

SUN SALUTATIONS: AS A PRACTICE OF GRATITUDE

BY GARTH HEWITT // PHOTOS BY JEFF SKEIRIK/RAWTOGRAPHER



The sun is a frequent symbol in yoga of the inner light that is in each of us, representing what we are trying to awaken in ourselves. Saluting the sun in our practice connects us to this inner light.

Many teachers and traditions value this practice as a way to begin a session or even as a stand-alone practice. In his book, *The Practice Manual*, renowned Ashtangi David Swenson encourages students who only have a few minutes to just do sun salutations. During several trainings with my teacher Sri Dharma Mittra, we would often flow through several rounds of sun salutations early in the morning followed by a seated pranayama and meditation. The sun salutations warm the body, prepare the mind to concentrate, and can deepen and slow down the breath, encouraging us to relax.

When I was in training with another of my teachers, Srivasta Ramaswami, he shared a story with us of a possible origin of the sun salutations. We are all born into this world owing three debts. (One translation of the word for sun in Sanskrit is debt.) The first debt we owe is to our parents for providing our soul with a vehicle so we can travel through this life. We pay back this debt by honoring our parents. The second debt we owe is to the sun for the light and energy it brings into our world. We pay back this debt by bowing down every morning and thanking the sun. The third debt we owe is to our teachers, their teachers and the original teachers, who gave us the practices we do in yoga. We pay back this debt by being good students, honoring our teachers, and passing on the knowledge.

The next time you practice sun salutations, consider the debt you owe to the sun. Offer your heart up. Then, bow down and say thank you. Offer gratitude. Move with intention. Match the movement of your body to the movement of your breath. Close your eyes. Concentrate on your heart and visualize the sun there. Imagine this light is within you; imagine you are this light. Take your time; you can't rush a thank you.

Thanking the sun each day shifts our perspective through the practice of gratitude. Practicing gratitude can help to release our attachment to the ego and the desires of the mind. The intentional practice of gratitude is a powerful practice of yoga. Practicing gratitude is practicing yoga.