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Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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A Yogi in the World #4

Changing Your Future

By Gurudevi Nirmalananda

For weeks, I meditated at a cremation ground in Kashi, the holiest city in India. Liberation is assured for one who departs from this sacred city, so people go there to die. I went daily to the main burning ghat, alongside the divine Ganga (Ganges) River, for sunrise meditations.

On one day, a cremation fire shone brightly, flames leaping higher than I'd ever seen before. My guide said, "This was a good person." The quality of the fire is determined by the quality of the fuel, even when it is a human body. Yoga's goal is to make you shine brightly while alive. Yet your luminosity affects your death as well as your life.

Usually we focus on how yoga and meditation improve your life. However, once you're born, death is certain. In between, quality of life matters. It matters a lot. Yet the quality of your death matters as well. Yoga and meditation help with both.

I went to meditate there because my Guru had repeatedly urged us to contemplate death. In facing death so deeply and tangibly, I became free from fear. And I found the current of life, ever flowing, present within all and beyond all. If you have attended a death, you already know it's not an ending, but a passageway to another dimension. That's why we say, "They left."

While death is inevitable, it's not predictable. When you truly understand this, you treasure every moment of life. Yet you tend to forget this. In an epic poem from ancient India, a wise king was asked, "What is truly amazing in this world?" He answered:

ahany ahani bhuutaani gacchantiha yamaalayam
"se.saa.h sthaavaram icchanti kim aa"scaryam ata.h param.
— Mahabharata, Vana-Parva 313.116

Every day, thousands of living beings die, but
while living, one foolishly thinks himself immortal
and does not prepare for death.

This is the most amazing thing in the world.

Sometimes you just can't see past your nose. When you're so focused on the here and now, it's not cosmic. Unfortunately, you're focused on your needs and fears, or on your perceived needs and fears. Most yogis live comfortable lives, yet they focus on their discomforts. I'll call it "being short-sighted."

When you become farsighted, you can see your own future. And you can see options to change your path. It's like having a cosmic GPS, showing you the route you're on as well as some alternative roads. You get to choose the road, which also determines the scenery along the way.

Your future does include death as well as what leads up to it. Death is not what's scary for most people. What's scary is the debility and decay preceding it. Nobody wants to be weak or bedridden. Nobody wants dementia. We all want to be hale and hearty, able to respond and to contribute to life, right up to the end.

Fortunately, yoga and meditation help with this as well. You can change your future by doing more yoga! Research studies have proven that yoga gives you all the health benefits of exercise. The major difference between them is that yoga reduces your stress hormones, while exercise raises them. And we all know that stress kills.

Meditation has also been researched. Preliminary results show mental and emotional benefits as well as physical improvements. These include the measures for pain, insomnia, cancer, weight control, high blood pressure and more. But meditators know this already.

I watch people come in for yoga classes and meditation programs. They limp in. They skip out. It's completely reliable. Swami Shrutananda did a therapeutic adjustment on a student at a recent Yoga Pain Clinic. On a scale of 1-10, she was reporting shoulder pain at a 12. It went down to a 6. It took 2 minutes. But Svaroopā® yogis know this already.

Yes, you are going to die. But you don't have to suffer from decreasing quality of life and diminishing mental capacities along the way. You can do something about it, beginning with yogic breathing as well as poses to decompress your spine. The current of life runs through your spine. Meditation activates that even more powerfully.

People sometimes tell me, "I'm 2 inches shorter now." That's terrible news! Not only is your spine all knobby and contorted, you're less alive and you live in pain. This can be changed. You're the one who makes it happen. You're in charge of your body, so you determine what happens next, both with your body and mind.

One yogi arrived for a week-long Teacher Training but was in terrible shape herself. Her body was OK but she wasn't able to track simple things, like remember where her hotel room was, not even her key. I phoned her partner, who agreed we could move the yogi into a therapeutic healing week instead of a training. We led her through breathing practices and healing poses individually, while she joined the group for the chanting and meditation segments.

On the third day, her improvements were obvious and tangible. She was able to track with us and remember instructions. She showed up for meals without needing someone to go get her. She began doing her poses in her hotel room. On the fourth day, she walked up to me and said, "Thank you for giving me my mind back."

Decay is avoidable. It's not just yogis who say this. Every dentist agrees. They even train you in what to do to avoid needing their services. Similarly, the ancient perspective in ayurveda and oriental medicine was that the doctor got paid when people were healthy, not when they were sick. It was the doctor's job to keep them healthy. Your yoga teacher wants to do this for you too.

While length of life does depend on health to a certain extent, there is more to it. Research shows that those who live the longest are the ones who are curious. They are learning and growing, even in their elder years. They respond to life and contribute to others. They make a difference in the world.

In India, a friend invited me to meet his Sanskrit teacher. My friend explained that his teacher was older than himself, then added, "You know, these guys live a long time." It turned out to be the teacher's birthday, somewhere in his 90's. He was wonderful! I felt honored to have his darshan. But I wondered, how is it that these guys live a long time?

It's their immersion into the language of Consciousness that makes the difference. Their attunement to the mystical realms of pure Beingness has an effect, not only on their mind but also on their body. When you shine with the light of Consciousness, your quality of life and physical condition respond.

This is yoga's goal — that you know your own Essence and Beingness, your own Self. This frees you from the fear of death, for you know you are immortal, an individualized form of the One Divine Reality. It's only your body that dies, not your Self.

Your essence is the Unchanging Reality that underlies all that exists. Shiva, the One Divine Reality, places himself in a mortal package, your own body and mind, and enjoys the full spectrum of life experience.

You are not your body, nor your mind. You are the Self, the immortal one who is being you while being all. Yet you have a body and mind. You need to take care of them if you want them to last and to serve you well. Do more yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "A YOGI IN THE WORLD"

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