



## On providing yoga to the dying, and finding the infinite well of love

### A reflection on a transformational process

by Molly Kenny

In the second part of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, the great sage speaks to us of practice—how we come to yoga, that state of quiet bliss that allows us to feel that all is well. In sutra 2.3, he describes the five obstructions to happiness, the *kleshas*, and states that while all five stem from the first, *avidya*, or lack of knowing our true nature, that the fifth klesha, *abhinivesha*, or fear of death, is the most difficult to overcome.

As a culture we are clearly terrified of death. We don't talk about it, we spend billions of dollars trying to keep ourselves and the ones we love alive even when death is unavoidable, and we have no common language for providing words of comfort to the dying or bereaved. It would be easy to scoff at our own culture and romanticize others who live closer to the earth and to a common spirituality, as accepting death so much more easily. But Patanjali wrote these admonitions a few thousand years ago, suggesting that although different cultures certainly deal with death differently, and some in much healthier ways than others,

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this undercurrent of fear of death and clinging to life is a part of human nature, and will always be a challenge for all of us.

How then do we face death? How do we learn a language and a context that affirms our life as a process, rather than simply being terrified by the idea of an end? How do we find words to express comfort and solace? How do we understand when silence is best? Just as in all our pursuits on the spiritual path, the most obvious answer is practice. And as with other aspects of our spiritual path, we must find teachers and safe places in which to practice.

At the Samarya Center, we have provided therapeutic yoga classes to adults and children in bereavement since November 2002. In January of last year, we founded a program at The Bailey-Boushay House, a residential facility for people living with AIDS and other life-threatening illnesses, where we provide bedside yoga to residents. We have sat with people who are dying, we have talked to people of healing, we have lost people we loved, we have heard heart-wrenching stories of loss, and we have had days when we feel like we can't do it anymore.

It is on those days especially when I remember that even though this fear of death seems almost unconquerable, it stems from that first obstruction—not knowing our true nature. It is then that I reflect on those moments in which I do know my own limitlessness, my own infinite capacity for love and compassion, and my belief in the limitlessness of others. It is from this place that I, and the others I know who share this work, are able to find the spaciousness within ourselves that allows us to provide that space for others.

It's not really something any of us has to learn. It is our true nature. Our work is in uncovering it, and this comes through *svadyaya*, continuous self-study—continually examining our own beliefs, fears, reactions, desires to do or change or fix. We can learn specific techniques and amass information about death and dying, but we can only truly, authentically, do this work if we are able to be in this place of constant self-inquiry. We must find that infinite source of strength and surrender through our own practice, meditation, and reflection. It is in this process that we will suddenly find our hearts breaking open, and in this moment experience yoga—unconditional love and boundless courage.

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