

SHIVA REA

tending the heart fire

Living in Flow with the Pulse of Life

Contents

Foreword by Sally Kempton

Introduction

PART ONE

Tending the Heart Fire: Our Firekeeping Ancestors and the Evolution of Our Energetic Heart

CHAPTER ONE

Envisioning the Heart Fire: From Ancient Wisdom to Cutting-Edge Science

CHAPTER TWO

Embodying the Cosmos: From the Primordial Fire to the Inner Heart Altar

CHAPTER THREE

Embodying the Heart Fire: The Science of the Energetic Heart

PART TWO

Meditations for Tending the Heart Fire

CHAPTER FOUR

Movement Meditation: Connecting to the Source of Movement

CHAPTER FIVE

Yoga Alchemy: Energetic Vinyasa and the Flow of Rasa

CHAPTER SIX

Heart Fire Meditations and Life Practices

PART THREE

Living in Rhythm

TENDING THE HEART FIRE

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tending the Fire of Creation—Ayurveda and Inner Firekeeping

CHAPTER EIGHT

Living Vinyasa: Cycles of Rhythm and Flow

CHAPTER NINE

Time out of Time: Sacred Retreats for Energy Regeneration

PART FOUR

Living Vinyasa: The Solar-Lunar Mandala of the Year

CHAPTER TEN

Winter Solstice: Rebirth of Light

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Spring Equinox: Reemergence of Life

CHAPTER TWELVE

Summer Solstice: Peak of the Light

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fall Equinox: The Sacred Return

Expressions of Deep Gratitude

Notes

Resources

Art Credits

About the Author

About Sounds True

Copyright

Introduction

WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, I left my home in Memphis, Tennessee, and traveled via Belgium, Greece, and Egypt to Kenya. I had saved all of my work money to pay for my expenses on a nine-month volunteer trip in village development before I was to enter my freshman year at New York University. I ended up staying in Kenya for a year and a half, postponing college indefinitely; it was a pivotal period that changed the course of my life. Back in Memphis, the seeds of yoga had first begun stirring in me when I started a little yoga practice in my room from a book I had found in the library, while roaming around to find a book about my name. A burning search for meaning had begun to arise in me. On the news, the horrific suffering of the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s moved me to do service work in East Africa.

For the first six months in Kenya, I lived with my coworkers in a three-room earthen hut made of mud, thatch, and dung from our neighbor's cows, deep in the bush near Mount Kenya. We had no electricity or running water. The rhythm of "life unplugged" deeply shook yet soothed my teenage soul, as I had left home disheartened about what I felt was a superficial urban life in the United States. Everything in America seemed to come in packages—food, what to wear, what to do—disconnecting us more and more from our origins.

In my village life as a volunteer, I began to reconnect with earth rhythms. The water I carried on my head from the local stream made my neck strong and my connection to water more precious. Pulling food from the earth and walking a mile to market made food taste more alive. Building rain catchers with one hundred villagers while we all sang the Swahili refrain "Harambe Pamoja Kujenge Kenya" ("Let's work together as Kenyans") began to link my body to a collective body. Going to sleep with the moon and rising with the sun started to shift my rhythm to that of nature and the cosmos.

Although my teachers and friends in the Murang'a Valley had very little material wealth, living on less than \$400 a year, the happiness they expressed while living in harmony with the natural world—sitting around the fire together to sing songs and tell stories—was rich and profound.

TENDING THE HEART FIRE

Even though I had become integrated into daily village life, I questioned whether I was doing anything effective as a volunteer. Was I really helping? Wasn't I receiving more than I was giving?

One day as I walked slowly into the village from my home, I felt a deep malaise come over me—first the chills, then the shakes and a high fever. It turned into a serious five-day bout of malaria that still affects my health today. As I lay in my thatched hut, usually alone, my body wracked with pain, I existed in that space outside time. I was so sick I could do nothing else, so I opened to all the memories of my life that were arising, simply to stay connected to being alive.



I remembered hearing the rhythm of the ocean waves in my first years living in Hermosa Beach with my surfer father and sun-worshipping mother; the chaotic and colorful years in the Bay Area through the 1970s while my father was at the University of California, Berkeley; my teenage years in downtown Memphis near the blues hub of Beale Street. I remembered all the characters I had met. I exhausted every memory of family, friends, teachers, lovers, loss, and precious joys until all that seemed to be left was the feeling of how rich life had been in such a short span of time.

