



Guided by Voices

Through the practice of yoga, we can learn to hear—and follow—our inner guidance.

By Sally Kempton

Jill met her ex-husband at a business lunch in 1998. They connected immediately, the way old friends do, and spent the rest of the afternoon in intimate conversation. But afterward, as Jill walked back to her office, a thought surfaced: "If you're not careful, you're going to end up marrying this guy, and that would be a huge mistake."

Much later, she marveled at the incisiveness of her inner voice. "I don't think of myself as intuitive," she told me, "but at that moment, I sensed that this was information I should pay attention to. Then my usual veil went down. My emotions took over. I fell in love with him, we got married, fought for five years, and finally got divorced. What I can't get over is that I knew all along and couldn't listen to myself!"

I understood just what she was talking about. With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, I could recall dozens of occasions when I "knew" something and ignored it, because some social consideration, desire, doubt, or fear spoke louder than my own inner wisdom. But I've also discovered that the more I'm able to listen to that inner knowing, the deeper my sense of personal authenticity becomes.

So I asked Jill, "Have you ever practiced tuning in to yourself, just on a normal day, and asking yourself, 'What's my deepest desire right now?' or 'What does my inner Self really want for me?' You know, seeing if you can get into a relationship with your inner wisdom so you can hear what it's telling you?" Jill shook her head. I suggested that she spend a few minutes a day doing that and see what happened.

As someone who has had to learn the hard way to listen to inner wisdom, I can guarantee you that (1) trustworthy guidance is really there and (2) picking up on it is not that difficult. Like everything important in life, it's all about paying attention. If we slow down a bit and check in with our body and feelings, we soon notice that helpful inner messages come to us all the time—through physical sensations, flashes of insight, intuitive feelings, and from that state of clarified intelligence the Yoga Sutra calls *rtambhara prajna*, or "truth-bearing wisdom." We can use this information to adjust our course, tune our inner state, and interact with the environment.

"I've learned to pay attention to a certain feeling of emotional discomfort," David, a financial consultant who meditates regularly, told me. "When I feel it, I stop and check

myself out internally. Nearly always, I'm stuck in some negative mental loop. So the uncomfortable feelings signal me when it's time to change the way I'm thinking in a situation."

Lacey's relationship with inner guidance started one day in a yoga class. Feeling wobbly in a pose, she began to explore her body, looking for a place of stability. Spontaneously, a thought came up: "Press down through the balls of the feet and widen your stance." Lacey did just that and sure enough, she felt more grounded.

Both of these people have discovered their innate intelligence—in David's case, it comes as feelings or emotions, while Lacey seems to access hers through the body. Both are instances of what I'd call normal or personal-level inner guidance—the kind that helps us find our bearings and direction in day-to-day life. This type of guidance manifests itself in different ways—as the physical "knowing" that makes us aware that we're in danger, as the subtler spatial sense that shows a ballplayer where to move for a catch, as the ability to "get" whether it's the right moment to push your friend to talk about his feelings or whether it's better to let him be. All of us have our own natural, individual ways of tuning in to this internal wisdom—whether we feel it in the gut, in the heart, or as some other form of inner sensation. We just have to learn to recognize it and make it conscious.

Extraordinary Guidance

Then there's what we could call extraordinary, or extranormal guidance, messages that actually arise in crucial, life-changing moments to guide us in making major decisions, warn us about potential danger, or help us take the next step in our spiritual journey. Jill's inner knowing about the man she married was like that. As it did for her, this kind of message can arise as a thought in the mind. Or it can, and often does, come as an image, a dream, or a sense of being drawn in a certain direction—as in those famous stories about religious figures who hear a call from God or a traveler who feels a strong inner pull to go down a certain road, where he comes across a man who's been wounded and needs help or a beautiful woman who becomes his wife. That kind of inner guidance can feel radical, profoundly at odds with the voices of conventional wisdom, culture, and our ideas of who we are and what we want.

It can also be quite dramatic. A man I know once woke up in the middle of the night after dreaming of a paper guillotine sitting by his child's bed. He went to the kid's room and saw a sheet of paper lying on top of the bedside lamp. The bulb had burned through the paper, which was just bursting into flames. He is convinced that acting on the dream saved his child's life.

