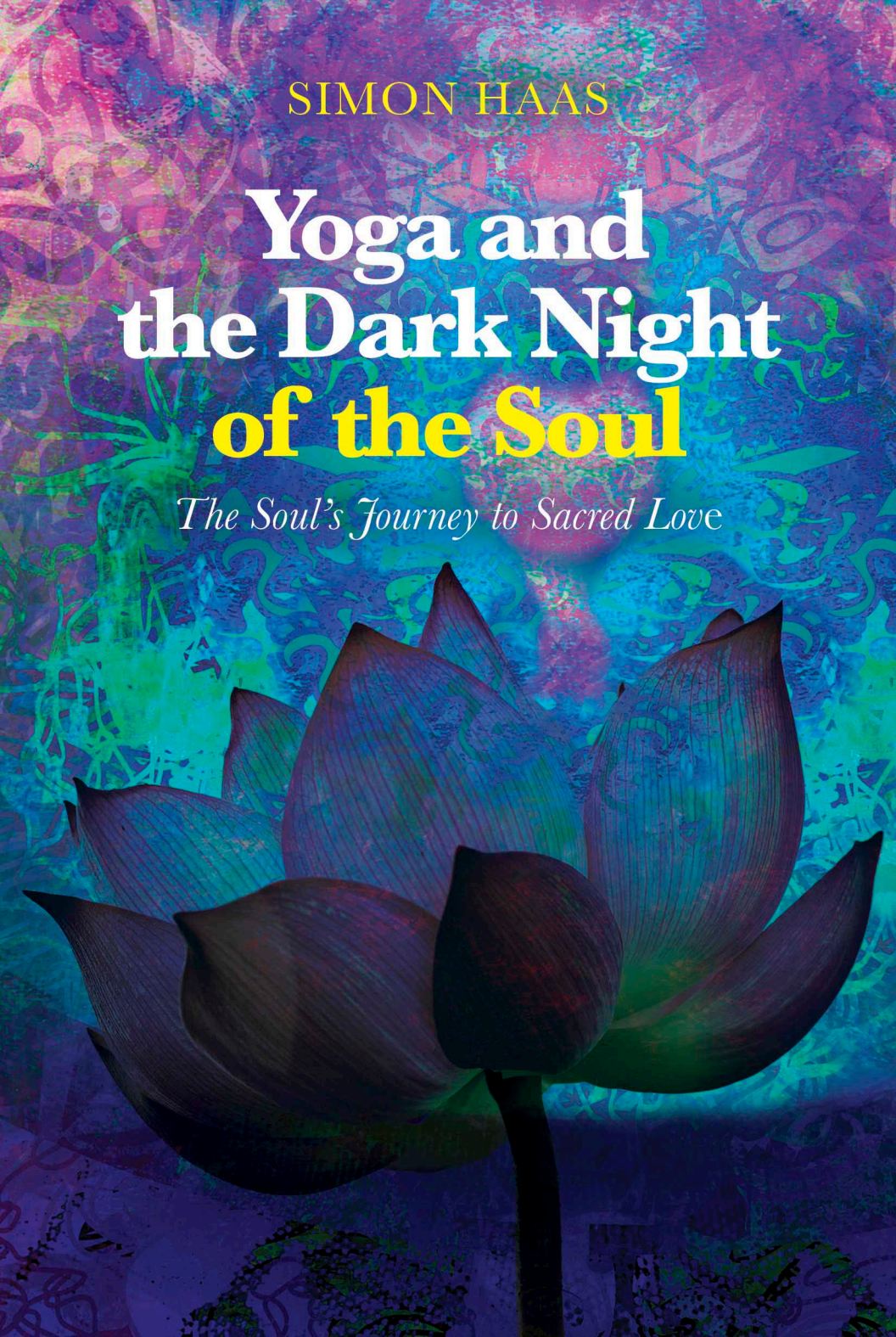
SIMON HAAS

Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul

The Soul's Journey to Sacred Love



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Acclaim for

YOGA AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

"What do Arjuna (of *Bhagavad Gita* fame) and St. John of the Cross have in common? Among other things, both experience a 'dark night of the soul'—that is to say, they undergo necessary purgations on the path to transcendence. But do these two luminaries have a monopoly on this proverbial dark night? No. We are all privy to such existential tribulation, sooner or later, and Simon Haas makes careful record of this. In his stimulating and informative work, *Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul*, Haas uses Arjuna's dark night to explore his own, thereby lending a hand to his own healing and, by extension, to ours. His focus, in particular, is the yoga tradition and India's ancient *bhakti* texts, primarily the *Bhagavad Gita*. Drawing on his own realization and that of the sages, he brings readers into the 'light' of enlightenment, showing us that the dark night is not so dark after all, but is, rather, a catalyst to illumination. This is an authoritative, metaphysical book on yoga that takes one beyond the needs of the body and mind and situates one in spiritual luminescence. What more can a discerning reader ask for?"

—**Steven J. Rosen (Satyaraja Dasa)**, author of some thirty books on Vaishnavism and related subjects; senior editor of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*; and associate editor of *Back to Godhead* magazine

"A true delight and pleasure to read, which I hope to share with young people across the world who wish to deepen their understanding of the true, majestic science of yoga."

—Charlotta Martinus, founder of TeenYoga and Director at Universal Yoga Ltd

"Simon Haas has done it again. With the clear perception of a sage, he has retold this ancient classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in a way everyone can understand. … I have used Haas's *The Book of Dharma: Making Enlightened Choices* as a course book for our students in yoga teacher training. This too will become part of our curriculum."

—**Dr Richard A. Masla**, founder of Ayurveda Health Retreat and of YogaVeda School of Yoga & Ayurveda

"Haas draws generously from the *Bhagavad Gita* and other classical yoga texts, alongside colourful narratives from his own spiritual journey and travels. From a little girl at Heathrow airport and a dog on the Yorkshire Moors, to holy men in crematoriums and Indian monkeys, we hear inspiring stories sure to open our hearts and minds in learning to appreciate the potential power in darkness to rewrite our own life stories from ones of fear and confusion into those of love and compassion."

—**Catherine L. Schweig**, chief editor of *Goddess: When She Rules* (Golden Dragonfly Press, 2017) and author of over fifty articles on yoga and the *Bhagavad Gita*

"*Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul* is by far one of the best books I've read. It's an eye-opening and heart-touching, beautifully crafted tapestry on the nature of difficult life experiences, and on how best to navigate through them. … Every page and chapter has an uplifting message and delivers immense value for the well-being of the body, mind and self. I highly recommend it."

