

# yoga

JOURNAL

## Play Your Part

Accept responsibility for what you bring to each moment and enjoy the power of the truth.

By Sally Kempton



You're in a yoga class, holding a forward bend. The teacher comes over and places her hands on your back, encouraging you to sink deeper. You hesitate for a moment, then you follow her instructions and feel a sharp twinge in the back of your leg. It turns out that you've torn a hamstring.

Now, here's the tough question: Whose fault is it? Or, to put it in a milder way, who has responsibility in this situation? The way you answer this question is crucial. It's also a pretty good predictor of your ability to move through tough situations, negotiate relationships, and initiate personal change.

In a situation like this—indeed, in all kinds of situations, from a car accident, to a fight with your boyfriend, to your failure to get a foundation grant—the natural tendency and desire is to immediately look for someone to blame. I call it the "blame frame," and it has been our basic paradigm for centuries. The blame frame assumes that someone is wrong and that the one who is wrong should be -punished—in extreme cases, with a lawsuit or the curtailing of any future relationship.

The blame frame is inherently dualistic: If it's not my fault, it's yours. If it's yours, it's not mine. You're the perpetrator; I'm the victim. Maybe I'll accept a sincere apology, offered in a self-abasing tone and accompanied by an offer of compensation. Maybe, if you're humble enough, I'll even admit that I had something to do with the whole situation.

In the past 50 years, at least in the more forward-looking quarters of the Western world, this centuries-old and deeply dualistic paradigm has begun to be replaced by an idea that I'd describe as "empowering self-responsibility," or "radical responsibility." In

its most basic form, radical responsibility comes out of the recognition that, if you are willing to accept responsibility for everything in your life, you can change a situation instead of being its victim. One contemporary model for radical responsibility comes from the Landmark Forum workshops, which encourage you to see yourself as the primary agent even in situations in which, by every law of reason and logic, the primary agency was outside you. When you take radical responsibility, you stop blaming others—your parents, careless drivers, the tax system, Republicans, your ex-wife, your nasty boss—and instead look at how you helped create the situation or, at least, how you might have done things differently. That is to say, you're never a victim, because you always have a choice.

## Shared Responsibility

As a close adherent of the "change the inside, and you'll change the outside" view of life, I've always inclined toward the radical responsibility position. Partly, I'll admit, this comes from having been steeped in the doctrine of karma, especially the idea of subtle-body karma, in which emotional "tape loops" (*samskara*) programmed into your system from childhood and other lifetimes are seen as causal factors, even in situations that are not of your conscious choosing. At the same time, some things clearly do just happen, and certain events actually are Their Fault. (The mechanic who failed to replace a bolt on the airplane before OK'ing it for takeoff, for example, *did* cause the accident.) Besides, most texts on karma point out that not everyone who gets caught in a collective disaster such as Hurricane Katrina has direct karmic responsibility for it. All of us are, to one degree or another, influenced by the collective karma of our society. And besides, there *is* such a thing as being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

My point is, just as the victim stance allows you to feel innocent but also makes you powerless, the radical responsibility position empowers you but also gives rise to an unrealistic and even hubristic sense of having control over circumstances that you don't control at all. We violate the truth as much by assuming that we "chose" to get cancer as by assuming that cancerous tumors have no relationship to our diet, lifestyle, chemical exposures, or other choices we've made. In fact, as in most things in life, the truth is somewhere in the middle.

Between the blame frame and the radical responsibility position is something we might call the "contribution system." With the contribution system model, you can see what you might have done differently, but you also take into account the other factors

involved.

Take our earlier case of the hamstring injury. What part of the problem was the teacher's responsibility? Well, she may have demanded too much from you because of her inexperience as a teacher or her inability to see the true capability of your body. On the other hand, if you look carefully at your own contribution, you may see that you were distracted, following her instructions without being fully present in your body or perhaps suffering from some form of show-offy yoga ego.

And there could also be hidden factors. Your hamstrings might have been overstretched from a previous class or weakened by an old accident; genetics may also have played a role. If you place all the blame on your instructor, you miss the chance to look at your own contributions, and you will be unlikely to learn anything useful from the injury or be able to avoid similar ones in the future. Worse, you'll probably feel victimized, powerless, angry, or depressed. But if you take all the responsibility on yourself, you imply that you should be an expert on the body, even though you may just be learning to practice yoga. You may find that taking total responsibility causes you to beat yourself up about your bad judgment or to question your ability to do yoga.

