

Linda Lang
Yoga and Aging for the Smithsonian Associates
September 10th, 2025

To all Smithsonian participants,

First: I thank you for your interest in this topic, Yoga and Aging. The study of Yoga is vast and the practices are many. Bringing this noble subject onto the Smithsonian Associates' stage is quite a moment in time, for which I am beyond grateful.

I've had great fun pulling together the ideas, practices, research and bibliography and encourage you to make time to review this introductory material, as it sets the tone for our time together.

As you read through the handout, let me know if you have questions or ideas you'd like to share or would like me to address during the discussion. There's still time for you to make an impact!

There will be an opportunity for Q&A and comments. If you happen to have a question that you'd prefer to ask privately, feel free to write to me at my email address: lindalang@theopen-door.com

Each of us has our own approach to aging wisely and living life to its fullest ~ mine happens to be yogic in nature. Please visit my website www.YogaAsLifestyleMedicine.com. This is where I interact with the public to spread the idea that, "I believe in yoga as lifestyle medicine, and practice as if my life depends upon it ... because it does."

With great appreciation for all that we share and hold dear,



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YOGA AND AGING: WISDOM, COURAGE AND CONNECTION

A PRESENTATION BY LINDA LANG FOR SMITHSONIAN ASSOCIATES
September 10th, 2025

Wisdom is timeless.

It resides within us and expands as we grow.

It is the synthesis of intelligence and experience, and it speaks.

Courage can seem elusive,

it comes with objective detachment from the intensity of whatever is happening now,
or has happened in the past or, might happen in the future.

It is intestinal fortitude arising from faith and confidence in one's self above all else.

It is courage that inspires and allows us to live life to the fullest.

Connection is the most essential of all human needs, the need to belong,
simultaneous with a deep connection to that which is infinite.

All things are connected through a continuum of continuums.
(from the constructs of Indra's Net to the akashic field)

On September 10th, we will spend two hours talking about yoga and aging.

Why examine wisdom, courage and connection in a discussion on aging?

Because these are the virtues that will sustain us.

This introduction will acquaint you with the yogic perspective we will explore and the universe of insights that follow from it. We will glean materials from this outline, and we will share practices that are designed to inspire you toward:

- a sense of comfort with who and where you are now,
- an appreciation for what you already know, and
- a deep(er) understanding of what might be possible for you in the days, weeks, months and years to come.

To prepare, you might want to read through, make notes in the margins, read the research articles and take a good long look at the bibliography (I allowed myself to get a little carried away, as there are so many marvelous connections that we can make through the written word. You might take a look at your own book shelf and dust off a few of your favorites to remind yourself of what you already know, as these books and their authors are a source of deep human connections, aren't they?)

WISDOM

The world around us and within us is changing rapidly and may be catching us by surprise. Our sense of purpose might be changing as well as our interests, our friends, our home life, our identity and our beliefs about what is important and what is possible.

We might question ourselves as the novelty of change requires more: more tenacity, more inquiry, more adjustments, more difficult decisions. More change.

The ongoing nature of transitions can be incredibly enjoyable or troublesome. By now, most of us can tally quite a few changes: some by choice, some by accident or coincidence. We have experienced wonderfulness and disillusionment, we have been enchanted and become disenchanted, again and again.¹

Yet we have survived and succeeded, through intentionality guided by understanding.

This, is wisdom

Prajñā

(insight and understanding)

Wisdom is the ability to draw upon everything we have ever experienced, whether real, dreamt or imagined, and valuing all of it. We learn to value everything, the dukham (undesired) and sukham (the desired) with equanimity and an awareness of the temporary nature of all things, with a sense of transcendence (a continuum, "I'll get through this"). One learns through yogic practice, that "I don't have to dwell on this" because I can dwell within a greater sense of being."

1. This is "the way of transition" (thank you, Dr William Bridges, as I learned in his book of the same title)

Wisdom, so accessible when you give advice yet so illusive when you need it most. The difficulty of accessing our own wisdom is one of the most apparent obstacles in our lives, known as a kleisha (in Sanskrit) meaning that we cannot see ourselves clearly (avidya, a kind of spiritual ignorance), because we have become self-absorbed (asmita, too self-centered) and distracted by not-knowing and fears.

Yoga gives us perspectives and skills that emphasize objectivity and compassionate detachment along with practices that distinguish that which is changing, and that which remains the same.

We will turn to the energies of our breath and our heart beat as a path to quieting the mind and allowing us to hear the whispers of wisdom at all times.

COURAGE

It takes courage to live fully, and our courage has shown itself through our lives: who we are today as a result of everything we have ever experienced, real, imagined, dreamt or dreaded. Whether we survived or succumbed, succeeded or surrendered, flourished or fled, we are here today because of our ability to overcome obstacles and build upon good fortune. Pause and consider the week behind you ... the days and weeks and months, the years prior to that ... everything, all of it, is here with you today. Sensing who you are in this moment, the person you've been and the person you are becoming, with your eyes wide open and with a full appreciation of This,

This, is courage

Vīrya

(strength, valor, bravery)

Courage, beneath the broad wings of wisdom, has carried you throughout life on a current of grace and will continue to carry you forward into the unknown and unknowable.

Courage grows from a rebellious spirit that refuses to be suppressed. In yogic terms, it represents something of a surrender from a position of strength, to a sense that you are far greater than you ever might have imagined. From this ancient point of view, it is a surrender to the continuum of your finite self becoming its infinite SELF.

There are practices that support this surrender, particularly the practice of Yoga Nidra, which considers things that appear to be separate and oppositional as existing on a continuum. From this perspective we can safely remember and understand the past and bring it into the present moment without criticism or judgment, without dread or fear.