—**Ariadna Landman**, Ayurvedic medicine teacher and practitioner; founder of VitalVeda

"The writing is beautifully balanced, simple yet profound and poetic, eloquent yet direct and accessible. Simon's insights, guidance and stories warm the heart and mind."

—**Dylan Hendrix**, teacher of yoga and author of *Art of the Storm* (Balboa Press, 2017)

"A timely yoga read and ideal travel companion. I highly recommend this yoga book to anyone on a yoga journey, especially yoga teachers and students; it is a must."

—**Twanna Doherty**, CEO at Yogamatters

"As an accomplished representative of an authentic spiritual tradition that has taught the *Bhagavad Gita* for millennia, Simon Haas guides us on a mystical journey within ourselves that leads to realms of everlasting, transcendent happiness. *Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul* makes for compelling reading and is sure to become a classic in its genre."

—**Krishna Dharma**, author of the world's bestselling retellings of the great Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*

"Simon Haas elegantly sheds light on the ancient text *Bhagavad Gita*, revealing its profound relevance to daily life. Haas weaves beautiful real-life stories into the context of this ancient wisdom, making it accessible at a time when it is so needed, in a way that perhaps has never been done before."

—**Jonathan Glass, M.Ac., C.A.T.**, Ayurveda practitioner and author of *Total Life Cleanse: A 28-Day Program to Detoxify and Nourish the Body, Mind, and Soul* (Healing Arts Press, 2018)

ALSO BY SIMON HAAS:

The Book of Dharma: Making Enlightened Choices

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The Soul's Journey to Sacred Love

VEDA WISDOM BOOKS

Readers interested in the subject matter of this book are invited to correspond with the author at **simon@simonhaas.com**

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To my younger brother David,
who fought cancer
and survived

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LET DISCERNMENT BE THE WARRIOR'S SWORD.

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The Journey

—1—

Homo sapiens sapiens, "human, the extremely wise". That's the name we've given our species.[1]

Today, we have access to more information than ever before, yet it struck me (even at a young age) that we're still far from wise. The name we've given humankind is more of an aspiration, an aim. Given the destruction of our planet and our capacity for greed, suffering and irrational delusions, we might, perhaps more truthfully, have named our species *Homo avarus*, "human, the greedy", *Homo vastans*, "human, the destroyer" or *Homo patiens*, "suffering human".

As a young teen, I wondered why so many of us live in a state of restless dissatisfaction with life. I hoped I might find a mentor, an example to follow; but wherever I looked, I saw people struggling with the same basic challenges: jealousy, anger, frustration, boredom, dissatisfaction. I was no exception, of course. A witness to the difficulties experienced by loved ones, I questioned Western culture's response to crises and where our perspectives might be failing us.

I began searching for answers in the world's wisdom traditions. Without knowing it, I was embarking on an inner voyage of discovery, the start of my own journey of the soul.

My search led me to the ancient yoga texts of India. One of these is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a classic on yoga wisdom.[2] In the *Bhagavad Gita* (or *Gita* for short), Arjuna, the greatest warrior of his time, falls into a deep existential crisis, a dark night of the soul, in the middle of two opposing armies facing off for battle. Krishna, his dear friend and charioteer, then imparts to him the transformative yoga teachings of the *Gita* to help him through his crisis.[3]

The *Gita* teaches us how to make daily life our yoga practice. It offers practical methods to shift our perception of the world and of ourselves, so we may become more effective in our everyday life. The aim is not *information*, but *transformation*.

In search of a wisdom capable of directing safe passage through life's tempests and of eliciting our highest potential, I had accidentally stumbled upon the ancient lessons that make such transcendence possible. Mastery of these yoga teachings awakens our innate power, allowing us to inhabit "a state of wholeness, even though your body may be broken; a state of riches, even though you may have no earthly possessions; a state of imperturbable peace and quietude, even though the world around you may go up in flames."[4]

As I was about to discover, the *Gita* contains all the wisdom of India's forgotten civilization, in just 700 short verses.[5]

If I could truly comprehend the *Gita's* teachings, I might be able to understand the essence of all of India's sacred lore. What better place to start in the discovery of self. I longed to learn more.

However, I oddly found myself unable to enter the *Gita's* yoga teachings with the depth I desired. Regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't unlock their secrets. The reason was simple: in ancient India, the "self-help" genre simply didn't exist. The *Gita* is, therefore, more of a teacher's manual. Every verse, even every line, contains a "universe" of meaning that can transform the way we live, if we can but shift our perception to receive what it expresses.

But how was I to make that transition from intellectual learning—what the ancients describe as "mere weariness of the tongue"—to yogic perception?[6] I noticed that the *Gita* itself reveals that these age-old yoga teachings have been passed down from master to student for generations in ancient lineages (called *parampara*).[7] I decided to seek out a teacher in one of these sacred lineages.

I reduced all my worldly possessions to a single suitcase and travelled to India, making my way to the ancient town of Mathura and surrounding land of Braj, where Krishna, the speaker of the *Gita*, was born. I yearned for an understanding of yoga's deeper meanings from within one of India's authentic living traditions. I was 16 years old.

But how would I find the perfect teacher, one whom the

Gita describes as a "truth seer"?[8] In India, I encountered many with great knowledge, but I was determined to find someone who truly *lived* what they knew. If my teacher wasn't living these teachings, how would he or she be able to show me how to live them?

Wherever I went, I prayed quietly with all my heart: "Let me find a teacher, a real 'truth seer'. Where can I find you? Please reveal yourself to me."

—2—

The heavy wooden doors of the ashram, or guesthouse, were bolted shut for the night. I called out, but there was no reply. It was past 11pm.

What was I to do now? I could hammer on the doorframe with a large rock and start yelling loudly—but I hesitated. This was the sacred town of Vrindavan in the heart of Braj. I was a guest here, and I didn't want to disturb anyone. I preferred simply to wait for the doors to open again at about 4am. At that time, ringing bells and Sanskrit prayers resound from homes and temples as the town rises prior to the sun.

To pass the time, I wandered the dark, empty streets of Vrindavan, looking for somewhere to sit or lay down. A dog howled in the distance.

On one street, I found a wooden platform against a wall, just outside an old temple. During the day, it was used by

street vendors to sell flowers. How different everything looked in the lonely, solemn stillness of the night. I lay down on the platform and covered myself with a thin woollen cloth, called a chaddar.

