

# Leaving

Behind

## The Yogic Way Out

he *Yoga Vasishtha*, an important text in Jnana Yoga and Vedanta, opens with the story of Sri Rama's depression as a young man. His father, King Dasaratha, noticed that his son's behavior had slowly changed after he and his brothers returned from an extended pilgrimage to the holy places of India. Rama progressively grew pale, thin, and weak, and seemed to lose all interest in his friends, in the beautiful gardens and the entertainments of the court, and even in worshipping the deities. He barely ate. To his father he refused to admit that anything was wrong; to others his despondency seemed nearly suicidal. When pressed, he would mutter something like, "What is the use of anything: wealth, prosperity, the kingdom, family, or even overcoming challenges as is befitting a warrior?"

When the great sage Vishvamitra came to court, the worried king asked for his help. Rama is speedily summoned before the court (which included members of the royal family, ministers, sages, citizens, celestials, the horses of the royal stables, and the household pets), and asked to describe to the two rishis, Vishvamitra and Vasishtha, what is troubling him. He replies that although he had a happy childhood and good teachers, he has recently begun to lose all hope of happiness in this world and, indeed, to question whether happiness is possible for anyone. Of his self-image he says, "I am a hero, but now I feel like a coward."

Rama explains at length that our body is susceptible to pain, suffering, illness, and decay; our egoism creates all sorts of emotional pain; and our



One who  
is trying to get  
out has already  
hit bottom.

—Baba Hari Dass

mind is always agitated, craving for what we do not have. This inescapable craving dries up our goodness, our noble qualities, and we become cold, hard, and cruel. Our lifespans are no more than drops of water on a leaf. We live only to die and we die only to be born again; to live thus is

to live like a slave. Not only that, whole universes are created and ripen, only to be devoured by time; even the gods will some day be destroyed.

Under such circumstances, he asks, "What hope is there for any individual person like myself? I don't care at all about wealth, fame, or sensual pleasures—I only want peace. I don't care whether I live or die. But when I think about the miseries of embodied beings I am paralyzed by terror and grief. I seem to be half free and half caught—I have renounced everything, but I haven't attained Wisdom. Please, O great ones, show me how to attain eternal peace and bliss, and how to live in this world." (Venkatesananda, pp. 5-21)

Though individual life histories vary, any modern Western therapist or healer listening to someone with similar symptoms would recognize them as indicative of depression. Most of us would feel deep compassion for the person's suffering, ask questions, and listen for a while longer. Then we would try to assist, using

**By Sarasvati Buhrman**

whichever tools from our profession seemed most appropriate. But that is not what they did in the Court of King Dasaratha, many millennia ago. Rama's audience sat quietly for some time, absorbing the impact of his words. And then they cheered him. Not for the half that was caught, but for the half that was free.

They recognized that despite his emotional pain and depressed behavior, Rama's insights about the limited and ultimately painful nature of individualized existence were entirely correct and, if properly directed, could lead to the recognition of the Divine Self. And then the wise counselor Vasishtha, the greatest of rishis, began to speak to Rama about the Self, the eternal nondual essence, and how it is to be first perceived and ultimately merged with. The court met for many days as Vasishtha recounted story after story about the various ways in which humans and nonhumans alike had attained realization. And through hearing these stories, through questioning Vasishtha, and through the enlightened energy of his teachers, Rama awakened to the all-pervasive existence of Divine Consciousness. He experienced its peace and bliss, and knew it to be the answer to his seeking.

#### **THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT**

**A**ccording to Hindu cosmology, we are presently living in the *kali yuga*, the age of darkness, in which the world is three-fourths nonvirtue and one-fourth virtue and marked by illness, greed, poverty, quarreling, and emotional pain. In the Vaishnava tradition it is said that *kali yuga* began with the Mahabharata war. Certainly, yoga texts written after this time (as the *Yoga Vasishtha* almost certainly was, as well as the influential teachings of the Buddha and the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali) give increasing emphasis to the ever-present experience of suffering in human life. And while yoga has much to offer to those of us who suffer from depression, its views about the causes of pain, as well as the cures, are quite different from those of Western therapy.

Ayurveda, yoga's sister science, focuses on lifestyle, life events, and genetically and karmically inherent factors that may have caused imbalances in the present body-mind complex. Using yoga practices and ritual, as well as medicines and diet, it tries to correct the imbalances in body and mind that encourage and support depression. Ayurveda is thus more similar to Western therapeutic approaches than yoga is, and easier for most of us to understand. In both Western medicine and Ayurveda, when we do not dwell overmuch on the painful aspects of our life, we are "normal." But when we are unable to withdraw our awareness from painful thoughts or emotions, to the point where we lose our energy and enthusiasm for life, we are "depressed."

