

Remain Aware

You may go along, making progress revising your inner dialogue, then suddenly something bad happens and it all falls apart. It's okay and natural to go through rough times. The moment you feel slammed, avoid sinking into a destructive thought/emotion feedback loop. Instead, be prepared with a "safe" word. It can be as simple as "change," to remind yourself that you want to react differently. Or you can use one of the following words, or think of one you feel is appropriate for you. Write in your own words. Peace, smile, love, positive, restful, thankful, friendship,

relax, playful, joy, grateful, happy, faith, joy, security, comfort, quiet, calm, laughing,
fun, heaven, kindness, health, lovingkindness, tranquility.

Yoga Increases Self-Confidence

Body language affects how others see you. But even more important, the way you stand affects how you feel about yourself. Social science has proven that “power posing,” which means standing in a posture similar to Tadasana/Mountain Pose projects confidence (even when you don’t feel confident) because it causes both male and female bodies to produce more testosterone, the male hormone. Meanwhile, your stress hormone, cortisol, is going down. The positive effects of standing in Tadasana can affect your life in a positive way, both on and off the mat.



Tadasana (Tah-DAHS-anna): Mountain Pose

Tadasana is the basic beginning pose of many yoga sequences. Stand with your toes together and your heels slightly apart. (If your anatomy doesn’t feel comfortable with your feet so close together, move them apart but keep the basic shape of toes together and heels

slightly apart.) Your arms hang at ease at your sides, palms forward, shoulder blades moving down your back. Your heart center moves upward while you keep your spine straight, pelvis tucked. With your chin slightly tucked, lengthen your neck. Challenge your balance by closing your eyes. Notice all four corners of both feet planted on the earth. Become aware of the gravitational pull of the Earth that causes your body to sway back and forth. Become aware of your inner self. Breathe deeply, and give yourself credit and support.