There are sadhus, or shamans of the heart, who come to Braj to perfect their spiritual practice. In doing so, they are granted access to a subtle side of Braj, a mystical, non-physical realm, invisible to the common eye, in which the truth of the land is revealed through their yoga meditation.

That arcane land of Braj is protected on all sides by a powerful guardian named Mahadeva. He is its gatekeeper. Those who are merely tourists, rather than pilgrims of the heart, cannot gain entrance: all they see is the dust, bustle and noise of a small town in North India.

Desiring to enter that sacred side of Braj, pilgrims first seek the blessings of Mahadeva. I had neglected to do this. I simply didn't know. But it so happened that the spot I had picked to rest that night was just outside an old temple dedicated to him.

That night, Mahadeva came into my dreams, his figure filling the sky. He was a dark bluish colour, and his eyes were beautiful, like lotus petals. The waters of the Ganges cascaded out of his matted hair. To my surprise, I saw the crescent moon adorning his head. It was difficult to divert my eyes from his captivating face.

"I am the gatekeeper of this land," Mahadeva said, his voice deep like a thunderous sky. "What do you want? Are you lost?"

"I've come to find a teacher," I replied, with folded hands.

Mahadeva smiled. "But there are so many; just look around you and pick one."

"I would like a teacher of the highest level, one who will teach me the yoga of loving service and help me dedicate my life to Shri Radha, the Goddess of Devotion, who rules this land."

"You are asking too much," Mahadeva replied.

"Then I will simply stay here and wait," I said. "You're the gatekeeper of this land. Surely you must know what I can do."

Mahadeva relented: "On Ekadashi, the eleventh day of the moon, make a *sankalpa* and do *parikrama*."

—3—

Thousands of pilgrims were walking barefoot on the pathway towards the River Yamuna. There were families with children; businessmen from New Delhi, their toes poking out beneath their suit trousers; young girls holding hands; and even elderly pilgrims with canes. I learned that these pilgrims were performing a sacred ritual capable of fulfilling all desires. Vrindavan, Krishna's homeland, is encircled by a dust path. For centuries, pilgrims have walked this six-mile path clockwise and barefoot, especially on the eleventh lunar day of the waxing and waning moon. This ancient practice is known as *parikrama*.

However, I noticed that a few pilgrims, instead of walking, covered the entire distance by doing continuous whole-body

prostrations to the earth. I watched them with awe, as they neglected the physical hardships of heat, fatigue and the rough, stony earth.

Prostrating themselves on the ground, they extended their arms above their head to place a stone as a marker. Then standing up behind the stone, they picked it up and prostrated themselves again, repeating this over and over, thousands of times. If done with humility and devotion, an incredible inner transformation takes place, and one emerges a different person. It's also said that whatever wish one has made will come true.

A prostration, called a *pranam*, is a simple, but powerful, yoga practice that has largely been lost in translation in the West. When done with the entire body, it is known as *dandavat-pranam*, or literally, "Stick-Like Prostration".[9] It's one of the oldest yoga practices. As I was to discover later, this yoga movement is a physical representation of the most confidential teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In this quiet practice, we lay down our burdens and literally embrace the earth. Eight specific parts of the body touch the ground: thighs, feet, hands, chest, mind, head, speech and eyes. As our own belly touches the belly of the earth, we feel a primal connection; we experience the surrender of our own individual self.

In this act of letting go, we're able to hear a voice that differs from the endless chatter of the mind, one we couldn't hear before: the voice of the Soul of the Universe, present within

the heart of all beings. By closing the outer ear, we awaken the inner ear. And when we speak, our words come from a heart purified by humility and devotion. This is the ground from which the most potent prayers emerge.[10]

If Stick-Like Prostration could speak, it would say, "I've spent my days lost in self-interest, following the dictates of the illusory ego. This has only enlarged the problems of my life. I now surrender my ego unto you, Soul of the Universe, and dedicate my body, mind and words in your service. I lie before you like a stick in full dedication, touching the ground with eight parts of me to make it true. Today, let me be your instrument."

It was November and extremely cold in the early mornings. A bitter fog covered the landscape. At 4:30am, I made my way to the path that circled Krishna's town. In 1991, the path was sandy and lined with beautiful trees and flowering shrubs.

I found a smooth, ochre stone on the side of the path and, holding it to my heart, I fixed my intent for the yoga practice I was about to begin. This is the confidential art of making a *sankalpa*, which we'll discuss further in these pages. The Sanskrit *sankalpa* means "definite intention", "resolve" or "vow". When performed correctly, a *sankalpa* has the power to reshape our destiny.

Having set my intent, I began my first prostration. And my second. And my third. After two hours, I looked back: I had covered a short distance only. This was going to be extremely difficult.

I made my way along the old sandy riverbed where the Yamuna River once flowed. It was lined by beautiful bathing ghats with steps that led into golden sands.

The sun began to rise on the eastern horizon. My knees felt numb. My muscles ached. Soon I was passing the reddish sandstone steps of Keshi Ghat, where the Yamuna still flows. I paid homage to the sacred river, sprinkling some of its water on my head, and continued on my way.

As the pathway around Vrindavan became more challenging, laced with sharp stones, I wrapped a cloth around my head like a turban, to protect myself from the sun. With every prostration, I felt my illusory ego, my false sense of self, weakening and dissolving. A tender humility was beginning to sprout in the heart.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, when Arjuna asks Krishna, "What is knowledge?" he responds with a series of esteemed qualities, the first of which is humility. The root of all virtues, humility is also the foundation of yoga. Bending to the earth in sincerity, we open our hearts, minds and energy to the service of others, and above all, to the service of sacred love.

As I continued with my prostrations, I recalled at one point the events in my life that had led me to this place. Trials in our life, sometimes in our childhood, can lead us to question life and to search for deeper truths beyond the prosaic and mundane. They can propel us on a quest for deeper wisdom, a journey of the soul. For me, that defining event was losing my mother at the age of 4 years.

With sincere devotion, I continued offering prostrations, tolerating the heat, traffic, fatigue and sharp stones. It took me three days to complete the full six miles around Vrindavan. Filled with joy and spiritual strength, I closed the circle with a final prostration. I held the smooth, ochre stone—my little companion on this pilgrimage—to my heart. Tears in my eyes, I remembered my *sankalpa*, my deepest desire, one last time and returned the stone to where I had found it.

