

YOGA

for Grief and Loss

Poses · Meditation · Devotion · Self-Reflection
Selfless Acts · Ritual

Karla Helbert

Foreword by Chinnamasta Stiles

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Foreword

Death is intimate, sacred and secretive. Learning how to live and how to die are equally important to a yogi. We are here in the physical body to live life fully, embracing all joyful and challenging experiences as a sacred weaving of life. Embracing joy is easy; living life gracefully while facing illness or grieving death are not as readily taught and accepted as an integral part of life.

How can you learn step by step to be with yourself while feeling utterly lost, despondent and consumed by pain? What can you do if you have tried everything possible to change your circumstances in life without result and you feel pushed to the point where life loses its meaning?

Grieving the death of a beloved is a personal and unknown journey. A personal relationship with the Self guides you from the heart how to live your life beyond death. With practice that relationship grows on you and is the sacred infinite lap that is always there when you fall apart. It is my personal experience that my beloved has never left me. The sadhana of love we practiced in the physical did not change. It transformed in the formless and showered me with the experience that love is stronger than death. The moment he let go of the last breath, he withdrew himself within me, merged into One. That is where we continue to dance.

This is where worldly life meets the spiritual heart of yoga. Each worldly experience leads you back to the Inner Heart revealing Truth, and the Guidance revealed within the heart leads you back into the world. Where else can you turn but inward seeking the Source of Infinite Love that is always there no matter what the insurmountable pain is you experience in life?

The classical yoga practices are the Source of Serenity, beyond the physical, emotional and mental disturbances. They lead you from darkness to

light, gradually, step by step. Life and death become a learning field, revealing when it is appropriate to act, when you have to surrender and how to meet the middle path of wisdom as your friend for life. Worldly life and Spirit life become like a dance of the lover and the beloved. When they gently move closer to one another, spontaneously they merge no longer experiencing separation.

The seen has the qualities of luminosity, activity and stability. It is embodied through the elements and the sense organs. It exists for the dual purpose of sensory enjoyment and liberation of the Self. (Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Chapter II Sutra 18, as interpreted by Mukunda Stiles)

You can learn how to be with and move through pain and accept the inevitable while simultaneously experiencing that Spirit is always there. That is the secret being revealed through yoga practices, wisdom scriptures, and the Truth being embodied by wise teachers. The wisdom teacher is there to give the example of a state of serenity no matter what the circumstances are. The teacher holds the space for you to be authentic with your feelings and guide you beyond the mind into a state of infinite love. The classical scriptures are “the body of God.” They are the nurturing foods for body, mind and soul that help you carve your life path, while living and loving it fully.

The outer teacher needs to live and share from a place of direct experience, integrity and love. The lessons Karla received through the death of her young child have become lived experiences, and it’s from that Source that she shares the yoga practices that supported her. Karla is reaching out and holding hands with you through this book so you may meet your unique path of health and healing, and connect deeply to the purpose in your life.

May many be soothed and nourished by the Divine Mother love that has created this book.

With great respect and love,

Chinnamasta Stiles
Director Yoga Therapy Center &
Shiva Shakti Loka in San Francisco, CA

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Om Shanti.

Why Yoga for Grief

This is whole. That is whole. When a portion of
wholeness is removed, what remains is whole.

The Purnamadah, Invocatory verse of the *Ishavasya Upanishad*

In Sanskrit, the historical and liturgical Indic language in which the ancient texts and teachings of yoga are written, the word *yoga* means “union.” The Sanskrit word is *yog* with the short *a* sound occurring naturally after the *g*. Said aloud, the word reflects its true meaning, “to yoke”: to bind, to join, to unify. The union of yoga describes unification, the yoking together of mind, body and spirit. A great part of this union, and one of the benefits of yoga, is the increased ability of the practitioner to become more aware of the workings of both mind and body and of the intimate connection between the two. Our thoughts create our feelings, and our bodies experience, hold and express these feelings. The more aware we become of this connection, the better able we are to manage, tolerate and even change our thoughts and our feeling states.