Yoga, on the other hand, attempts the more difficult

but complete cure, the one which Lord Rama discovered. In yoga, depression is seen not as a separate or definable condition which we sometimes have and sometimes do not, but rather as a visible and unmanageable eruption of an underlying unconscious but continual problem. However, because the problem is unconscious, only a few rare individuals, like Lord Rama and the Buddha, are able to recognize it in themselves without assistance. The rest of us require help, and that is why our gurus and the yogic texts give so much emphasis to explaining the concepts of attachment and desire, which often initially feel obscure, abstract, or irrelevant to us, when all we wanted was an easy way to feel better. Yoga's approach to the problem of depression is radical and confrontive: it turns our attention to the ultimate cause of our pain, and, through our practice, tries to eradicate it forever. The ultimate answer to the pain of existence is, in the yoga system, always a spiritual answer.

The purpose of Ayurveda is to teach us how to live a healthy, balanced life in accordance with nature's laws. The goal of yoga is the attainment of liberation from the cycles of birth and death. However, these two approaches, yogic and Ayurvedic, are not mutually exclusive, and in practice are usually used together. Deciding which approach should receive the most emphasis is sometimes a matter of discerning whether the problem is more issue-related or more physically organic, as well as which approach the person is more open to. We will explore both of these approaches in this article.

#### **THE YOGIC APPROACH**

**F**rom the perspective of yoga philosophy it is important first of all to understand that emotional pain and its varied expressions, such as depression, stem from desire, attachment, and certain unconscious universal constructs, existing in all unliberated human minds. These constructs form a platform on which all other more individualized neuroses are woven and re-woven, life after life, through a complex association of desires, attachments, and experiences. If they can be removed through yoga practice, all of the individual neuroses which they support will crumble away. Called *kleshas*, or afflictions, these five constructs or crystallized thought-forms are described by Patanjali at the beginning of Book 2 of the *Yoga Sutra* (1,2,4).



tence, which is inherently painful because it is incomplete. Once this misidentification occurs, our whole perception of reality is altered, so that the entire universe is divided into "me" versus "not-me," and the objects of our experience are divided into "mine" and "not-mine." This is *asmita*, or "I-ness," the second klesha.

However, because the identification of *ahamkara* was false to begin with, and because what is "me" is relatively small compared to the large surrounding universe mostly composed of "not me," a sort of existential terror and insecurity results, the sort of feeling described by Sri Rama in the opening story. We don't want to face this overwhelming feeling of terror, so we develop various strategies for distracting ourselves from it—for enlarging "me" and for buttressing and preserving our individual and continually threatened small existence.

This leads to the third klesha, *raga*, attraction, which creates in us a pattern of acquisition; we begin to pursue human relationships, control strategies, material possessions, knowledge, wealth, status, power—anything which might be capable of enlarging and protecting our fragile individualized existence. But because change is the nature of creation, all objects within it are impermanent, and thus subject to loss at any moment. In experiencing an object which gives us pleasure, we become attached to that pleasure, and desire to experience it again. When the experience becomes unavailable to us, we feel pain. Our spouse or

The first of these is *avidya*, primal ignorance, which pervades all of creation. This ignorance is experiential, not conceptual, in nature. To individuals, *avidya* means that while the nondual source of all existence and awareness is pure, all-pervasive, immanent, and transcendent, and radiates from the core of our being, we do not automatically perceive that this is the case. Our individualized and unpurified sensory mind and sense organs, because they are relatively crude instruments compared to the subtlety of pure awareness, are incapable of directly perceiving it. Our mind's higher nature (*buddhi*) is capable of perceiving the radiant and blissful reflection of the Divine Self, but only when it has been

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sufficiently purified through persistent practice. For most of us, such purification requires many years of meditation practice, as well as the help of our teachers.

As individuals, we also have what is called an *ahamkara*, or "I-maker." It is a single *vrutti*, or thought-form, the idea of individualized existence. This single thought of limited self is enormously convincing because it pervades the entire body-mind complex. It is the nature of this individual "I-am" sense, or ego, to identify with something and become attached to it. And because we do not easily perceive the existence of the Self, the *ahamkara* identifies with some sort of limited self-concept, usually our body-mind complex, our social identity, the chain of our individual existences through many lives, our individual attributes of personality or experience, etc. As my guru, Baba Hari Dass, once remarked, "We are born into this world knowing only one thing: This body is mine. But we don't even know who it is who is claiming the body."

