



FIND YOUR INNER WARRIOR!

Yoga Philosophy and the Armed Forces

As a yoga teacher, it occurred to me that many of the philosophies I teach and practice in yoga are similar to the disciplines in the Armed Forces.

So why would yoga be so good for soldiers? Well to begin with, Yoga enhances that part of the soldier's innate personality that he/she strives to master and offers empowering mind and body exercises that nurture inner strength and discipline. The added perk of yoga is it helps soldiers release the mental, emotional and physical stress that comes with one of the most stressful jobs there is.

Strength. Both Army and yoga beliefs encourage you to be the best you could be. Yoga also encourages one to learn how to just be. It takes just as much strength if not more to stop doing and let go as it does to engage your energy with force. It also takes strength to find peace with where you're 'at', who you are and what you've been called to do in this life.



Most of us will have regrets at some point in our lives. Yoga helps us learn how to let go of regret when we accept the wisdom we've gained from the experience. It can also inspire us with understanding how we can turn negative into a positive, usually by way of making a difference.

Resilience. The Army calls it "sucking it up." Yoga calls it "non-attachment." Both beliefs strive toward avoiding excuses to get caught up in the drama of suffering. Yoga's non-attachment practice asks you to be the observer of your emotions as opposed to allowing your feelings to overwhelm you and throw you off balance. Holding asanas for long periods can sometimes feel challenging, but the yogi is asked not to give up. Instead, work through the mental, emotional and physical challenge and it can result in feeling more strength and confidence on deeper levels.

Physical Discipline "Move with purpose" is a military saying, meaning make yourself useful. Don't get idle, lazy or stagnant. Soldiers are routinely given physical fitness tests they must pass as part of their military contract, so you will often see soldiers working out. Physical fitness is an important part of military life, regardless of which unit you're in.

Yoga is moving with purpose. The body, emotions and thoughts are monitored with self-awareness to help guide you and foster meaning in your life. Yoga encourages you to avoid stagnancy. The physical yoga exercises are only one part of the yoga discipline and an important one not just for physical health, but mental and emotional as well. Each asana has an effect on the body, mind and spirit. Some days the yogi may not feel up to practicing an asana, but with discipline, yogis know that practicing this "movement with purpose" instils them with a sense of inner strength, health, ease and balance that will serve them throughout the day.



Mental/emotional discipline is practiced in boot camp. Drill Instructors will test a soldier's mental strength by tempting him or her to fly off the handle and react to their verbal taunts. Yoga encourages the student to use self-awareness, breath and non-attachment to refrain from over-reacting to outer challenges and relying on inner resources to help you stay calm, cool and collected.

Self-discipline is a huge factor in the practice of yoga. One must have discipline to practice the asanas, the breath and to use the philosophy to better themselves in daily life. Many of us will fall out of our routine in moments of stress or busyness and return to our practice once things have settled down. The challenge is always to remain faithfully committed to our practice no matter what's happening around us. This commitment to self-discipline is what helps yogis take their practice deeper and receive long-term benefits. Yogi's believe in using your energy wisely, in productive ways.

Bravery. You have to be brave to be a soldier. To get through boot camp, away from loved ones, being tested to your mental, emotional and physical limits, sacrificing your freedom of where you'd like to live, when you could get away and how you could run your schedule takes courage. Soldiers give up a lot of freedoms to serve, and some give up their lives. Every soldier knows once they join, there is always the possibility that they may be sent to war and not come home.



Yoga asks us to be willing to let go of things that no longer serve us. And to push past self-imposing limits so we can be all that we can be. There are yoga poses that you may feel scared of trying. Sometimes trying those poses can liberate you from deeper fears. Meditation can be scary to some. Sitting alone with your feelings takes courage. Admitting you're not perfect takes courage. Committing to the higher ideals of a yoga lifestyle that include taking responsibility for yourself and honouring the divine in others, not over-reacting to life, being kind, compassionate and respectful – these ideals take bravery in a world that often worships violence, hatred and drama.

A soldier must act in defence of his life and to protect others, but that doesn't mean that he subscribes to a violent state of mind. There are many kind, giving, bighearted soldiers who are struggling with the fact that they had to commit acts of violence because it doesn't feel right to them. Their act of bravery now is to forgive themselves, to feel liberated from the past and accept the wisdom gained, which is freedom. Acceptance leads to peace.

Yoga is a holistic approach to life which takes courage. It's a brave act to change one's diet, to sacrifice things that bring you instant pleasure but are unhealthy. Both the Army and yoga ask us to sacrifice something for freedom. Yoga asks us if we're brave and willing enough to sacrifice an attachment to material illusions for emotional freedom?

Focus. *"Boot Camp is 80% mental, and 20% physical. Don't get discouraged or give in to the temptation to give up (namely because quitting is not an option.) Don't look too far ahead and stay focused on the task at hand."* -military.com.

The military life asks soldiers to be very focused and mindful in every aspect of their life. On the job, focus is critical for many soldiers who are placed in life or death situations. Mindfulness is also important in their personal life. If a soldier acts unbecoming and less than is expected of his character, he or she can face a demotion or even dishonourable discharge.



Many yoga asanas such as Tree Pose can also be considered 80% mental and 20% physical. That's what draws people to yoga – it's an exercise that requires focus in the present moment. When you're holding a yoga pose, you're not thinking about what happened yesterday or what will happen tomorrow. You're focusing on your breath and maintaining the integrity of the pose: lengthening, grounding, extending, exhaling. There's a lot happening during a yoga pose that focuses you to be present and to free your mind and body of the stress that tightens, constricts and restricts. Yogi's who are interested in cultivating spiritual values will practice yoga on and off the mat, striving to judge less, and to be more patient, kind and compassionate human beings.

Are you up for the challenge?

It takes a lot of focus and self-awareness to raise the bar on your standard of living and aim to be the best person that you can be. Both the Army and yoga ask us how strong are we, just how much we can persevere and what level of integrity are we willing to reach. Yoga helps us find peace among the answers.