Beyond even this is the ultimate and true goal of yoga, which is union. It is the realization that we are connected to, unified with, and *one* with something greater than ourselves. Some conceive of this something greater as God, the Universe, Spirit, the Divine, our Higher Selves, the True Self; there are many names and ways to call this Greater Something.

The concept of the true unity of yoga also includes the awareness of unity with all creation, with all human and non-human life forms, with the energies

that exist here on our planet, within the cosmos and beyond. Whether we know it, recognize it or believe it, this is the goal and the ultimate result of the diligent practice of yoga.

Yoga is a path, a way of life, and a way of being that can help us to understand and realize, “to make real,” this truth, or Truth: We are part of, connected to, and one with something greater than that which we perceive as our individual selves. The unity of yoga is the realization and remembering of what so many of us have forgotten: All aspects of self—body, mind and spirit—have never been removed from Oneness. We are, and have always been, united and whole. We have simply forgotten this union. We may spend hours, days, months, years, or even lifetimes in a place of forgetfulness of our natural and true state of wholeness. Yoga helps us to remember.

The experience of deep and profound grief tops the list of things that contribute to our forgetting. At some point all of us will experience grief due to the death of someone we love. If we live long enough, and love deeply enough, we will experience this kind of grief more than once. Death is part of life. Everything that lives must die. Plants die, animals die, people die. It is a fact of life that life comes to an end. Death and life are inseparable. One does not exist without the other.

Our conception of death and dying is very individual, shaped and often limited by what we have seen and learned from family, friends, teachers, preachers, therapists, books, media and all of the cultural influences that surround us. How we experience grief is also very individual. Many people do not consciously acknowledge the reality that they will experience the deaths of people they know and love, any more than they consciously acknowledge the reality that each and every one of us, personally, will one day die.

There are whole schools of psychology and philosophy that tell us that every neurosis and anxiety we humans experience is based in the unacknowledged fear and unavoidable certainty of our own deaths. Much of the angst we experience in day-to-day life is rooted in the fear of not only the cessation of our existence as living human beings, but in perceived fears of the process of change, of growing older, becoming infirm, senile, powerless and ultimately non-existent. We are also afraid of pain. We are afraid of being

alone, of being disconnected from all that we know. We are afraid those we leave behind will forget us, or that it will not matter whether we existed at all. This is untrue but we don't know it, because we have forgotten our Truth.

These fears stem from the non-realization of our own personal power and the forgetting of our essential Oneness. If we really knew that we are perpetually and eternally connected to a power and a force beyond our understanding, if we really knew, like we know that we are sitting right now on this chair or that we are standing on a solid ground, that we do indeed go on, that our existence beyond this known and tangible physical form is unending, that death is no more than another developmental stage that we will move safely through, we would never be afraid. If we truly knew who we really are, we would never be afraid. When it comes to thinking about death and dying, most of us live in various states ranging anywhere from distaste and denial, to uncertainty and insecurity, to states of fear and terror that result all too often in regular attacks of anxiety and even panic.

Many of us also greatly fear the deaths of those we love. Sometimes these fears are acknowledged, sometimes they are not. For some, that fear is so unspeakable, triggering such discomfort and superstition, that thoughts and talk of death are avoided at all costs. Existentialists would say that fear of the deaths of our loved ones is in actuality only thinly disguised fear of our own eventual, inescapable and positively permanent deaths. Fears of aging, of growing old or powerless, are symptoms of this same fear.

I would have agreed that was true before the death of my son Theo. Having lived through his illness and his death, and having since then had the privilege of knowing and working with many others who have experienced the soul-crushing grief that comes when someone you love so much has died, I think differently. I am less afraid of my own death than I was before Theo died. My husband agrees that that he too is less afraid of death. So are multitudes of those who grieve so profound a loss. In order to experience the presence of those beloveds once more, even if for some that belief is a remote possibility and not a guarantee, death would be a small price to pay.