A few days later an elderly monk of the highest order, a master-practitioner in the Bhakti tradition, visited Vrindavan. Born in 1921, and dressed in simple cotton the colour of the rising sun, he was effulgent with piercing blue eyes. In his hand, he carried a *danda*, or stick, representing paramount surrender: full dedication of one's body, mind and words.

The moment I saw him, I knew I had found my teacher. In my heart, I offered Stick-Like Prostration at his feet, and my body followed automatically, all eight parts of me touching the ground in his direction.

As my forehead touched the earth, I remembered my *sankalpa*. Shri Radha, the Goddess of Sacred Love, had heard me.

My teacher looked at me carefully, his blue eyes gazing into the depths of my being. I had the strangest sense he was looking through my physical body, staring directly at the naked soul. He seemed to be scanning my past and future, the trials and tribulations of a thousand lives.

"Don't worry," he said at last. "Remember always, I am your mother."

–4–

Most people today come to yoga through yoga poses, called *asana*, like "Downward Facing Dog" or the "Warrior". Yoga poses are intended to unite body and breath, the physical and the internal, forming a bridge between our posture and our consciousness.

When performed as part of a genuine yoga practice, yoga poses can be vehicles to a deeper awareness of ourselves. They awaken dormant aspects of our being, helping us develop "divine" qualities—especially love and compassion. In that sense, yoga postures are a precursor, a warm-up, for a deeper practice that takes place in the arena of our everyday life.

Initially, there may be a disconnect between our yoga practice and our life as a whole. But what if we could *unite* our expression on the yoga mat with our thoughts, words and actions on the field of our everyday life? After all, the Sanskrit word *yoga* comes from the verbal root "to unite" or "to connect".[11] Yoga is about making *everything* we do a skilful act. What we do on our yoga mat is only a starting point for our yoga practice.

In the West, we're becoming increasingly aware that there is far more to yoga than physical and breathing exercises. For thousands of years, yoga has been a deep philosophy of life, a way of living skilfully.

Yoga is not only about self-discovery, but also about applying that self-knowledge in our everyday life. We each hold untold promise and potential; we each have a unique contribution to make in the world. To understand and manifest that potential requires great skill. That *skill in action* is called yoga.[12]

But can yoga also be about darkness? Can it be about crisis and despair?

In ancient India, soul-searching crisis was not concealed or imbued with shame, but viewed as an important time of transition, a deep rite of passage. The rishis, or sages of India, called it *vishada*, which in Sanskrit means "despair". They understood that periods of great tribulation, while difficult to bear, can serve as pivotal moments of growth.

If you're a pilot, your skill as a pilot is not tested or deepened when the airplane functions on autopilot in clear blue skies. Rather, your skill is deepened in the face of adversity—a fierce storm, the loss of an engine, the sudden failure of your instruments. In these moments, amid life's turbulence, yoga becomes an effective tool in navigating the storm.

Recognizing the immense value of adversity, the very first system of yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita* is the "yoga of despair".[13] The *Gita* begins with its hero, the warrior Arjuna, falling into a debilitating personal crisis. So deep is Arjuna's despair that he even questions remaining alive. At this point, Krishna guides the warrior through his dark night experience, teaching him the secrets of yoga.

Regarding the dark night as a potent metaphysical experience, the sages of ancient India, masters of potentiality, mapped the landscape to help us take this journey, birthing our full potential as wise and compassionate "warriors" on the field of life.

Unfortunately, with a strong and legitimate emphasis on positivity, the value of despair is often forgotten in contemporary presentations of yoga. Coming to face a period of darkness when we're already practising yoga or a spiritual path might feel bewildering. "This shouldn't be happening to me," we may think, feeling confused, ashamed or even let down by our practice. At times we may attempt to dismiss or invalidate our despair by taking shelter in pop psychology and easy spirituality, with mantras such as "Think positively", "Get over it", "Let it go", "Choose happiness".

But the ancestral roots of yoga are filled with accounts of wise seers and powerful warriors who transgressed deep despair. Alongside Arjuna, renowned seers and sages like Narada, Vyasa and Valmiki demonstrate the extraordinary transformative power available to us when we recognize that difficulty can also be a form of yoga. Teaching by example, their despair became the catalyst to their greatest work.[14] Arjuna's despair led to the *Gita*, one of the most practical and deeply insightful wisdom texts of all time.

Of course, suffering is not something we would wish on anyone—not least on ourselves. There is a notion that

authentic spiritual growth requires some great tragedy or suffering. The yoga texts of ancient India don't promote suffering in this way. Yoga is foremost about kindness to oneself and to others. It's about utilizing the lessons of our suffering to achieve a transcendence and an awakening to our fully flourishing powers.

—5—

"What is a dark night of the soul?" you may be asking yourself. A dark night of the soul is not a temporary setback or a bad day at work; it's a period of intense, disorientating inner turmoil. Such an experience strikes us at the core of our existence. Almost all of us will go through at least one period like this in our life. There's little, if anything, in our upbringing or education to prepare us for it.

A dark night may have different triggers: the death of a loved one, the break-up of a relationship, being made unemployed, bankruptcy, illness, domestic violence, even war and displacement. Sometimes the internal crisis may simply creep up on us, without any external friction at all. We sometimes call that a mid-life crisis. Either way, the dark night experience is always an *inner* crisis. There may be external triggers to that crisis, but the real challenge occurs *within*.[15]

The phrase "dark night of the soul" originates from St John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish poet and mystic

in the Carmelite order.[16] Since then, the term has been used broadly to describe a loss of meaning in life. In this book, I use the phrase to describe a personal life crisis such as that faced by Arjuna, and by almost all of us at some point.

Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul looks at what such a crisis really is, how it unfolds, what its common features are, and how best to navigate the experience, allowing it to transform us. In doing so, I focus specifically on the yoga teachings of ancient India, especially from the *Bhagavad Gita*. This book aims to make the *Gita's* practical wisdom teachings easily accessible for contemporary readers and yoga practitioners.

While I'll draw upon stories and examples from the yoga texts, I'll also share contemporary examples of ordinary people like you and I, who have gone through, or are presently going through, crisis. These examples of everyday people will help illustrate the nature of a dark night, as well as helpful and unhelpful ways of dealing with life's challenges.

To protect the privacy of those who have shared their experiences with me, I've changed some of their names and details, while trying to remain as faithful as I can to these real human experiences.

