

# Introduction: What does it mean to be strong? What does it mean to be vital?

Would you like to feel strong? Would you like to feel vital? I have yet to meet a person who prefers to feel weak and drained, yet this is how many of us move through life. What can we do to feel stronger and more vital? This is exactly what we will cover in this yoga series.

What does it mean to be strong? How is strength measured? Do we measure it by how much we can lift or by how much we can endure? Feeling strong means different things to different people. For one person, it means being able to bench-press 100lbs. For somebody else, it's about being able to go up four flights of stairs without their knees buckling and to lift a toddler. For another person, it might mean being able to eat common foods without having an immediate digestive reaction. For somebody else, it might mean being able to carry on a conversation with an estranged critical parent without an emotional breakdown. These are examples of different types of strength: physical strength, physiological strength, and emotional strength. We need all types of strength to handle whatever life throws at us. Fundamentally, being strong means being capable of doing things we want to do in life without major strain. The type of activities and things we want to be able to do varies from person to person, and it boils down to the feeling we have on the inside - you either feel strong and capable of doing it or you don't.

The same applies to vitality. Vitality is hard to objectively measure with blood tests and nasal swabs, but you can certainly feel its absence. Vitality is "the positive feeling of aliveness and energy that lies at the core of well-being." (1) Vitality shows up in how rested you feel in the morning, how excited you feel about your tasks, how smoothly you move through your day, whether you have a spring in your step, how well you cope with stress and negative emotions, and how optimistic your general outlook on life is. More than just our energy level, vitality is the oomph that carries us forward and elevates our daily experiences.

Strength and vitality often go hand in hand, and we feel the best when we experience both simultaneously. Strength infused with vitality is the definition of health and well-being.

Different disciplines have different strategies for developing strength and vitality. The yoga tradition has developed its own methodology and it revolves around your spine, because your spine is the structural and energetic center of the body.

From the structural perspective, the spine is responsible for balanced weight distribution during any physical activity. It also encloses and protects the spinal cord – a bundle of nerves that controls all movement and organ function. There are many advantages of having a supple and flexible spine. Joseph Pilates put it best: “You are only as old as your spine. If your spine is inflexibly stiff at 30, you are old; if it is completely flexible at 60, you are young!!!” A balanced yoga practice needs to take the spine through the full range of motion with forward bends, back bends, lateral bends, twists, and axial extension postures. Each of those directional movements of the spine serves a specific purpose and has its own benefits. In this yoga series, we will take your spine through its full range of motion using progressively more challenging postures to improve your ability to bend forward, backward, and sideways, to rotate and elongate your spine. There are five dedicated chapters in the series, each covering a specific direction of spinal movement. Each of these chapters includes three practices of various lengths and intensities to allow you to explore each direction of spinal movement thoroughly, increase your range of motion, and strengthen the supporting musculature that makes your spinal movement stable yet supple.

According to the yoga tradition, the spine is also an energetic center of the body - the main energy pathway, *sushumna nadi*, runs along the spine. Traditionally, yoga poses were meant to move the energy—prana—throughout the body. Prana carries nourishment to every part of the body along its many channels, called nadis. When the flow of energy is smooth and consistent, it reaches every nook and cranny, ensuring that the body remains healthy and disease free. When the flow of energy becomes disrupted in some way, disease follows. From an energetic standpoint, yoga poses are meant to be “prana pumps”—they help us pump the energy throughout the body. The energy can flow in five main directions reflecting the flow of nourishment throughout the body. For the body to be alive and healthy you need to take nourishment (in the form of food, water, air, or experiences), process it, distribute and absorb the nutrients, eliminate waste, and, as a result, heal, grow, and evolve.

The yoga tradition says that there are specific currents of energy (Vayus) that guide each one of these directional energy movements. Each Vayu has a specific location in the body and consistently moves in a particular direction to guide and regulate every physiological function in the body. If we want to feel strong and vital on a daily basis, we need to ensure that the energy flows freely along each one of those channels. In yoga, we can use specific poses, breathing techniques, mudras, visualizations, and points of focus to facilitate the flow of energy along the paths of individual Vayus, Vayu pairings, and all Vayus together. In this yoga series, we will explore the location and direction of movement of each individual

Vayu, discuss the main health and wellness qualities that the Vayu is responsible for, analyze the Vayu flow in your organism and potential issues you might encounter if the Vayu does not flow smoothly, and discuss practice recommendations for specific Vayus.

In this series, we will also connect the direction of movement of specific Vayus with a specific directional movement of the spine and see how they support each other, serve common goals, and cultivate certain physical and mental qualities.

This yoga series is expansive in its scope and blends together the biomechanical understanding of the physical structure of the body with traditional yogic ideas about the essence of health and vitality. Throughout the series, you will increase your physical strength and movement capacity and try progressively more challenging poses that are meant to strengthen, stretch, and stabilize every part of your body. You will also work on building your vitality and resilience from within by ensuring smooth energy flow in every major direction so that every cell in your body gets nourishment to do its job without hindrance.

Feeling strong, capable, and vital enhances every part of your life. It gives you a sense of well-being, enables you to tackle life's challenges, instills optimism about the future and enables you to move forward with grace and ease. This yoga series will help you build strength and vitality by mobilizing your spine, restoring smooth energy flow throughout the body, and encouraging you to make more mindful choices to replenish and fortify your sense of well-being.

## References

1. [Everyday Vitality: Turning Stress into Strength](#) by Samantha Boardman