By the evening of the fourth day, my fever was still so high, despite my taking the medicine, that my Kenyan coworkers decided they would carry me five miles to the clinic the next morning if my fever didn't break. We all started to pray. They said their prayers aloud in Kikuyu, Swahili, and English. My prayers arose quietly between the violent shakes that came and went in waves. There was a strange, sacred calm inside the shaking, a place I had not been before, one of initiation.

Slowly, within the stillness of the night, an intense sensation began to spread from my chest through my body. I didn't know if I was dying or being reborn. This inner force blew away any thoughts or conceptions of what was happening. It was a feeling of intrinsic sacredness—an unmistakable presence of the One, a healing force that was melting within my heart and transforming my whole being. It's a feeling I still experience today whenever I listen deeply. At this eleventh hour, I felt strangely blissful and suddenly without fear as this most intimate heat moved from my heart center to my limbs, filling the room and moving into the night sky. An all-pervasive feeling of gratitude washed through me, because in that moment I knew I was not alone.

I wasn't quite sure at the time what, exactly, was happening, yet I hovered in that state all night, at some point finally falling asleep for the first time in days. When I woke up, I felt transformed. The fever and shaking were gone, and I felt euphoric but incredibly weak. I will never forget walking outside that next morning and heading out into the green flourishing of life: leaves swaying in the early morning wind, the sounds of roosters crowing, the first light on the horizon.

What I'd experienced was one of those mystical moments that often arise during life-turning events—be it a significant illness, childbirth, or standing at the crossroads of a new adventure or life change. Yet this fire, this warmth, that lives in the center of our hearts is accessible in all of us, in any moment. When I was confronting leaving this life, this body, I was reminded of this fire within, and I made a pledge right there that I have followed ever since: To follow my Heart Fire—this energetic inner blaze, the love of life—at the center of my being.

The Call Within

My heart is burning with love. All I can see is this flame. My heart is pulsing with passion, like waves on an ocean. I'm at home, wherever I am. And in the room of lovers, I can see with closed eyes the beauty that dances. Behind the veils intoxicated with love, I too dance the rhythm of this moving world.

—RUMI¹

Tending the Heart Fire is an offering from my heart to yours. Through my thirty years as a student of yoga, I have come to recognize the great truth that the human body is a universe—and that it is one and the same with the cosmos itself. Our bodies are literally made of the same materials that surround us—dirt, rocks, plants, rivers, oceans, and sunlight—and the wild and creative pulse of life that actuates the universe exists within the body itself.

The Universe began in fire, an explosion so powerful that we are still basking in its radiance. Our very own bodies contain traces of elements that exploded outward to birth our galaxy at the moment of the big bang, 13.7 billion years ago. Every mineral, every trace of our environment, can be found in our bones, our blood, our sweat, our tears. At the center of this magnificent and elegant universe of the body is our very own sun, the heart, with its electromagnetic radiance communicating with every cell of our body and synchronizing with our brainwaves and the heartbeats of others around us.² Just as a reference, the electromagnetic field of the heart is five thousand times stronger than that of any other organ in the body, and in heart-transplant patients whose vagus nerve has been severed this field is a means of heart-brain communication.³

WITHIN THIS HEART BURNS A FIRE.

Fire is at the core of our existence. From the original primordial fire of the big bang to the generative energy of the sun, all life depends on light and heat for creation and survival. As we will explore in this book, our Heart Fire, the energetic center of our bodies, functions as a pulse of life, just as the sun functions as the life pulse for our solar system. As the sun radiates the heat that warms the planet and animates all life, our hearts pump blood and nutrients throughout the body and send electromagnetic waves outward that

connect to the world around us. There are hundreds, thousands, of examples of how our external environment and our bodies work in unison. As such, the *vinyasa*, or flow, of our bodies—what we eat, when we sleep, when we create, when we rest—seeks to be in harmony with the natural rhythms of the natural world and our source of energy, the sun. Just as the length of days increases in spring and summer and releases a great generative energy that allows for new buds on the trees and a great expanse of green to blanket the earth, our bodies experience windows of potential for creation. And just as the world around us darkens in winter, our bodies seek to move inward, to rest, and to reflect during the season of winter and in the night. The cycles of time are mapped in the body—and when we attune to those internal and external forces, we are able to experience enormous peace, harmony, creativity, and longevity.