Many of these stories, as you'll soon see, reveal the extraordinary potential that lies within each of us, which we can access through yoga. They show us how we can use a set of timeless teachings to make our way through life's most difficult periods.

While this book closely follows the original yoga systems taught by the yogis and seers of India, these teachings are not tied to any specific culture. They can be applied by anyone at any time, in any part of the world. The rishis held the view that there is only one wisdom in this world, which doesn't belong to any single nation or culture.[17] We can discover that wisdom, or at least fragments of it, in all civilizations and traditions.

As a text, the *Bhagavad Gita* can be difficult to access, partly because it was composed thousands of years ago. Its teachings are contained within the words and context of a very different culture and time. Most approaches to the *Gita* tend to be philosophical and academic, with numerous Sanskrit technical terms, limiting its accessibility to scholars or long-time students. While such approaches are certainly valid, they often hide the text's everyday tangible wisdom that anyone can at once use in their life to a formidable effect.

After all, the *Gita* is first and foremost a tool for practical application in the world. After hearing the *Gita* from Krishna, Arjuna doesn't retire to the forest to contemplate philosophy; he moves into battle. The teachings of the *Gita* are designed to help us live, right here and now, in the often chaotic and turbulent environment of everyday life.[18]

Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul traces the soul's spiritual ascent from fear, lamentation and confusion to sacred love and compassion for all beings. It's an inner voyage that follows

Arjuna's own journey through his dark night experience.

To help his friend through his crisis, Krishna teaches him different, complementary yoga paths, each suited to a different kind of practitioner. But having heard these teachings, Arjuna is still not at peace. Krishna therefore shows Arjuna how to make his entire life a work of devotion. He offers Arjuna a beautiful definition of yoga as "the unwavering offering of love".[19]

Although set on a battlefield at the onset of war, the *Bhagavad Gita* is really a guidebook on sacred love.[20] The *Gita* teaches us that the dark night of the soul is our call to love; yoga is the way we get there.

Personal crisis is a unique opportunity, a sacred juncture, for addressing the soul's true need, unconditional love. The purpose of this book is therefore to lead readers to soul fulfilment, by awakening the alchemical potential of the heart through yoga.

Notes

Prologue: The Journey

1 The Latin *homo* derives from an Indo-European root for "earth", and has the sense of "earthling". It is usually translated as "man" or "human". *Sapiens* means "wise" or "knowing". *Homo sapiens sapiens* is the name of our sub-species.

2 The *Bhagavad Gita* forms part of "The Book of Bhishma", the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, or great tale of the Bharata dynasty. The *Mahabharata* is the longest poem ever written, with about 1.8 million words. The text predates Christ, with references to it found as early as the 4th century BCE. According to archaeoastronomy, the events of the *Mahabharata* unfold some 5,000 years ago.

3 The traditional colophon that ends each chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* identifies the text as an Upanishad on yoga. In the original Sanskrit text, the word *yoga* appears 78 times as a noun and 36 times in its verbal form as *yukta*, while the word *yogi* appears 28 times. In using the term *yoga*, the *Gita* doesn't refer solely to teachings similar to those recommended by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutra*, but adopts a far broader usage.

4 Nisargadatta Maharaj and Robert Powell, *The Nectar of Immortality: Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj's Discourses on the Eternal* (2004), p. xv.

5 The *Bhagavad Gita* is often referred to as *Gitopanishad*, indicating its equal status with the Upanishad texts of the Vedas. The *Gita-mahatmyam* (verse 6) of Shri Shankaracharya describes the *Gita* as the essence of all the Upanishads. This makes the *Gita* the essence of the Vedas. The *Gita* is one of the three canonical texts of Indian philosophy (known collectively as the *prasthana-traya*, the three foundations), especially for the Vedanta schools.

6 For example, the *Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad* (4.4.21) distinguishes between perfect knowledge (*prajna*), which manifests in action, and the knowledge of books, which it describes as "mere weariness of the tongue".

7 *Bhagavad Gita*, 4.2.

8 *Bhagavad Gita*, 4.34: *tattva-darshinah* ("truth seer").

9 Stick-Like Prostration is similar to Savasana, or "Corpse Pose", a yoga posture that normally comes at the end of a yoga session. Corpse Pose represents saying *yes* to life, allowing what is to be. Stick-Like Prostration is also a pose of surrender, but is imbued with the beautiful qualities of deep humility, dedication and devotion.

10 To learn more, see Shiva Rea, "Welcome Summer with Shiva Rea's Solstice Prostration Practice", Yoga Journal [website], published 17 Jun. 2016.

11 The Sanskrit term *yoga* derives from *yujir*, meaning "to unite" or "to connect" (*yujir yoge*), as well as from *yuj* in the sense of stilling (*yuj samyamane*) and of enlightenment (*yuj samadhau*). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the word *yoga* is used in varied ways, but these all derive directly or indirectly from the sense of yoking, uniting or connecting. See Surendranath Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays* (1982), pp. 89–91.

12 *Bhagavad Gita*, 2.50: "yoga is skill in action" (*yogah karmasu kaushalam*).

13 Each of the *Bhagavad Gita's* eighteen chapters is traditionally named according to the specific system of yoga it sets out. There are no chapter titles in the original text of the *Gita* or in the *Mahabharata*, for that matter, but over time similar or identical titles have been assigned consistently to its chapters. Chapter 1 is commonly entitled *arjuna-vishada-yoga*, "The Yoga of Arjuna's Despair". Arjuna's dark night experience, while painful and highly disorientating, simultaneously creates the opportunity for his inner transformation and spiritual deepening. By studying Arjuna's despair and how he emerges from it, we engage in a process of yoga ourselves.

14 For instance, Narada's despair led to Sanat-kumara's profound teachings in the ancient *Chandogya Upanishad*. Narada had a student named Vyasa. At the height of his literary accomplishments, Vyasa was consumed by a feeling of utter emptiness. His teacher, Narada, guided him out of his dark night. The result was the *Bhagavata Purana*, a twelve-volume work of astonishing beauty. Then, the despair of Narada's student Valmiki led to the *Ramayana*, one of India's great epics, made up of nearly 24,000 verses.

15 This is illustrated by Arjuna's dark night of the soul in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is characterised not just by outer difficulty, but above all by inner conflict. Arjuna's outer crisis is described in verses 1–27 of Chapter 1, while his inner crisis is described in verses 28–47.