The result of this ignorance of our true nature is thus our misidentification with some aspect of limited exist-

partner whom we loved and enjoyed leaves us for another. We try to persuade him or her to return, or we try to find another like him or her. If after repeated efforts we are not successful, but our attachment remains strong, our pain and anger turns to depression, helplessness, and finally hatred of ourselves and the world. This is the fourth klesha, called *dvesha*, "the hate which follows after experiencing pain." (Dass, *Translation and Commentary*, 2.8)

Because of *raga* and *dvesha*, a tremendous, continual, and habitual outflowing of our energy and attention through our senses to the objects of the external world has been created. This outflow of all our attention and energy can only increase our identification with our physical body and our present physical existence, making it even harder for us to perceive or identify with our spiritual nature. Not only do we fear death because it represents an ending of our ability to fulfill our desires, but we have also emotionally identified with our body-mind complex and thus (at least subconsciously, if not consciously) fear that our existence will

terminate with the death of our physical body. This is the fifth klesha, *abhinivesha*, the clinging to life, which "dominates even the wise." Or, as Anand Dass puts it:

The kleshas are imprinted on the *chitta*, the individual consciousness, from time immemorial and create and perpetuate the illusion that existence is limited to the mind-body complex. Even after death the *chitta* retains the kleshas in seed form and they sprout to full fruition in the next incarnation. As long as the individual thinks that consciousness is limited to bodily existence, he is forever at the mercy of forces beyond his control, snatching a little happiness here and there but always aware, even if it is on a subconscious level, that sooner or later the body will die and the vehicle of experience will be no more. (sutra 2.9)

#### PURIFYING THE MIND

**I**f you were not depressed when you began reading this article, by now you may be. The picture of individualized existence presented by the great masters of India is not a pretty one; in fact it sounds not very much different from Hobbes' description of human life as "nasty, brutish, and short." But the one thought that sustained me through my years of depression was that all of the great masters of the world would not have bothered teaching us how to achieve permanent inner peace and bliss if we were not capable of learning. And if I, like most people experiencing depression, could have no faith in my own abilities, I certainly had had enough experiences in my practice of yoga to confirm to me that this path was reliable. When I was too depressed to meditate, asanas and Ayurveda and pranayama and my guru's help eventually brought me back again to the point where I could. Yoga, after all, does not claim to be an easy path. It claims to be a path that works.

Patanjali does not teach us about suffering and then abandon us to our fate. Rather, having presented the problem of suffering, he reassures us: "The pain of

slowing of thoughts, suspension of breath, spontaneous correct knowledge, inner lights, subtle sounds, forms, or feelings, movement of subtle energies, ecstasy, etc. Regardless of the content of these experiences, these moments of relative peace begin to etch into our mind the thought patterns of peace, which over time begin to compete successfully with the pre-existing habits of more attached, agitated, or painful thoughts and feelings. With each stage of samadhi, we gradually become a little less attached to external things.

As our practice deepens, our experiential understanding of the reality and illusion of the universe also increases. At some point we notice that we no longer have to confront each of our individual neuroses separately; they seem to fall away in chunks, dislodged somehow by the process of inner illumination. Ultimately they are inconsequential, we begin to feel, in the face of That Presence. Still we struggle between peace and pain whenever the circumstances we encounter in the external world succeed in bringing our painful *vrittis*, or thought-patterns, scurrying into activity again. The kleshas which underlie them will last until liberation. What can we do in the meantime?

In sutra 1.31, Patanjali identifies depression, as well as irregular breathing and nervousness, as a symptom which accompanies the distracted mind. Yoga also describes depression (*daurmanasya*) as occurring when we have deeply desired something but our desires have not been fulfilled, and we feel incapable of removing the resulting pain from our mind. As Baba Hari Dass elaborates (*Translation and Commentary*, 1.31): "All of the symptoms are related and appear one after the other. First a person gets pain which disturbs the mind and causes depression. The depression gets so intense that the person becomes nervous and can't function properly. In this state of nervousness, the pranic flow is disturbed and causes hard breathing." Thus, in the yogic view, depression, pain, attachment, mental distraction, nervousness, and disturbance of prana are all related phenomena.

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the future is to be avoided" (sutra 2.16), and gives us a practical methodology for escaping it. This is the path of *ashtanga yoga*, the "eight-limbed" system of practice which culminates in *samadhi*, a succession of deepening states of higher consciousness, which unfolds in stages. In the lowest stages of samadhi, the content of the experience, though not the form, varies a great deal from one person to another. As the mind internalizes and becomes absorbed in the object of meditation, a person can experience relaxed peace,

Patanjali's prescription for the problem is given in the next sutra: "Practice on one principle is to be done." In other words, pick an object of meditation and stick with it. Why this works is not immediately obvious to most of us and requires that we refer back to two previous sutras, the second and the fourth. In these two sutras Patanjali conveys to us the idea that yoga (in one interpretation) is the cessation of all the thought-waves in the mind (1.2) and that until this very high stage is achieved the underlying aware-

ness of our being will not know its own freedom, but will identify instead with the thought-waves of our mind (1.4), even at the most causal and unconscious levels. Another common interpretation of the second sutra is that yoga is the process of learning to control the thought-waves and to progressively disidentify with them (see Aranya), which gradually develops non-attachment.

