



YOGA FOR OVERCOMING LIFE'S GREATEST CHALLENGES

We associate yoga with tranquillity and wellbeing. But can yoga also be about darkness? Can it be about traversing crisis and despair?

Most of us experience a dark night of the soul in our lifetime. This is not a temporary setback or a bad day at work; it's a period of intense, disorientating inner turmoil that strikes us at the core of our existence. Yet there's little, if anything, in our upbringing or education to prepare us for it.

In Western society a dark night of the soul is treated as an obstacle to overcome. Doctors can't really help; they lack the wisdom to treat the root cause of the suffering. They simply medicate. In ancient India, crisis was an important time of transition and a sacred rite of passage. Yogis and mystics studied crisis and noticed the common attributes of a dark night, viewing them as potent experiences leading to spiritual awakening.

The immense potency of crisis is recognised by the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient classic on yoga, which begins by establishing 'the yoga of despair' with its hero, the

warrior Arjuna, falling into a debilitating personal crisis. So deep is Arjuna's despair that he questions remaining alive. At this point, Krishna, his friend and charioteer, guides the warrior through his dark night experience, sharing with him the secrets of yoga - and offering us three teachings on how to navigate crisis.

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 contemporary presentations of yoga. As such, coming to face a period of darkness when we're 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."





Struggle is certainly not something we would wish on anyone, yet the first teaching of the *Gita* is that crisis is not something to fear; it can be a gift. By reframing darkness, we can make it part of our yoga journey.

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. This disintegration of our story can be isolating, disorientating, even enraging.

As we struggle to navigate life's circumstances, we come to see that the more we cling to our broken narrative the more intensely we experience suffering associated with time - 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.' Early on, Krishna reminds Arjuna that whatever pain he's experiencing is sure to pass. Like heat and cold, these sensations are impermanent and are born of our engagement with this world. The wise

learn to endure these sensations, without being distracted by them.

Krishna is making an implicit distinction here between *pain and suffering*. Pain is an inevitable part of life. Suffering, however, is our mental response to pain. It's the story we create around our experience. Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.

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

The practice of 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. If Corpse pose could speak, it might advise: "Let go of projection and resistance. Let go of your stories and identities in this world. Be your own best friend. Above all, never forget that you're a child of the universe, as much as the stars and the trees; you deserve to be here. You're protected and supported."



THE THIRD TEACHING:

Trust your inner guide

In traversing a dark night of the soul, trusting our inner guide is essential. The dark night of the soul is a time to pay less attention to the relentless chatter of the mind, and instead to listen out for the voice of the Universal Teacher within us.

At first, Arjuna is doing all the talking in the *Gita*. He is voicing his fears about the future, his regrets about the past, and his confusion about the present. The warrior soon realises that no amount of his own talking will quell his suffering, so he turns 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 through yoga. Hearing our inner guide requires an inner stillness, an open-hearted willingness known as 'surrendered listening' and a genuine desire to honour truth in whichever way it reveals itself.

The *Gita* teaches 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. It can help us develop 'divine' qualities, what Krishna calls the 'wealth of the gods and goddesses'.

Yoga warriors on the field of life

After fourteen years of marriage, Claude's wife Amber left him for a fitness instructor. During their marriage, Claude had wanted children, but Amber had been distinctly unenthusiastic. Within a few months of meeting her new partner, Amber found herself expecting a baby. Claude plunged into a dark night of the soul, facing the natural depression and pain that accompanies such circumstances. Claude, however, was deeply interested in the wisdom of the *Gita*. Instead of feeling ashamed or trying to ignore or bypass his experience, he decided to allow the dark night to be - without creating a story around it.

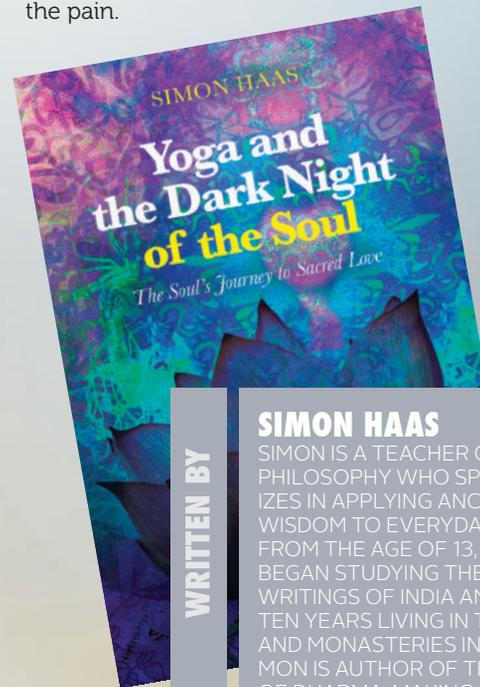
Regularly studying the *Bhagavad Gita*, Claude turned his attention inward and began listening to the Universal Teacher within. He sought to culture divine qualities, such as non-violence,



avoiding anger, never maligning others, compassion, kindness, humility, and the absence of malice. Divorces can elicit the worst in us, but in a dedication to deepen his yoga, Claude refused to linger in self-pity, bitterness or fury. Taking ownership of his life, Claude contemplated and acknowledged the mistakes he had made in the relationship, and how he might have contributed to the break-up. He never spoke ill of Amber and despite his own suffering, he deliberately chose to remain respectful of her.

There were still unresolved legal issues between Claude and Amber, including a third-party court case relating to their previous business together. Amber had taken the better half of their joint property portfolio, but Claude didn't look for payback. Instead, he helped Amber settle the case, without her knowing. Claude's yoga teacher

had taught him the wisdom of trees. A tree gives whatever it has to others - its shade, flowers, fruits, oxygen - without concern for receiving gratitude or anything in return. It braves the scorching heat and torrential rains without complaining, offering shelter to those in need. And if someone arrives with an axe to cut it down, it remains free from malice and the desire for revenge. Claude wanted to emulate a tree, not an axe. He understood that by delving into his yoga practice, he could overcome his suffering, while growing into his highest self. Claude saw that the dark night of the soul is the perfect time to develop kindness and compassion, both towards oneself and towards others, despite the pain.



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