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Yoga's True Purpose

Simon Haas takes us on a journey into yoga, an ancient system for awakening our full potential – even during life's challenges



For thousands of years, yoga has been a deep philosophy of life, a way of living skilfully. Most people today come to yoga through yoga poses (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. They can be a vehicle to a deeper awareness, awakening dormant aspects of our being, helping us to develop “divine” qualities like love and compassion.

The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient classic on yoga, teaches us how to make daily life our yoga practice. It offers beautiful definitions of yoga, such as 'yoga is skill in action' and 'the unwavering offering of love'.

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.

We usually associate yoga with tranquillity and wellbeing, but can yoga also be about darkness; about traversing crisis and despair?

A dark night of the soul is a period in our life of intense, disorientating inner turmoil that strikes us

at the very core of our existence. Almost all of us go through at least one period like this during our lifetime, yet we live in a society that conceals crisis or despair, looks upon it with fear and medicates it out of sight. There's little, if anything, in our education to help us navigate personal crisis.

We disguise our sorrow: no-one wants to go to work looking “mental”; no-one wants to be labelled with a nervous breakdown. There's often no-one to turn to for help either. Doctors typically lack the wisdom to treat the root cause of the suffering.

Dark Night of the Soul

In ancient India, however, crisis was viewed as an important time of transition, a deep rite of passage. Yogis and mystics studied crisis and noticed the common attributes of a dark night, viewing them as potent spiritual experiences that can lead to spiritual awakening.

The immense potency of crisis is recognised by the Bhagavad Gita. It begins with its hero, the warrior Arjuna, falling into a debilitating personal crisis in the middle of a battlefield. Krishna, his friend and charioteer, then guides the warrior through his dark night experience, sharing with him the secrets of yoga to navigate crisis, find his purpose, and awaken his full potential.

**THE FIRST TEACHING:****honour the dark night as a rite of passage**

With our strong and legitimate emphasis on positivity, the value of despair is often forgotten in yoga. Facing a period of darkness when we're practising yoga or a spiritual path can feel bewildering. 'This shouldn't be happening to me,' we may think, feeling confused, ashamed or even let down by our practice. We may dismiss or invalidate our despair by taking shelter in pop psychology and easy spirituality, with mantras such as 'Think positively', or 'Choose happiness'.

The first teaching of the Gita is that crisis is not something to fear; it can be a gift, an offering, a journey to sacred love. By reframing darkness, we can make it part of our yoga journey, allowing it to transform us and deepen us.

**THE SECOND TEACHING:****surrender the need to control**

During a dark night of the soul, the personal narratives we've lived by begin to fray at the seams, causing us to question our sense of self. As we struggle to navigate the darkness, we discover the more we cling to our broken narrative the more intensely we experience suffering – fear, lamentation and confusion. Fear is suffering associated with the future, lamentation with the past, and confusion with the present.

One of Krishna's definitions of yoga is 'breaking the connection with suffering'. Krishna reminds Arjuna that whatever pain he's experiencing is sure to pass. He makes an implicit distinction between pain and suffering. Pain is an inevitable part of life. Suffering is our mental response, the story we create around our experience. Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

Krishna explains that we can work with pain skilfully, by removing some of our strong mental resistance to it. This graceful acceptance of pain releases it, detoxifying us and facilitating a powerful transformation.

The practice of surrender and saying yes to life, of allowing what is to be, is represented in yoga by Shavasana, the "Corpse Pose". In this pose, the yoga practitioner lies on her back with her arms at her sides in a state of complete acceptance.

**THE THIRD TEACHING:****trust your inner guide**

The dark night of the soul is a time to pay less attention to the relentless chatter of the mind, and instead to listen to the voice of the Universal Teacher within us.

At first, Arjuna is doing all the talking in the Gita. He voices his fears about the future, his regrets about the past, and his confusion about the present. He soon realises that no amount of his own talking will quell his suffering. So, he turns instead to his most trusted friend, Krishna, who reveals his true identity to Arjuna as the Universal Teacher and the source of all wisdom.

The Universal Teacher assumes different forms in our life to lead us towards the fulfilment of our highest potential. These include, foremost, the voice of truth within each of us. Hearing our inner guide requires inner stillness, open-hearted willingness known as "surrendered listening" and a desire to honour truth in whichever way it reveals itself.

The inner guide can be difficult to hear when the illusory ego, the lead character in our small and limiting human story, speaks so loudly. So, to better reach us, the Universal Teacher also manifests as the different teachers in our life – from loving parents to friends who have the courage to speak truthfully but kindly to us, to yoga teachers and elders who may guide us in our life.


The third way the Universal Teacher manifests in our life is as the environment. Everything around us has something to teach us. We can learn from the earth, the trees, the ocean, the wind, the birds, and our own body. Even suffering can be a great teacher. All these teachers are manifestations of the Universal Teacher present in our own heart.

The True Wealth of Yoga

The Gita begins by teaching us to view personal crisis as a natural process and a sacred rite of passage, to let go of our need to control life, and to turn our attention inwards and trust our own inner guide. If we can do this during personal crisis, it will reduce our suffering. This act of deep self-kindness will also create a sacred space for yoga wisdom to blossom in our heart.

We each have higher and lower qualities. We each carry the divine and the destructive within us. The outcomes we experience in life reflect the potential we choose to nurture and to act from.

Love, gratitude, harmony, truthfulness, beauty, humility, kindness, patience, hope, compassion, courage and generosity: these are divine qualities. Anger, hate, fear, shame, arrogance, self-pity, greed, contempt and resentment are destructive qualities.

This is the wealth we become open to receiving in this sacred rite of passage that a dark night of the soul offers to us. We can all experience these tangible results in our life through our practice. This is the Gita's final promise to us. This is yoga. 



Hearing our inner guide requires inner stillness, open-hearted willingness and a desire to honour truth.

Find out more

- Simon Haas is a teacher of yoga philosophy who specializes in applying ancient wisdom to everyday life. From the age of 13, he began studying the sacred writings of India and spent ten years living in temples and monasteries in India. Simon is author of *The Book of Dharma: Making Enlightened Choices*, as well as *Yoga and the Dark Night of the Soul: The Soul's Journey to Sacred Love*.
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