In the typical 9-to-5 work world where life has become ever more mechanized and urban, we need to find a new way of being. For those of us in the West, our natural rhythms have changed to one of 24/7 constant stimulation and high levels of stress, both of which contribute to the rise in heart disease—the number-one killer in the U.S. even though it hardly existed more than a century ago.⁴ There is great need for a new way to deal with the fragmenting effects of life in the twenty-first century. However, tending the Heart Fire is *not* entirely a “new” way of being, but instead a return to the ways of our ancestors—who placed the movements of the environment at the foreground of their lives. As such, much of what I offer in this book is actually a remembering of what our bodies already know to be true. When we synch our lives with the fire in our hearts, we can access the power of creation and manifestation and letting go. Similarly, we can access the slowing and inward movements that allow us to fall back into the wide, spacious quiet of gestation and rejuvenation, which is critical for finding peace and wholeness in our bodies. Everything in nature, and everything in our being, goes through a process of expansion and contraction. And it is the heartbeat, expanding and contracting, that keeps us alive.

This living in deep attunement to the natural rhythms of the planet is what I call “living in flow with the pulse of life.” Yoga is infinitely more than the now well-established world of movement practice that has branched out into

studios across the world. Yoga, too, is a universe, and it is a gateway through which we can live in harmony with the solar and lunar rhythms that dominate our biological and spiritual experience in order to find optimal flow in our lives. The word *yoga* means to “yoke,” or, in other words, to “unify.” Thus, in the yoga of the heart that I offer in this book, we seek to reintegrate ourselves with the natural flow of our bodies, guided by the warm, central wisdom of our Heart Fires.

Living Vinyasa: The Background and Principles Guiding This Book

Tending the Heart Fire is a life-guide book, an offering of meditations centered on the innate wisdom of our heart and the rhythm of the seasons. This book invites you to take a journey into the legacy of meditation connected across deep time to firekeeping, a practice that’s more than two million years old—the current carbon-dated evidence of our ability to tend fire.⁵ All animals, including human beings, become more focused, reflective, and meditative around a fire. It is here that the earliest forms of meditation such as fire gazing, chant, movement, and music emerged.

This book includes more than 108 such meditations, ranging from sound to movement, and from ayurvedic health practices for balancing our inner fire, or *samagni*, to ritual bonfires for the solstice. These meditations are a tapestry woven from what I have learned through personal experience and from the wisdom traditions I have studied, including yoga, tantra, bhakti, ayurveda, and *natya* (dance). As a graduate of UCLA’s World Arts and Cultures/Dance program, I have always been drawn to a universal, big-picture understanding of yoga. As a student, I keep returning to the roots of my path—not just in yogic lineages, but also within the world’s indigenous traditions. These pathways of yoga have all informed the body of knowledge presented in this book—but above all, I offer my gratitude to my teachers.

Tantra, Bhakti, and the Inner Firekeeping of the Heart

Much of the material in this book is guided by the Tantra, the origin of most of the embodied yoga that we practice today, and has become a central part of

my personal practice and offerings. Often misunderstood, nondual tantra is a spiritual movement originating in North India that reached its peak in the ninth to twelfth centuries, primarily characterized by a life and body-positive approach to daily practice (*sadhana*). Within tantra, there is an emphasis on a direct experience of divine reality that has transcendent and immanent aspects, called Shiva and Shakti, respectively. Shiva is primarily understood as the pure consciousness that is the ultimate ground of being, while Shakti is the flowing energy making up the entire manifest universe.⁶ A tantric orientation to yoga recognizes that the highest place of realization is not to be found outside of us but within our embodiment amidst daily life.

Within tantra, the cosmology of the universe and the rhythms of the earth are all directly mirrored in the body. All the sacred junctures of the year—the lunar cycles, the change of seasons—have a direct and observable point in the body. Thus when we try to override the body’s natural shifts, we create blockage, a stagnation, and the truth of what wants to emerge from our minds, bodies, and hearts is impacted.

Central to tantric meditation is the offering of breath, mantra, and awareness into a living energy of the heart visualized as a fire altar, or *hrd kund*. Here meditation embraces the senses and the entire spectrum of one’s life, as we have a direct, transforming experience of the inner source as the fire of consciousness illuminating the way.