So taking responsibility demands a certain sophistication and balance; it requires you to recognize that every situation has a contribution system, a web of shared, interconnected responsibility. It is not useful to take on more or less of the responsibility than is yours.

At the same time, even if 95 percent of the responsibility for a situation is *not* yours, the source of your power in that situation lies in identifying the 5 percent that *is*. That's where you can bring change, where you can turn a mistake into a source of learning. It's your ability to work with mistakes—your own and others'—that makes the greatest difference in being able to become a master not just of yoga but also of life. Being the change you want to see in the world starts with identifying your own part in the contribution system of any situation in which you feel conflict or tension. All good yogis—and most successful, creative people—are good at what they do precisely because they have learned the art of taking an injustice, a personal mistake, or an injury and using it as a fulcrum for growth.

## **Response-ability**

My teacher, Swami Muktananda, once described a yogi as a person who knows how to

turn every circumstance of life to his advantage, not because a yogi is an opportunist—at least not in the usual sense—but because he turns every moment into yoga. He takes whatever happens, whatever material life throws him, and works with it. He learns how to turn to his inner ground, his own being, and from there to tune his inner state to meet the situation creatively.

For a yogi, the word "responsibility" is actually thought of as "response-ability"—the skill of responding spontaneously and naturally from a core of inner stillness in such a way as to take a situation to a higher level. I've always felt that this is what is meant in the Bhagavad Gita by that beautiful verse: "Yoga is skill in action." Skill in action is the skill of knowing how to respond to situations from your center, when you stand your ground so firmly that nothing can knock you off track.

For the apprentice yogi—that is, the person who is on the path to mastery—responsibility starts with self-inquiry. Obviously, your capacity for responding to situations depends on your inner state at any given moment. If, for example, you're tired, angry, or distracted, you won't be able to respond in the same way you would if you were calmer or more energized. Most big mistakes happen because our state is somehow impaired. So a practice of self-recognition, a self-check-in, can make a big difference. Something about asking yourself key questions seems to invoke the inner wise person, who, in my experience, is the part of me with the best chance of not only acting like a responsible adult but also guiding me through difficult moments. You—the surface you—might be totally clueless in a situation. But your inner wise person knows exactly what to do, and when to do nothing. I work with a self-inquiry exercise in which I ask my self three questions; you'll find them at [yogajournal.com/wisdom/2551](http://yogajournal.com/wisdom/2551).

## Accidents Happen

I've been working with self-inquiry questions for years, so much so that I rarely have to ask them consciously. Last year, when I was in a car accident, I naturally felt the questions coming up and found that not only did they guide me through a tough moment but they also taught me something real and valuable about levels of responsibility.

It was twilight in Berkeley, California, where I'd come to teach a workshop. I was driving across a blind intersection behind a friend's car, following her to my lodging for the night. There was a median strip between the lanes, no traffic lights, and no stop signs. My friend drove through the intersection. I followed her closely, not looking at the cross

traffic, feeling safe because there were pedestrians in the crosswalk to my right. But just as I entered the intersection, another car suddenly appeared from my right. The car's headlights were off, and I caught a glimpse of the driver, who had his head turned toward his passenger, obviously in conversation. My car (at low speed, thank God) rammed into the side of his car.

Shaking, I pulled over to the curb, then automatically checked my inner state, asking the first question—"Who am I right now?" Fortunately, my body wasn't hurt. But my heart was trembling, and I could feel adrenaline racing through my system. I was in a state of anxiety and fear. My main fear was that I was at fault.

The second question—"Where am I right now?"—revealed a fair amount of chaos. My right headlight was smashed, the fender was punched in, and the other car was smoking.

The young couple in the other car was completely freaking out. Their steering had been damaged; their car would require towing. The woman was screaming that the car had been ruined and that she needed to get home to her baby.

Then, when I asked myself the third question—"What am I supposed to do right now?"—it was clear that the first thing I had to do was accept the situation, identify my part in the contribution system, and take responsibility. The couple clearly expected me to defend myself, to argue about who was at fault. A passerby was saying, "I saw it all! She hit you!"

