

*Yoga Therapeutics for those facing death*

*Never the Spirit was born*

*The Spirit shall cease to be, never.*

*Never was time was not-*

*End and beginning are dreams.*

*Birthless and deathless and changeless*

*Abideth the Spirit forever.*

*Death doth not touch it at all.*

*- the Bhagavad Gita*

Baba Hari Dass declares that fear of death is the underlying fear of all fears. The transition from this conscious life can be the most terrifying or the most liberating process of a persons earthly life. The yoga practice, and the intention of this paper, assumes that this life is a temporal one, meaning, that “something” comes after. That “something” is up for debate, but my faith in the afterlife inspires me to investigate more deeply the transition towards, and support work through, the dying process.

There have been several experiences in my life that support my faith in the afterlife. I have read numerous stories and seek out people who can talk to me about near death experience, or those who have supported others in their dying process. I have not had the privilege to witness this yet. As Jnani Chapman said “ the best thing you can do as aspiring yoga therapists (within the context of support for those dying) is to contemplate your own mortality.” I approach this topic with a desire to learn more, acknowledging my “unknowningness”, and a deep humility to the vastness and depth of this issue.

Ghandi once said, “Fearlessness is the first prerequisite to a spiritual life.” Acknowledging our deepest fears and inviting them for a cup of tea is an integral practice for the yogi. Digging in to the emotions connected to these layers and honouring the discomfort of the ego is essential to evolution on a soul level. Upon contemplating my own mortality, I begin to ruffle the surface of the deepest ingrained fears, that manifest in daily life as fictional insecurities and inadequacies.

As yoga practitioners and aspiring therapists in this role, our practice needs to be one of deep spiritual work. This must incorporate meditation, mindfulness and above all, a willingness to let our personal story take a back seat. As we sit present for those in pain, anger, denial,

grief, loss, or however the fear of death manifests within our client, we must have discovered our own True Nature so we can support our friends near death to find the place within themselves which is Unchanging. With compassion and faith we can help them meet the aspects of themselves which will survive long after the physical body departs. It is my hope that this state of mind, and being, will give some peace in the journey to the afterlife.

As spiritual seekers one of the most important questions we ask is “Who am I?” This first question leads one down the rabbit hole of all rabbit holes! Hopefully we realize that at any given moment we are more than meets the eye. We are far more than perceived. The world around us entails far more than meets the senses. We are housed in body, infused matter with energy and consciousness, ego and soul. We honour the body as precious temple, honour the ego as conduit for learning for the soul.

Another question to ask oneself is, “What happens after I die?”. Paramahansa Yogananda likens the beauty of this reality to a glimmer of what comes after. We need to encourage our clients to read the works of saints and sages from all religions and help them to initiate a process of inquiry into their own mortality and the afterlife.

Unfortunately we live in a culture that values science to determine what is real and unreal. This makes it difficult to find comfort in the passing of the physical body. Imagine if we grew up familiar with death, welcoming it in the home, surrounding it with ceremony and honour. Imagine if we as children were used to being with dead bodies, seeing them paraded with glory in the streets, or if we were familiar with the sights and smells of ceremonial cremations! Would this not change our thoughts and feelings with death?

In a society that measures success with worldly possessions, a good job and physical beauty it is no wonder that sickness, old age and death are regarded with dread and misunderstood. These values are determined by a culture fascinated by itself. Illness and dying shatters a well preserved self image. This ego fascination holds the material plane of existence as the pinnacle upon judgement. For the spiritual seeker, the continual process of self reflection and soul learning towards a (re)union with God is the pinnacle of a life’s work

In the Western society and the “modern” world death is relegated to hospitals and funeral homes, sombre, sterile, with no homage to the aging process and celebration of rite of passage. Death is hidden away, behind closed doors, the authority of the dying, or their family given over to the medical community. Pain is numbed immediately by pharmaceuticals, the dying often making the transition to the afterlife semi-conscious and paralysed by drugs.

Separation from the natural cycles of nature also play a role in the defiance of the waning of life. Our disconnection to the biotic community deprives us of an inherent notion of the cycles of death and rebirth which happen all around us, which make up the web of existence on our planet. Most of our North American population lives separate from circadian and seasonal rhythms substituted by synthetic means.

In the Tibetan tradition monks and nuns are trained to support the dying. They provide support by telling the dying why they are feeling certain sensations in the body, such as thirst,

heaviness, and breathlessness. The one who is dying is encouraged not to cling to these sensations. The monks say things like, “as the earth element leaves your body you will feel heavy. As the air element leaves your body, your out breath will be longer than your in breath.”

. Only recently are there creative hospice programs that incorporate song, music and prayer in progressive hospitals. As therapists we can bring beauty, light and healing touch into an otherwise depressive and oppressive hospital environment. Into homes , if the dying is fortunate to be in a familiar place with family, we can bring a grounded energy of support , a channel to the Divine, a reminder of acceptance to the laws of impermanence.

Perhaps the most appropriate practice for our clients is a mindfulness practice. If they haven't already begun , we can assist them in letting go of the turmoil in the psyche, and in turn bringing them to the present moment. For it is here we can find the Innermost being, the place of Eternal Witness. “As we practice mindfulness, we see that the ego does not cease to exist, it simply ceases to tyrannize us or to offer the only version of experience available”. so in this way we can assist our clients in releasing attachment to the physical reality , people they love , identities that have served them for years.