Bhakti often refers to the way of the heart, from the root *bhaj* as devotion. *Bhakti* can refer to the historical movement of *kirtan*, dance, and teachings that blossomed during the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries and led to the contemporary *kirtan* movement. It can also refer to the mystical traditions within tantra and the devotional texts, sutras, and songs from Abhinavagupta to Lalleshwari, Tirumoolar to Kabir, whose heart realizations are offered in various passages in this book alongside meditations, offerings, and *pujas* dedicated to tending the fire of devotion and liberating the power of love as a living *bhakti*.

Tantra encourages you to experience your body as your most sacred altar and to honor the cosmos that is your body by honoring the fire that lives in the heart.

Ayurveda and the Firekeeping of Our Vitality

Ayurveda, one of the oldest healing systems in the world, is based on a foundation of religion, philosophy, and medicine to balance the natural flow of the body for optimal health and well-being. Native to India, ayurveda is based on the observed wisdom of the body—and it acknowledges that the body, just as the outside world, is a fine-tuned instrument that contains the five basic elements that also make up our planet: ether, air, fire, water, earth. It also takes into account what Dr. Vasant Lad, a preeminent doctor and author of ayurveda, terms the “trinity of life”: body, mind, and spiritual awareness. The word *ayu* means “daily living,” while *veda* means “knowing.” Simply put, ayurveda teaches that our bodies are microcosms of the universe and that disease in the body has a direct relationship to the macrocosm—the environment, the cycles of the seasons and time, and what is around us. We mirror each other. Just as the earth, when in balance, has immense generative and healing power, so too does the body. But again, we must bring it into balance with its gorgeous and wise natural rhythms.

This book is informed by ayurveda because its practices honor the deep relationship between humans and the cosmos. According to Dr. Lad, cosmic energy manifests in all living and nonliving things. Our bodies are no less complex than the cosmos itself. Because ayurveda has long been such an integral part of my life; teacher trainings; annual ayurvedic retreats to Kerala, South India; and my study of *kalarippayatu*, a martial art and healing system that integrates ayurveda, I want to share that which has transformed me. Throughout this book, I thus provide many “living in rhythm” practices and suggestions based on ayurveda that honor the needs of the body in relation to what is happening with the seasons and time of day.

Prana Flow—Energetic Vinyasa

When I first began teaching vinyasa in 1990, my teaching was rooted in the practice of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga taught by Sri Pattabhi Jois and informed by Iyengar teachers and teachers of Desikachar—all students of Sri T. Krishnamacharya of Chennai, India. Throughout the last two decades, I have been dedicated to a holistic vision of the understanding of “living vinyasa” in

its roots and branches. Vinyasa in its original meaning from the early Tantras is understood as the “sequence of consciousness,” or how life unfolds from *spanda*—the creative pulse of life.⁷

In nature, vinyasa is any cycle, from the tiniest vibration to the cycle of our entire life. It represents the journey of how a potent seed evolves into a full, branching tree. My father gave me the seed name of Shiva at birth from his love of the sculptural image of Nataraja, or the Cosmic Dance. This name led me to seek out yoga as a teenager, to perform service work in Kenya, and to follow the mystic opening of my heart through the fire of malaria, leading eventually to living in an ashram-orphanage run by yogic nuns in the slums of Nairobi. The fire of yoga had been ignited within me. In the intimacy of self-practice, my organic relationship to the wave of breath, the cellular energy, and the ebb and flow of my heart consciousness has guided me throughout, including saving me from burning out from a fiery yoga practice during my early years of study.

Now I offer vinyasa as living flow connected to the dance of life—a changing and evolving sequence based on the movements of prana (life force) and our energetic body. From my earliest studies in Odissi (classical Indian dance), kalaripayattu of CVN Kalari (Indian martial arts), and my undergraduate and graduate studies in the department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, I have become dedicated to a global understanding of movement meditation and *namaskar*, or moving prayer. Going deeper into *sahaja yoga* (spontaneous, natural flow) with my root teacher Daniel Odier as well as within trance dance systems of Jamaica, Haiti, Mali, Ghana, Morocco, Bali, and Kerala awakened the experience of being a vessel of movement. My body could no longer be held in the physical perfection of an asana. The life pulse of the breath and the connection of the heart reclaimed my body. Thus I’ve chosen in *Tending the Heart Fire* to offer a more universal book of meditations, but I also offer an entire practice companion of Prana Flow–Energetic Vinyasa, featuring a mandala of more than forty namaskars: solar-lunar vinyasa sequences that complement the living vinyasa meditations on these pages.