This is the kind of inner guidance that tends to get our attention. We give it different names—the voice of God or our higher Self, the enlightened voice within us. Yet it is simply a deeper, subtler level of the basic guidance that we are always getting through the body and feelings. If you accept that everything is made of one substance, one intelligent consciousness, it makes sense that the guidance that seems spiritual and the

kind that seems mundane actually come from the same source, and that both deserve to be honored.

The Real Thing

Whether inner guidance manifests itself through the body as gut instincts, through the heart as feelings, or through the mind as clarified wisdom, intuition, a vision, a voice, or a dream, it is smart—probably smarter, in certain situations, than the cognitive mind. That's because it comes from a level closer to the essence, the deep Self, or what is sometimes called the wisdom mind. Tuning in to inner guidance is one of the best ways to access the enlightened sage or visionary artist who lives inside us. When we follow our true inner instincts, we are receiving guidance from a master.

Of course, there is a challenging aspect to all of this. How can we tell what is "real" inner guidance and what is just a stray impulse or masked desire, or even some form of mental static? In fact, when there's a lot going on in the mind, it can be hard to find the inner voice. (This is one reason to regularly quiet the discursive mind through meditation.) Most of us discovered early on that our own instinctual sense of things was often at odds with the ideas relayed by our parents and caregivers. So as we learned to adapt to others' wishes—a necessary part of human socialization—we also learned to override our intuition and to substitute the voices of our parents, society, TV, ad campaigns, the news, and our peers for the guidance that arises from within.

In fact, we can get so far out of touch with our inner wisdom that we actually doubt its existence. So before we can hear the deeper wisdom, we may first have to accept that it is there to be heard. Then we have to find out how to move past, or still, the competing societal voices that get in the way. Finally, we need to learn how to discriminate between the real guidance of the deep Self and the voices of our fears, desires, and delusions.

Getting to Know Yourself

It helps to have some understanding about your own tendencies. Perhaps you have a judgmental inner parent who shows up as a critical inner voice or a feeling that things will turn out badly. If you know how to recognize that voice, you won't mistake it for the voice of truth. Perhaps you have a bent toward fantasy or wishful thinking. If you can recognize when the part of you who still wants to believe in Santa Claus is operating, you can be skeptical of any messages to spend your last \$70 on lottery tickets. If you know you have a driving, perfectionistic streak, you can look askance when you're inwardly "guided" to stay up all night to finish a project and instead be aware of your body's need for rejuvenation.

We all have aspects of ourselves that are wise, mature, and deeply trustworthy. We also have parts that are undeveloped, prone to making decisions based on childhood fears or fantasies of omnipotence. One reason to practice working with intuition is so we can learn to tell the difference between an insight that comes from the wisdom mind,

the purified heart, or the deep body and one that comes from the part of us that might be called pre-rational—the part of us that hasn't quite surrendered to growing up.

When you get a hunch about something major, it's always good to ask yourself the tough questions, like "Is this hunch grounded at all in reality? Is it congruent with my basic principles and values? Would I advise someone else to act on this hunch? Does it reflect the principles of the spiritual traditions I honor? Is it likely to cause harm to myself or someone else? Will following this hunch make me depressed? Will it inflate my sense of being special or 'chosen'?"

Wisdom Mind

The more you are willing to examine the insights you receive, the more you'll learn how to recognize the guidance that actually comes from the wisdom mind. The turning point for me in discerning the feeling of clear inner guidance came in a mundane and apparently trivial way. I was about to fly home from India and had been packing quickly, discarding everything that didn't fit in my suitcase. While the taxi waited at the door, I discovered I didn't have my airline ticket.

Frantically, I turned out my bag, the drawers, the wastebasket. Nothing. At last, I closed my eyes, got quiet, and asked my consciousness, "Please find my ticket."

Seconds after I made the prayer, a very faint sequence of words began to appear in my mind: "Look in the wastebasket again." I did. My ticket, it turned out, was folded between two other papers, concealed so well that I hadn't seen it.