16 St John of the Cross (1542–1591) was a Spanish mystic in the Carmelite order. Born in Fontiveros, near Ávila, he composed a poem entitled *Dark Night of the Soul* (*La noche oscura del alma*) during his own dark night experience in 1578 or 1579, while imprisoned for trying to reform the Carmelite order. St John was held in isolation and darkness in a tiny stifling cell barely large enough for his body, and was subjected to brutal public lashing at least weekly. St John also wrote a commentary on this poem by the same name in 1584–85. His poetry and studies on the growth of the soul are widely regarded as masterpieces and the summit of mystical Spanish literature. For further details about St John's life, see Richard P. Hardy, *John of the Cross: Man and Mystic* (2004).

17 The *Rig Veda*, for instance, states, "Truth is one, though the learned speak of it in many ways" (1.164.46). The *Bhagavata Purana* similarly advises (11.8.10), "As the honey-bee extracts nectar from all flowers, big and small, a discriminating person should take the essence from all sacred texts."

18 Indeed, this represents a key distinction between Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Yoga Sutra* offers prescriptions especially suited for ascetics, who have disengaged from the world. Often naked and strangely adorned to assert their freedom from social stricture, Indian ascetics are commonly wanderers. They frequently take vows of silence and may retreat to isolated hideouts in the jungle, desert or mountains. By contrast, the *Gita* offers yoga teachings directed specifically at those who are in active engagement with the world, like Arjuna.

19 *Bhagavad Gita*, 13.10: *bhaktir avyabhicharini*, "the unwavering offering of love". Krishna advises Arjuna to pursue no other form of yoga.

20 Catherine Ghosh makes this insightful observation in "Yoga in The Gita: Love Changes Our Perception", Elephant Journal [website], published 25 Mar. 2012.

PART

I

ARJUNA'S DESPAIR ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE

The Dark Night of the Soul

I

Born into the royal Kuru dynasty of Northern India thousands of years ago, the prince Dhritarashtra was blind from birth. In an age when a king was expected to lead on the battlefield as well, this precluded him from inheriting the throne, and the kingdom was passed to his younger brother Pandu, "The Pale One". But who in this ancient tale of intrigue would inherit after Pandu? That depended on which of the two brothers had an heir first, Dhritarashtra or Pandu.

Under pressure to see their own offspring reach the throne, the brothers now competed to produce an heir. When Pandu's wife gave birth to a child, Dhritarashtra's wife, Gandhari, pounded her stomach in frustration and gave birth to a hardened mass of grey flesh. She appealed to the mystic Vyasa, who produced 101 embryos from the mass, each engineered to become a brutal warrior.[1] The first to emerge from his artificial uterus vessel after two years of incubation was named Duryodhana, meaning "dirty fighter".

Upon Duryodhana's birth, he began to bray like an ass.

Hearing that sound, asses echoed his cries, jackals howled and vultures screamed. The wind blew furiously, while raging, fierce fires sprang up around the city. When such omens appear at the birth of a child, the royal seers revealed, the child will be the exterminator of his own dynastic line.

Some years later, King Pandu died unexpectedly and the Kingdom of Kuru reverted to Dhritarashtra. But Pandu had five sons, now young princes, known as the Pandavas. Among them, the warrior Arjuna grew up to be an archer of unequalled prowess and dexterity. Kings feared him, warriors revered him, and parents would tell their children of his valour and exploits.

Duryodhana's natural rivalry with his cousins, the sons of Pandu, turned to deep-seated hate. He attempted first to poison one of the brothers, and upon failing he conspired to burn all five alive in a fortified, highly flammable palace, specifically designed to trap them in billowing flames. Finally, through trickery in a rigged game of dice, the power-hungry and ambitious Duryodhana succeeded in depriving the Pandavas of everything they owned: their extensive land, property, titles, wealth, horses, weapons, and even the jewels and royal garments they wore.

Laughing loudly, one of Duryodhana's brothers then dragged the Pandavas' wife, the beautiful and accomplished Draupadi, by her hair into the royal court. He tried, unsuccessfully, to strip her naked. In that terrible assembly, the Pandavas vowed

to find justice. In the end, the elderly Dhritarasthra and his sons exiled the Pandavas from the kingdom for thirteen years.

When the Pandava princes returned from exile, they requested their land back—or at least, a humble grant of five hamlets. But Duryodhana declared he would not bequeath them so much as a pinprick of land.

War now seemed inevitable, with all the kings of the earth taking sides. Duryodhana amassed an immense army on the great plains of Kurukshetra. The army of the Pandavas was smaller, but nonetheless formidable. Elephants, chariots, cavalry and infantry now faced each other in military formation as far as the eye could see. The two armies were about to converge.

Faced with imminent battle, Arjuna turns to Krishna, his friend and charioteer, and asks him to drive the chariot between the two armies, so that he may see the faces of those who have chosen to fight for the sons of the blind king.

Krishna is the complexion of a dark blue sapphire or a monsoon raincloud, and his beauty enchants the heart. Dressed in armour and precious gems, he's regal. He's also steady and wise. Unwavering.

An unequalled archer, Arjuna is tall, handsome, strong and powerful. He's valiant and heroic, with "the gait of a lion". Idealized by the public, he's also a little brash and boastful. Arjuna isn't so steady as Krishna.

As requested, Krishna directs the chariot between the two

armies. There, among the great generals and kings of the earth on both sides, Arjuna sees his teachers, uncles, cousins, fathers-in-law, grandfathers, brothers, nephews, sons, grandsons and friends. Setting eyes on those he holds most dear, ready to forsake their lives, Arjuna hesitates. He suddenly grasps the full horror of what he is about to do. Overcome by grief, Arjuna's world begins to collapse into crisis.

Arjuna turns to his friend, Krishna. For the first time, he begins calling into question his strongly held beliefs. Does he really care for victory? Not anymore. Not at this cost, anyway. Is he even entitled to fight and slay the sons of the elderly Dhritarashtra? He is not so sure anymore, in spite of their covetous ambition and deceit. Will killing them lead to happiness? He thinks not.

"I do not desire victory, nor a kingdom, nor happiness. What is the use of pleasures or purpose in living?" he declares. Arjuna is reeling from the shock of one who has suddenly seen the falsehood of his perception and thus the madness of this world.

The dark night of the soul is a term used to describe a collapse of perceived meaning in life. This is what Arjuna now faces: his narrative, or life story, has suddenly been ruptured by events. All his notions of who he is and what he is supposed to do have fallen around him, and he is cast adrift in darkness. Everything looks void and meaningless.

