

Yoga for Cancer

Part 1

My first insight into cancer was at the age of fifteen when my mother told me my father had colonic cancer. The news that he only had a few years to live tears at my heart to this day, yet to feel such love heals the pain and gives my life meaning. He died five years later and seven years after that, my mum followed him with a fierce cancer of the breast and spleen. What I learned from this is that time is precious and love only grows.

Cancer has been around for hundreds of years. It is typified by uncontrolled cellular growth through abnormal division of mutated cells. These cells then invade neighbouring regions spreading the disorder throughout. This commences on a genetic level, whereby DNA is altered and stimulated in a chain reaction of corrupt information; mutated cells multiply rapidly, misinforming the cellular infrastructure to cause internal breakdown. This may remain local or in the case of malignant cancers, spread to other bodily regions via the blood or lymphatic fluid.

Cancer is largely environmental, with a small percentage (around 7%) being hereditary. Our environment has become rather toxic. In a similar vein to our modifying the genetic make-up of the food we eat, the body's reaction to pollutants such as stress, radiation, obesity, infection, tobacco, sugar and alcohol, may be to create abnormalities while it seeks to learn how to survive in this ever changing world. Whether this is the body's way of coping or showing us that it can't, all provide great scope for debate; surely these anomalies can help us learn more about the correct way of living.

Cancer is a progressive disease, in the same way that if we tell a lie, another is usually required to mask the first. Eventually the amplification becomes so great that we may have difficulty recognising the person that 'once was'.

The pressures of society are great. The effect of too much tension is an overtaxed and gradually weakening immune system. We may sometimes appear as indestructible warriors, yet beneath the exterior, a deeper purpose calls for unity. Cancer juxtaposes this; tyranny occurs as mutations develop. We might think that we are different from one another, such that the arms move one way and the legs another, yet if they don't work in some scope of harmony, the body

can neither walk nor stand. Our beliefs may differ from our neighbour, but if we don't learn we breathe the same air this can only lead to one end.

The thing about cancer is that it can often be prevented. When we learn to relax again; balance the forces of work and play we will see more clearly. When we learn that cigarettes, overeating, alcohol and drugs are frequently used to mask how we are really feeling, then we will be more effective and free. In moments of great joy, I used to reach for cigarettes, only to find I felt robbed of energy and anxious the next moment. I believe that cancer is like a karmic-*Tweet* - "time to wake up, put the ship right again. What's really important? Are we making the right choices?" We can choose to eat more sensibly, get the necessary rest and exercise. We can invest a small proportion of our time in giving to society, helping those less fortunate. We can treat each other as equal, rather than gauging by superficial appearance of what one owns or has achieved. The saint or mystic doesn't possess, as sh/e knows the level of being from where it all springs. S/he knows this is the source and destination and thus enjoys large amounts of time simply smiling or laughing.

There are mixed beliefs as to the 'right' diet and so this is something we must all learn to intuit. This is where yoga brings us home as it fine tunes the senses in to acting and ingesting accordingly. Whether animal protein increases the risk of cancer or not and whether chemotherapy is always the best remedy; these are questions each individual faced with cancer may have to ask.

The symptoms of cancer and side effects of its treatments are vast, depending upon which kind is present. Speaking very broadly, there is often tissue damage, swelling or abnormal lumps, pain, ulceration, coughing, weight loss or gain, appetite loss, sweating, loss of sleep, intense fatigue and hormonal shifts. We must add to this the psychological effect of knowing cancer lives in one's body.

Science is constantly searching for the panacea, which may eventually come in as many varieties as there are cancerous strains. There are varying philosophies as to how to live with cancer; some don't want to, others fight, some accept totally, while others find their own melange.

Practicing yoga strengthens your reserve. You boost your immune system each time you smile with a true heart. Time dedicated to any yogic practice softens a hardened mind and strengthens a weakened will.

Postures, breathing and meditation all teach us to stop battling. Our killer cells can battle on, in accord with their design, whilst an open and honest heart learns

to identify boundaries and differentiate between neighbour and foe. Yoga educates cells to act, wait, expand or contract in unison with their environment. When intelligence is intended towards a peaceful outcome we see love is the underlying medicine. If you have cancer you may find taking part in class has an amazingly healing affect, as by nature, most of us are social beings. In groups, we see with subjective and objective awareness. This removes us from the predicament of suffering, as our consciousness often separates from its egoc identification; we forget ourselves in a wave of yogic sway. In class we see we are not alone in suffering and in some way, for the allotted period, our issues appear different or even vanish. Problems shared can be halved and pains can be looked at under a new light of awareness. If we are in pain, yoga teaches we don't have to dig deeper into the wound. Let pain be the guru inviting us to find that which is just a bit more subtle than we are used to. Stop, rest, lie on the floor and sleep.

If housebound, yoga can also take place. We can rest in corpse pose, nestling beneath a blanket and mantra like 'Lord give me the wisdom to see things as they truly are. Help me to let go of the unreal; that which keeps me from peace and joy, despite what this body and mind are used to'.

Yoga is the *constant*, it is the unwritten mind far greater than the physical body. It gives us energy by saving it. There are days where we may feel the battle has won us over. Letting go in to the ocean of inner spirit offers the truest perspective - all this is impermanent. In knowing this we embrace it more fully, crying and laughing in the same breath. The physical body is always limited. Spirit has no frontiers; it doesn't differentiate as it has no need. Fear dissolves and we are renewed with the information we need for the next moment.

Next month Part 2 - Postures, breathing and meditation for Cancer.

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