I relate this story for two reasons. First, because the guidance was so specific and concrete that it was impossible to discount it as fantasy. Second, because it gave me my first clear sense of how trustworthy guidance appears to me. It comes in trickles. I feel it surfacing as if from a depth. It feels small and subtle—literally, for me, the "still small voice"—though some people have told me they receive images more often than words. It is often so subtle that if I'm not looking, I won't find it. But when I do, there's a quality to it that brings release or ease. And if I truly pay attention to it, it also feels inevitable—even if it is calling my attention to something that challenges my personal status quo.

Testing Your Guidance

Although it happened accidentally, my experience with the ticket gave me a model for hearing and working with inner guidance. When I want to understand something or make a decision, I ask for guidance, and then I experiment with following the guidance I receive. There's a process I use that has really made a difference in my ability to hear what my deeper Self wants to tell me. Here's how to try it yourself.

1. Spend some time formulating your question, getting as clear as possible about it. Write it down. (This is important—the act of writing concretizes your question or

issue.) You could start by asking for help in resolving a creative problem, problematic relationship, or living situation. You could ask for insight about your practice or about an inner tendency that disturbs you.

2. Sit comfortably with your back erect but not rigid and your eyes closed. Hold the question in your mind. Say it to yourself a few times and notice the feelings that arise when you do. Notice any thoughts that come up, including resistance to the process. Jot them down if they seem important or relevant.

3. Use the rhythm of the breath as an anchor. Keep your attention on the breath until the mind relaxes and becomes quieter.

4. Sink your attention deeper. You can do this by focusing on the heart center (in the middle of the chest) or on the belly center (three inches below the navel, deep inside the body). Or you can use a visualization: Imagine yourself descending a staircase into a quiet cave, moving step-by-step until you find yourself enclosed in quiet.

5. In this quiet space, ask the sage within you, the person of wisdom who resides in your deepest core, to be present. Or, if there is a particular deity form or teacher or sage you respect, you might ask that being to be present. Alternatively, you might simply have the feeling that you are asking guidance from the universe, the Tao, the source of all. Understand that it is enough to ask that inner wisdom be present; if you do, it will be available.

6. Ask your question. Then wait silently, without expectation or discouragement, to see what emerges. Remember that insight does not always come in words. It might come as a feeling, an image, or something said by another person. Also, it might not come the moment you ask for it. Intuition emerges in its own time. Once you have seeded the question, be attentive during the next 24 to 48 hours, because answers to your question will arise.

7. As insights come, write them down. Hold each one in your mind and let it percolate. See what comes up and note the feelings. You may be drawn to interpreting the insight, but it is also enough just to hold it in your consciousness. As you do, it will create shifts in consciousness all by itself.

Note that if your insight feels judgmental, punishing, or blaming, it is probably not coming from your deepest source. In general, the wisdom of your inner consciousness is expansive, loving, and embracing. Your intuition may ask you to take responsibility for a situation, but it will never tell you to blame yourself or someone else.

8. Finally, think of a step you can take to put your insight into action. Here is where the real experiment begins. The only way to learn to follow your intuitive guidance is to try it and be very aware of the results. It may be that the guidance you receive unravels a situation quickly. Sometimes, if the situation you're asking about is knotty, you may have to take a series of small actions, to ask for further guidance, and to keep

observing the results. Sometimes the guidance you receive is just for now, and the next steps may emerge in time.

As you do all of this, you'll naturally develop an attunement to your own deeper wisdom. You'll find yourself moving through life more skillfully, more imaginatively, and with greater trust. In time, you might even realize that you've brought forth the enlightened sage who lives inside you. All it takes is a willingness to turn back into yourself just a few times a day and ask, "What does my deeper Self want for me now? What would the sage in me do in this situation?" It's when you begin to invoke and listen to your deep wisdom that your inner life begins to shine through all of your actions and you realize how wise you truly are, how instinctively loving, how deeply attuned to the rhythms of life itself.

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September/October 2004

This article can be found online at http://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/1389_1.cfm