The cultivation of courage is a fascinating subject, it lives at the spiritual heart of the classic Bhagavad Gita, a courage that is deeply personal, moral and ethical, purposeful and painful, human and divine.

Courage and wisdom evolve, they weave themselves into the fabric of our character, connecting us to our greater sense of purpose in life, allowing us to create lives of purpose and meaning.

CONNECTION

I am smiling as I write this: notice where you are and what you are doing today. It is your act of intentionality that brings us together to think about the noble notions of wisdom and courage. You chose to be here out of curiosity, out of a fascination with ideas, to listen, perhaps learn, and to consider possibilities through a yogic lens. You decided not to do something else, you chose to be here, now, in a Zoom room filled with like-minded individuals, kindred spirits.

*One very specific, very human, and very finite, connection.
And I thank you for this ...*

This, is connection

Samyogah

(A bringing together, a refinement of relationships)

The heart of our humanity is our desire to belong, our need to be seen, and known and heard. This is human connection. And it is vital to our survival.

Equally vital, through the yogic lens, is our ability to appreciate that we are made of atoms and molecules, appearing in human form, enlivened by an eternal source of energy that expresses itself through us. No different than the sea or the sky, the substance of stars and starfish. We are part of something greater. Embracing this idea, connecting our individuality with the infinite, is the essence of yogic thought. Throughout our lives, we are dancing with

divine, always have and always will.

Yoga provides an ultimate and intimate sense of connection, a simultaneous bringing together of seemingly separate concepts:

- the material world and what we call “spiritual” (that without form)
- the finite (that which changes) with the infinite (that which remains the same)
- past, present and future
- the Known and the Unknowable
- humanity (material) with divinity (energy)

This is an esoteric conversation filled with abstractions, very human imaginings and understandings of the world(s) into which we were born, and from which we shall depart.

The practical part of the conversation has to do with how we manage our relationships with our inner selves, with other people, with everything in the world(s) around us.

Yogic philosophy eases relationship by inviting us to soften into experiences, to open our hearts and minds simultaneously, to remain somewhat detached and objective, to take important things seriously, but not to take ourselves too seriously in them.

In our time together, we will share practices that help us recognize the wisdom and courage that have brought us to where we are now, to help build our capacity to be in relationship with our emotions, to help us move ahead with skill and determination and a loyalty to our selves, yes, a loyalty as in the most sincere friendship.

By connecting ideas with actions, we become wiser.

By connecting with one another and sharing the intensity of growing older, we become wiser, we might feel less alone, we might feel more understood. We might be more courageous, and more curious about what might and what surely will come next.

Research

Impact of Yoga on Aging Physiology

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1279770723011272?via%3Dihub>

Yoga Effects on Brain Health: A Systemic Review of the Current Literature

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3233/BPL-190084>

Changes in Neural Connectivity and Memory Following a Yoga Intervention for Older Adults: A Pilot Study

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.3233/JAD-150653>

Neurobiological and Anti-aging Benefits of Yoga: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Advances in Non-pharmacological Therapy

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0531556524001967?via%3Dihub>

Bibliography

Primary Classics and References

The Yoga Tradition: It's History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice by Georg Feuerstein

This is by far, the first book I reach for when I am working with yogic texts and esoteric practices.

Dr Feuerstein was first and foremost a dedicated Indologist, a masterful translator of Sanskrit, a brilliant and inspirational scholar. The following excerpt is from his website:

"In ancient times, the yogin looked to the natural world and within themselves to cultivate understanding in their goal of self realization; today, we have the benefit of books that transmit the teachings, channeled through brilliant minds such as Georg's. When you pick up such a book... say a prayer of gratitude for the life and time of Georg that lives on through his publishings."

Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy by Georg Feuerstein

Simply fascinating for anyone interested in weaving together the history of yoga, the development and practices of Tantra and the world of Advaita-Vedanta.

The Bhagavad Gita translated by Easwaran

An accessible commentary and compelling story, one of the earliest accounts of an existential crisis, courage, wisdom and man's very personal relationship with the Divine.

Some of My Favorites

Some of these books are about the practices, others are perspectives on everything from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras to Buddhist insight meditation to emotional self-regulation. Some are personal reflections that have become sources of inspiration and comfort, some helped affirm and reinforce my lifestyle choices. All are treasures.

Light on Life by BKS Iyengar An overview of yogic philosophy "to live by" (Patanjali)

The Wisdom of Yoga, Deep Human Connection, The Great Work of Your Life, Yoga and The Quest for The True Self all by Dr. Stephen Cope are insightful, rewarding, "real"

The Way of Transition by William Bridges, because it is so honest and clear

Kitchen Table Wisdom by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, because it is profound and filled with love

Voyage to The Bunny Planet by Rosemary Wells, inspirational in its clarity, deeply moving

Yoga Nidra by Richard Miller, because it works and we need it

True Refuge by Tara Brach, because we can always find it within

Yoga Therapy Across the Cancer Continuum edited by Leigh Leibel and Anne Pitmann, included because of its thorough examination of what yogic practices add to our lives when we are most in need, applicable whether you have cancer or not

The Last Best Cure by Donna Jackson Nakazawa, integrative medicine for real change

Breath by James Nestor, because he doubted and became a believer

Into the Magic Shop by Dr. James Doty, because someone believed in him, which led him to become who he is, a physician and philanthropist supporting compassionate action around the world

Still Here by Ram Dass If you loved "Be Here Now," this will touch you today

Being Mortal by Dr. Atul Gawande, a primer for families throughout the life cycle