Tormented by sorrow and confounded by doubt, Arjuna now finds himself paralyzed. He no longer knows what to do. Looking to the future, he sees only signs of chaos and terrible reversals.

"O Krishna, seeing my relations standing nearby ready to fight, my limbs have become heavy and my mouth has become dry," he says. "My body trembles and the hairs on my body stand on end. My bow, the Gandiva, slips from my hand and I feel my skin burning. I find myself unable to stand steadily and my mind seems to be reeling."

The once formidable warrior Arjuna now sits down in his chariot, having cast aside his bow and arrows. Sapped of his former strength and will, Arjuna longs to retreat from life. He even wonders whether he should maybe rush into battle unarmed and be cut down by his enemies without fighting back. Alternatively, he could quietly leave the battlefield now, before war has begun, and take up life as a beggar.

Arjuna finds himself in an abyss of despair. He is unable to cope with what has arisen in his life. He finds himself entirely helpless, unable to pull himself out of his grief. His troubled eyes full of tears, he says to Krishna, "I shall not fight!" and falls silent.[2]

This sudden crisis that Arjuna experiences doesn't occur in the privacy of his home or within a solitary forest during his exile. It happens in the middle of a battlefield, at the most critical time for action. This is a very public meltdown in

front of Duryodhana and all the kings of the earth, who look on at this unexpected turn of events in utter disbelief.

If ever there was a personal crisis, it doesn't get much more dramatic than this. It's with this acute crisis that the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most important yoga texts from ancient India, begins.

ONE

The Story and the Storyteller

—1—

Monty's skin looked dry, wrinkled and discoloured. He had lost a lot of hair. What had *happened* to him? He looked like he had been ravaged by a disease.

And then it struck me: *time* had happened. I hadn't seen Monty for twenty-five years. Monty had simply aged, as we all do. Monty was probably having the same thoughts about me as we greeted each other at this college reunion.

I soon found myself talking to strangers, some of whom used to be my friends. We began sharing memories and trading details about our lives. We each had a story to tell.

Melanie, a classmate, had selected a striking yellow Prada summer dress to wear. Always the achiever, she began enumerating her successes: her large new house in the Hamptons in New York, the growth of her legal practice, and the work of her art collector husband.

"If you really want something, just go and get it!" she exhorted. "Like when my husband teamed up with Richard Eagleton, who remodels homes. He's a friend of Barrack

Obama's. So, they were just starting out, and really had no idea how they were going to grow their business; but now they're so popular, they actually have to *turn down* work. Just imagine. *Everyone* on Long Island wants their home refurbished by them."

"That's really impressive," Lisa said kindly. "I always knew you would achieve big things." Melanie thanked her with a smile.

Monty, self-assured and articulate, was discussing politics in the Middle East. He was a staunch supporter of former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Lisa didn't like Blair's war in Iraq. She interjected a few times, but Monty cut her down like a lawyer.

"As an argument, that's not only silly, but irrelevant," Monty declared with finality. Lisa was about to push her point further, but thought better of it.

"Do you remember Jim Elms?" Emma interrupted. "You know he committed suicide a couple of years ago, right?"

"Jesus! No way!" Melanie exclaimed. "Of course I remember him. What would make someone do that?" Her words tailed off, as if she were whispering to herself. There was a sombre silence.

I noticed that Bertha didn't say much. She was the only single woman in our group who wasn't a mother. Later she confided she wasn't leading the impressive life she had planned on twenty-five years ago; and she wasn't up to repeated interrogations about it.

Actually, Bertha had at first disposed of her invitation to the reunion. The prospect of attending this event had filled her with a mixture of curiosity and dread, not unlike that of a blind date. I suspect the last person she had wanted to meet was Melanie. They had been college rivals, and Melanie had stolen her boyfriend from her in the second year.

And then there was I, eager to please. Amiable and smiling politely, I nodded and agreed with the others, even if I wasn't sure I did agree. I wanted to fit in and be liked.

As I listened and watched, I experienced a shift in consciousness. I found myself looking on with the perspective of a distant observer. It felt just like watching a movie and involuntarily becoming aware that what you're seeing, with its drama and twisting storyline, is just a movie. As the audience gasps when the hero is in peril, you are left undisturbed. This is because you no longer identify with the lead character.

While growing up in temples and monasteries in India, I had learned from my teacher that in life we each create a story in our mind. That story is like a movie. Not only are we the author of our story, but we're also the lead character in it.

The sacred texts of India identify the powerful hold our narrative has on us as one of life's greatest illusions. The Sanskrit word for illusion, *maya*, means "not that". The delusion that we are the lead character in our story causes us to live in a feverish dream.

We take our stories extremely seriously; we're prepared to fight for them, even lose friends over them. We carry that story with us wherever we go; we can't escape it. Our story is the script from which our life unfolds.

So much of our story is inherited and then enforced, coerced and impressed upon us by society. From a young age, we're told what to be like, how to behave, what to want and hope for, and what to fear. We internalize these ideas, often unthinkingly. We come to believe we are what we wear, what we drive, what we watch and what we watch it on. We work very hard to keep up appearances. We try to live up to so many expectations and pressures. Slowly, imperceptibly, we build the walls of our own confinement.

With everyone living out their personal story, we are in the end simply interacting with each other's projections. We view everyone else through the lens of our own story, and our stories can conflict and collide. We find our friends in those who support our personal narrative, and enemies in those who challenge or undermine it. If we start altering our own story, or if we move out of it, our action affects the stories of others. It creates ripples of disturbance in their world.

Lost in our story, we experience a continuous compulsion to define who we are to ourselves and to others. Through Facebook and social media, we now have the technology to refine and polish our image of ourselves. We forget that the lead character in our story is birthed by the mind. The

ancient texts of India refer to this fictitious self as *ahamkara*, which in Sanskrit means literally, "I-making". Mostly, we live from this illusory, constructed self. We, the storyteller, remain undiscovered.

Because the false self is created by the mind, circumstances in the world can test that identity, challenge it and even shatter it. If my story is about being a successful achiever, that story is undermined if I suffer misfortune or if others view me as a failure—say, if I lose my job, face bankruptcy or suffer a nervous breakdown. If I see myself as highly attractive, my story is challenged if others no longer find me as beautiful as before, maybe because I've put on weight or suffered illness. When the lead character in our story, with whom we identify, is in trouble or fails, we become fearful, confused and dejected. When the lead character triumphs, we're temporarily jubilant. The more we believe our story, the more we are its prisoner.