Knowing that our loved ones have braved that undiscovered country makes our own impending journey to those mysterious lands far less

fearsome. The prospect of reuniting with those deeply beloved souls is so beautifully inviting that our own deaths can be anticipated without alarm or apprehension. A force of love and longing, so deep and wide that it holds the power to negate the fear of death, is a powerful thing. I don't wish for pain and I hope my death is peaceful and free of trauma, and the thought of leaving behind my daughter, my husband or my parents makes me feel great concern for them. However, those things aside, I can say that in my heart, I do indeed look forward to a day when, after shaking off of this mortal coil, I might be reunited with my beloved firstborn child. This doesn't make me—or anyone else who feels the same—suicidal or crazy; it makes us normal people in deep grief, who long for a day when we might once again fully experience the presence, instead of the protracted and painful absence of our beloveds.

Yoga teaches us that reunification is not a distant dream or imagined hope. It teaches and shows us that we are already unified; that in fact we were never parted. *Unifying* is not a word most grieving people would ever use to describe their experience in or with grief. This is why I am writing this book. It has taken nearly a decade for me to approach this place in my own grief journey. I am, in the writing of this book, steeping myself in the love of my child, in fearlessness of my grief, in my personal *sadhana* (practice), embracing my *dharma* (path or life's work), and stepping out in faith that I am not always completely sure I have.

While much of what you read here of my personal story surrounds the death of my child, because that is my direct experience of my own deepest grief, this book is not about grief following the death of a child. This book is about grief due to death of those we love. It is also about other kinds of loss. Loss occurs across a lifetime in many different forms; it is not always about physical death. Grief is the experience we have when we lose something precious to us no matter what that something precious may be. This book is about learning a different way of being with grief and loss as part of a full and wholehearted life.

Just as grief is not one way or one thing, neither is yoga one thing nor one way. There are multiple yogic paths. Yet all paths of yoga lead to the same

place, to the space and place where we recognize our essential wholeness. Yoga allows us to see all the various pieces and parts of ourselves as unified and to recognize that we were never really separate in the first place. It helps us to remember and to re-member those parts of us that we forgot were One. Yoga helps us to realize and remember that we were never separate and can never be separate, from ourselves, from our loved ones, from all of humanity, from our planet, from Spirit, or from God; howsoever you experience God, Truth, the Universe, Spirit, the Divine.

Yoga is not a religion. Yoga can help us to rise above religious confines and aspects of dogma or religiosity that we may recognize as divisive and which no longer serve us. Yoga can also support and augment any religion you may follow, allowing you to go deeper into your own chosen path. Yoga is a spiritual practice, whether we practice it for spiritual purposes or not. The goal of yoga is unification of our own body, mind and spirit with the wholeness of Universal Spirit. Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychiatrist, founder of analytical psychology, father of archetypes and the theory of our collective unconscious, is said to have had a plaque above his doorway inscribed, *Vocatus Atque Non Vocatus Deus Aderit* from the Latin, meaning “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” Yoga reflects and reveals that truth.

The tradition and school of Integral Yoga®, in which I was first trained as a yoga teacher, and whose founder and guru Swami Satchidananda’s teachings I follow, is dedicated to the principle that “Truth is One, Paths are Many.” The teachings of my yoga training helped me through my son’s diagnosis of a brain tumor, his illness, and his death with more equanimity, peace and, probably, sanity, than I could have done solely on my own. It has been those same teachings that have helped bring me back to a place where my body, mind and spirit can be unified. Grief makes it very hard to see this truth. Grief can in fact smash that particular belief to smithereens. Yoga can help bring us back.

Grief impacts every aspect of our being. It affects us physically, mentally, cognitively, emotionally, spiritually and philosophically, in every aspect of body, mind and spirit. Yoga and its various branches can support the bereaved in being with and moving through acute and long-term effects of