In stilling the mind, releasing it from the detail or drama of the outer world, lies the key to understanding. As Ram Dass explains, in the present moment there is no time. The present moment is a portal to timelessness. He quotes Kalu Rinpoche:

***We live in illusion, the appearance of things.***

***But there is a reality. We are that reality.***

***When you understand this you see that you are nothing,***

***and being nothing, you are everything.***

***That is all.***

Ram Dass goes on to explain, that not being wholly dominated by our feelings, we are, in fact able to feel them more deeply. Knowing that a light exists, we may not be so afraid to peer into the darkness and discovering what it has to teach us. For example, grief or separation, need not paralyse the heart or become a garment for the ego. It can be an opportunity for growth on a soul level.

Simple and gentle breath awareness practice is a cornerstone to this mindful practice. Pranayama would vary according to the persons physical, mental and emotional well being , and how thin the veil is between the worlds. The three part yogic breath, with emphasized awareness to the belly would help to calm and sooth the nervous system. Sensations of the breath at the nostrils, in the head, and thru the chest would give them a feeling of embodied awareness.

Inviting the breath as a vehicle for prana to different areas of the body may give them a sense of the energy body. Giving people a sense they are being breathed by something far greater than themselves can help them surrender. A breath practice for those in critical care, or undergoing treatments like chemo-therapy or dialysis, helps the nervous system manage the stress of hospital regime.

The beauty and mystery of the breath is that it brings one into the present moment. In this place of being there is no 'self' to experience the pain of loss, of someone or something of the past, or the fear of the unknown, something in the future. As Ram Dass puts it, "in the present moment, there is no time. The moment is a portal to timelessness" It is here we can experience Soul consciousness, and it is here there is relief from suffering. This kind of practice offers a way to step back from the physical and mental states and view who we are with wisdom, humility, humour and patience.

Yoga Nidra as prescribed by Richard Miller PhD, is an excellent practice for yoga therapist as practitioner and the client. This is a transformative process derived from the ancient teachings of meditation that leads to psychological, physical and spiritual healing. The protocol is integrative in that it heals unresolved issues, traumas and wounds in the body, mind and senses. It is also restorative in that it aids its practitioner in recognizing their underlying, unchanging ground of equanimity that is always present amidst all the changes of life. It involves two basic steps: 1) The embodiment of pure awareness, and 2) the release of negative body sensations, emotions and beliefs and stress that give rise to self-destructive patterns. Yoga Nidra, or *iRest*, teaches people skills for everyday use throughout their whole life, and is also a gift we can give to comfort the dying.

Savasana, the corpse pose, is an integral practice for everyone. The subtleties and depth of this pose are essential for all, as this pose prepares us for the loss of the physical. Using guided imagery, breathwork practice and mindfulness we can drop into a state of Witness or Soul Being. The asana practice is not perhaps the most appropriate focus for this group of people. Depending on their state of being, perhaps a few simple restorative poses to relieve specific areas of discomfort would be part of the prescription.

Mantra, kirtan and Tratak, or candle gazing, would also be methods for alleviating stress. These would enable practitioner to focus and ease the mind. Making these practices accessible for those confined to bed, at home or in the hospital, or even in trauma in any location can bring equilibrium to state of mind.

Upon investigating the derivation of the word compassion, one learns that "passion" comes from the Latin *pate*, meaning suffering. When we consider compassion as one of our foremost themes when we sit present for those near death, we can see how the word embodies our duty. *Com* in Latin means 'together', so we sit together with another's suffering. Can we be a solid channel of support within the myriad of emotion unmoving in our own being? As Ram Dass suggests this is an excellent opportunity to sneak Soul Being Awareness in past the ego. If the ego can't worry about itself, when we truly wish for the suffering of others to cease, it becomes powerless to feed on its own fear.

***“Fear of death is the root of all fears. One who has removed that fear is liberated.”***

Baba Hari Dass explains that once life energy takes form, a natural desire to live also forms. As the living form evolves, ego consciousness becomes stronger and the fear of death increases. We are afraid of losing what we have and we are afraid of things that do not support our individuality. On the one hand fear is a big block to finding peace and love, on the other hand, it is the cause of motivating a person to seek liberation. In this way we use our weakness as our greatest strength.

The yoga practice invites us to peel away the layers of who we think we are, we weed out these temporary identities, re-evolving into who we really are. We must acknowledge that this quest is lifelong, and that there really are no concrete answers. Surrendering to the unknown, the Un-nameable, as said in the Lords prayer, “Thy Will be done” is our primary task. By questioning our own identity, by listening and “not” doing, and by meeting fear with love, can we prepare to be present for our own and our fellow humans’ mortality.

***Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.  
My shoulder is against yours.  
You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,  
nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:  
not in masses, nor in kirtans, not in legs winding around your own neck,  
nor in eating nothing but vegetables.  
When you really look for me, you will see me  
instantly-  
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.  
Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?  
It is the breath inside the breath.***

*-Kabir*

## **Bibliography**

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Hours worked december 2008 and january 2009

4 weeks in December with three clients as case studies

client #1 (Carol) 4 hours

client #2 (Gary) 4 hours

client #3 (Pete) 4 hours

= 12 hours

other clients (6) @3 hours each

=18 hours

Total=30 hours

4 weeks in January

Carol 3 hours

Gary 4 hours

Pete 3 hours

= 10 hours

other clients(6) @ 3 hours each

=18 hours

Total=28 hours

8 weeks Restorative/Therapeutic class @ 3 hours /week = 24 hours

8 weeks all levels Hatha class @ 3 hours /week = 24 hours

4 weeks Chair yoga class @ 1 hour/week = 4 hours

Total=52

hours

Research paper

research 20 hours

face to face interviews 5 hours

writing 15 hours

Total=40 hours

Total all hours logged = 150 hours