Mundane as it sounds, this was a pivotal yogic moment. When someone is scolding you about something that is clearly your mistake, you can get lost in three main ways. First, you can move into defensive hostility and get angry with the other person or the situation. Second, you can collapse into guilt and selfrecrimination and get angry with yourself. Third, you can dis-associate from your feelings and just focus on getting through it. I could feel myself tending toward the disassociative response, putting up an inner defensive wall. I focused for a moment on correcting my inner stance—breathing, softening my eyes, looking for a balance between protecting my own energy and connecting to the angry couple. I noticed that part of my imbalance came from my mind's frantic search for a way not to blame myself, and I made an internal decision to accept being technically at fault.

One of the great laws of life immediately came into play: When I stopped resisting the situation, my shaky energy calmed down. (There's a reason spiritual teachers are

always counseling nonresistance!) I said to the driver, "You definitely had the right of way."

As soon as he saw that I wasn't going to argue with him, he nodded and calmed down. The next steps of "What am I supposed to do?" were calm and relatively easy. We exchanged information. A cop showed up, checked us out, said it was an issue for the insurance companies, and called a tow truck for the other car. Then I got in my car, drove to the place I was staying, and called the insurance company to report the accident. At that point, I found myself asking the three questions again. "Who am I?" My body was still shaky, and I was feeling anxious about whether the insurance company would cover the cost of repairs to the other person's car.

"Where am I? What's the situation?" I was hungry; I'd done everything I could do about the accident that evening. I had a workshop starting early the next morning and needed to be able to show up for it in my best state.

"What am I supposed to do?" This was another pivotal yogic moment. Again, there were three possible ways to get lost. One was to let myself pickle in worry and fear about worst-case scenarios. ("The insurance company won't pay. It'll pay, and my insurance will go up. My car is going to lose all its resale value.") Another was to beat myself up in recrimination. ("How could I have failed to look where I was going?") The third was to disassociate myself emotionally from the accident and soldier on, doing what was needed, making the best of things, but repressing my worries and fears.

## **Contribution Clarity**

I knew from experience that adopting any of those responses was a sure way to accumulate karmic baggage, since feeling resentment and repressing it ensure that some level of trauma gets stuck in the energy body and becomes part of one's self-description in the future. (For example: "I'm a person who has stupid accidents" or "Life is unfair.")

So, what did I need to do to help my inner state? The first thing I did to calm my anxiety was to look at the contribution system for the accident. How much of it could I have controlled?

Luck and timing had definitely played into the accident—how many times have we narrowly missed or been missed by a car coming through a blind intersection? My

friend *could* have slowed down at the intersection. The other driver hadn't been paying attention. Nonetheless, he had had the right of way. So basically it was all about whether I was paying attention. Then I asked the question that always helps me turn the situation to my advantage. I asked, "What did I learn here?"

The obvious answer was "Duh, look before you cross an intersection." But there was more: I had not been taking responsibility for my own safety. Because I was following someone else, I had unconsciously put the responsibility for traffic safety in her hands.

## Conscious Choices

For me, this small insight turned out to be huge. Had there been other situations in which I'd been hurt by blindly following a leader? Had I ever made a mistake by following instructions without checking how they felt to my internal feeling sense? Had I ever assumed that because I was following a boss's orders (regardless of whether I agreed with them) I would somehow be protected from negative personal karma?

In that moment I realized that this event was a clue to an inner attitude that was asking to be changed. In other words, the lesson here wasn't just to look before you enter an intersection. It was to remember that you are always responsible for your own choices and that you can't rely solely on some supposed expert to ensure your safety. In the end, it is all about responsibility—or the recognition of our part in the contribution system.

The price of innocence is impotence. Our potency comes from the ability to take responsibility for making choices based on the highest and best understanding of the truth in any given moment. So, for yogis, being responsible for our inner state doesn't just mean doing our best to feel good. It means being conscious of our part in the web of causation and making our choices with the intention that our contribution be as clear, as positive, and as skillful as we can make it. For us, there is only the trying, as T. S. Eliot famously wrote. The rest is not our business. n

**Sally Kempton is an internationally recognized teacher of meditation and yogic philosophy and the author of *The Heart of Meditation*. Visit her website at [sallykempton.com](http://sallykempton.com).**

Return to <http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/2549>