That we create a personal story is an almost inevitable part of life; this is how we make sense of the world. But when we take our story so seriously that we forget it's just a story, we begin to lead small, anxious lives. We're then blind to the quality of the narrative we create. Whenever we find ourselves caught up in fear, anger, jealousy or frustration, we've fallen victim to the delusion of the false self.

Not only individuals possess stories, but entire communities and nations create and promote them too, as they construct false shared identities. Religions may do the same, propagating

narratives that unite or divide. When these collective stories clash, it leads to conflicts and war.

So, what happens when events challenge our story so profoundly that we can no longer hold on to it? What happens if our story collapses? We are propelled into deep darkness and despair. We find ourselves cast adrift in a world without meaning. This is a dark night experience, a crisis of despair.

This is exactly what happened to Arjuna at Kurukshetra.

—2—

On that fateful day at Kurukshetra, Arjuna was poised for battle. He had prepared for this moment very carefully for more than thirteen years, acquiring the deadliest of weapons. He blew his conch shell loudly, signalling his presence on the battlefield and intent to fight, and took up his bow.

Requesting Krishna to position his chariot between the two armies, Arjuna sees his family members, elders and dear friends, all willing to face death. This is the trigger that leads to Arjuna's despair.

Arjuna is deeply loyal to his brothers, headed by Yudhishtira. They have suffered piteously, as has his dear wife, Draupadi. Shamed, banished, mocked and driven into hiding, they were forced to take up positions as servants in a foreign kingdom. They now depend upon Arjuna to win this war. To do so, he'll have to fight against his own dearly loved teacher and

grandfather. Both now face him as generals in Duryodhana's army.

Until now, Arjuna has been confident about his cause, sure that he and his brothers hold the moral high ground. The public insult to Draupadi, the many years of suffering in the forest, and the attempts on their lives have led to this great battle. Through deception, Duryodhana had unjustly stripped the Pandavas of everything they owned. The Pandavas had tried repeatedly to compromise with Duryodhana and find a pathway to avoid war; but Duryodhana had always interpreted these attempts as signs of weakness, becoming only more avaricious and belligerent.

On many occasions, Arjuna had vowed to defeat Duryodhana and crown his older brother Yudhishtira as emperor. The time had finally come. Surely, Arjuna thought, he now had a right to claim the kingdom back for Yudhishtira.

But when Arjuna sees his dearly loved family members and respected elders ready for battle, he has very serious doubts. The sheer number of soldiers on both sides makes him question whether such a war can be justified. His moral compass is thrown into confusion.

Shocked by his own thoughts and actions, Arjuna turns to Krishna: "Ah yes! How strange it is that we're resolved to enact such great misfortune. Driven by greed for the happiness of royalty, we're intent on killing our own people."[3]

Arjuna had believed that with victory he and his brothers

would finally be happy. They would reclaim their kingdom and at last find peace. This was his narrative. But now Arjuna is not so sure. How could he enjoy the spoils of such a war? How could he find any happiness in a world without friends and relatives—those he had himself killed or had allowed to be killed in such a battle?

Arjuna's crisis is not the result of a newfound morality or sense of meaning in his life. It's the result of a breakdown of meaning, leading to a loss of purpose, doubt, lack of resolve and paralysis. Casting aside his bow and arrows, Arjuna sits down in his chariot, overcome by despair.

TWO

The Four Signs of a Dark Night of the Soul

—1—

Heather woke up one morning to find a letter on her pillow: her husband was leaving her for another woman.

I've known Heather since I was 14. We went to the same high school together. Even back then, I knew she was someone who would devote herself to her family and to whomever was lucky enough to be in her life.

Heather now had three children, one of whom was still living at home. She had given up a career as a journalist to raise them.

I came to visit Heather at her home just after 11am. She was still in her pyjamas. She looked thin. Her eyes were swollen and red, like she had been crying. I made her a soothing cup of camomile tea and we went into the living room.

Heather was normally meticulously tidy, but there were dirty cardboard pizza boxes and chocolate wrappers on the floor and coffee table. I cleared up.

"Why is this happening to me?" Heather kept saying. She began questioning all the decisions she had made in her life.

"Maybe I gave up too much to have a family," she said at last. Her voice was filled with regret. I could sense her deep pain; she was tormented.

"Things will get a bit easier. Just give it some time," I offered softly.

"I think it's too late for me to start again. At my age, I'm not sure anyone will find me attractive. If only I could have my old life back." Heather broke down crying.

"Are you all right, mum?" It was 13-year-old Theo, who had heard the commotion and decided to investigate.

"Just leave me alone! I told you to stay in your room," Heather snapped, before checking herself. "I'm sorry, Theo. I'm sorry. It's been really difficult…"

Theo retreated.

"I just don't know who I am anymore," Heather said by way of explanation, holding her head in her palms. "I feel completely lost. Sometimes I wish I could just die."

The things Heather used to love doing—eating out, going on country walks, taking photos, spending time with her friends—no longer made her happy. Life seemed repetitive and pointless.

Months passed, and Heather's family, who were sympathetic and supportive at first, struggled to understand why she couldn't just pick herself up and forge ahead with life. Irritable, embittered and dispirited, she had become difficult company and would often snap at her family. Preferring isolation, she avoided them.

Heather was experiencing a dark night of the soul.

I knew there was little I could do to help Heather, except listen and try to understand. And in making the effort, I noticed surprising parallels to my own experience of crisis. Although Heather's circumstances were different to mine, the symptoms of her dark night were strikingly similar. These were also the same symptoms Arjuna describes in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

A dark night of the soul can arise in many ways, and it can pass quickly or last for many years. Nonetheless, the sages and seers of India recognized that the dark night experience itself, the dissolution of our world, has certain shared features. If we examine Arjuna's crisis closely, we find four main symptoms:

1. *Suffering associated with the three phases of time*
2. *The revealing of our dark side*
3. *A strong impulse to retreat from life*
4. *Complete helplessness*

—2—

I awoke in the middle of the night with a start. A sharp pain swept across my foot, like an electric charge. I looked about and saw nothing. Had I just been bitten by a rat or maybe even a serpent?

I was in India, and like the other monks, I slept on a thin

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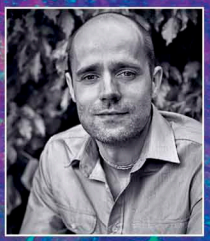

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