Where to Begin: Tending the Heart Fire

This book invites you to take a journey into the legacy of firekeeping that is

more than 800,000 years old. I want to pass on to you the inspiration of the legacy we've been given by our ancestors, who observed the cosmos and created daily practices, rituals, festivals, and celebrations to align themselves with the deeper rhythms of nature. Our whole body is synched with nature to preserve this balance.

When we “tend to our Heart Fire” we center our life-energy into the core of our being, our hearts, which is ever generating. Like the sun, our hearts contain an eternal flow of energy that is life-giving and life-holding. When we tend to our Heart Fire, we integrate the solar and lunar aspects of ourselves—our inner regeneration and dynamic energy. Much of yoga today does not integrate this tending. Yoga as asana practice is only part of the picture. Firekeeping is thus the central metaphor for this book. It is a metaphor for the infinite ways we stay attuned and attentive to our core truth. Firekeeping is primal and raw. It requires discipline and deep attention. It demands agility, for life is always changing—externally and internally—and we need to shift and adjust to what life presents us. And it calls us to activism—for we must wake up and live in our highest potential so that we can be a force of good in the world.

This book is divided into four parts: In Part One we explore the cross-cultural meanings of the heart through time among mystics and philosophers, East and West. We trace its fall in Western thought to the status of a mere mechanical pump, and the welcome resurgence of knowledge of the true energetic heart that is taking place today. We explore the deep tradition underlying the tending of the Heart Fire—firekeeping through human history—and look at the effects of our disconnection from this profound history. Through the flow of nature (envisioned as the ecstatic dance of Shiva and Shakti within yoga), we see the creation of the cosmic rhythms and elements of the universe and explore the power of living in synchronization with these rhythms and elements to reclaim our firekeeping power.

We begin our firekeeping practice in Part Two with movement meditations, again visiting the dance of Shiva and Shakti as archetype and inspiration. I will introduce you to simple, accessible, and yet profound forms of movement such as *pranams*, *mudras*, *kriyas*, and *namaskars*—movement alchemy. In this part we also look at the influence of time and rhythm, place, and our somatic mood on

our practice. In this part, I offer a series of meditations for tending the Heart Fire.

In Part Three we begin to link the energies flowing through our bodies with daily, monthly, and seasonal rhythms, exploring the *sandhyas*—sacred junctures of time—that are highly potent for practice. From the elements created by Shiva’s dance flow the principles of ayurveda, which we explore here. Practical ways to live in accordance with these principles are included. We learn to attune to the rhythms of day and night, sun and moon in our firekeeping and to use sacred retreat time and ritual to regenerate our Heart Fire.

With Part Four we apply our knowledge in six-week annual cycles, using a calendar that I developed that integrates the solar and lunar cycles of the sacred mandala of the year. We begin in the fertile darkness of winter, the time of least external light, when we envision and gestate our own renewal, regenerating and rekindling the internal light, the Heart Fire. Then it is on to the swelling of spring, the creative fire of summer, and onward through the letting-go energy of fall. Food, body, and yoga rhythms appropriate to each season are included, and along the way we visit some of the great sacred holidays and festivals that mark each season.

Notwithstanding this structure, my hope is that you can open to *any* page in this book and be inspired by a meditation, a passage, a sutra, or an image. If you are not interested in theory, you can dive right into the practices starting with Part Two. Meanwhile, if you have any physical hindrances or are not a “yoga practitioner,” you can still enjoy most of the meditations at any time or place without limitations.

I am grateful to the many teachers and friends on the Heart Fire path as well as to the “Tending the Heart Fire: Living Yoga Sadhana” program within Samudra Global School for Living Yoga, which I founded in 2002. This book is also a multimedia ebook and online resource, in which you can see the practices come alive. Since my first Sounds True CD offering in 2000, I have been dedicated to home-practice tools as a grassroots way to help people tend their inner fire in a direct relationship to the cellular energy that awakens through the breath of yoga.