In depression, our thoughts and feelings are exceedingly painful. In practicing on one principle, we are removing our attention from our painful thoughts and placing it elsewhere, on a single object of meditation. In other words, in the present moment we are interrupting the identification of our consciousness with the objects of pain, which immediately brings some measure of equanimity and peace to the mind. Ultimately it allows us more objectivity and clarity for taking whatever actions may be appropriate to our situation. This, again, is not always easy to do. It may be especially difficult in certain cases, where we may also need to use some of the methods described later on in this

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article. But if we persist in our efforts, it will work.

The object selected for meditation is highly personal. It should be the easiest and most effective one for us to focus on successfully. The goal is to control the thoughts through concentration, either directly, or by controlling the breath, or by concentrating the awareness on a specific thing. In one method of *prachardan-vidharan*, one sits in a comfortable meditation posture with the spine erect and the eyes closed. Let the breathing become relaxed, and then slowly become aware of the space between the exhalation and the next inhalation. Slowly, without increasing either the volume or rate of breath, let that space after the exhalation become elongated. During the outheld breath, it is easiest to make the mind free of thoughts, and one should not allow any thoughts in the mind.

One can also meditate on the sound of *Om*, or the form of one who has attained liberation (and thus has a perfectly quiet mind), or the inner light, or the contents of a spiritual dream, or supersensuous impressions, or the peace of deep sleep, or any other spiritually inspiring object. In every case, effort is to be made to focus the mind without allowing it to wander. When we notice that the mind has wandered, we should simply return it to the object of concentration. In this way the thought-waves will calm down, and we will feel more at peace.

In order to purify our mind of negative emotions, which can add to, if not create, depression, another kind of practice is given in sutra 1.33. Patanjali advises

us to cultivate attitudes of friendliness (rather than jealousy) toward those who are happy, compassion (rather than contempt or condemnation) toward those who are suffering or in misery, delight (rather than criticism or undermining) toward those who are virtuous, and indifference (rather than revenge) toward those who are evil-natured. As well as creating a positive environment generally, these practices help us to avoid creating negative *samskaras* for the future.

#### THE ROLE OF THE GUNAS

In Sankhya philosophy, the system of cosmology on which both the *Yoga Sutra* and *Ayurveda* are based, the *gunas* are the three great forces of creation. Their activation propels the origination of the cosmic mind, the universe, and all of the processes occurring within them. These energies are *sattva*, the quality of equanimity, clarity, and peace; *rajas*, activity and movement; and *tamas*, dullness, heaviness, contraction. Living beings have awareness due to *sattva*; process, movement, and change due to *rajas*; and individuation and physical bodies due to the influence of *tamas*. In order to progress in yoga practice, we must remove excess *tamas* and *rajas* from our mind, and that is why there are so many practices—such as *asana*, *pranayama*, *mantra*, *shat karmas* (or *kriyas*, as they are called in some texts), and *sattvic* diet—which are employed for this purpose. When excess *rajas* and *tamas* are removed, the inner light of higher consciousness shines in the mind, and the mind is capable of one-pointedness and equanimity.

According to both *yoga* and *Ayurveda*, the *gunas* play an important role in depression, which is characterized by too little *sattva*, and too much *rajas* and *tamas*. When dominated by *tamas*, our mind is locked into our own physical existence and we are overly preoccupied with our own sensory pleasures or pains. In *tamasic* depression, signs of clinical depression are seen: lethargy, negativity, dullness, and lack of motivation and the will to live. *Tamas* creates a mind which is too dull or sleepy to meditate correctly, and strong measures are required to dispel it. *Shat karmas* (the yogic cleansing practices which constitute the first limb in the *hatha yoga* system) are extremely effective where appropriate to the individual, and all *tamasic* foods—such as meat, fish, eggs, mushrooms, onions, garlic, alcohol, and sedatives—should be avoided. Activating *pranayamas* and styles of *asana* should be pursued, as well as chanting. In particular, the sun salutation and *gayatri* mantra can bring light to the darkness of *tamas*. Limited juice fasting can also be helpful, and overeating should be strictly avoided. Normally the dominance of the nostrils should switch every one to two hours; if the right nostril is dominant for longer, it should be plugged with cotton to force

more air to flow through the left nostril. Or the left nostril can be opened with *sutra neti* or by placing a ball of cloth under the right armpit.

When rajas dominates in our mind, we are obsessively active and distracted; we can't seem to calm down physically or mentally. In cases of rajasic depression, which corresponds to the Western diagnosis of agitated depression, the nervousness and irregular breathing described in *sutra* 1.31 become more evident. Insomnia, racing thoughts, and reliving painful events over and over in one's mind (or playing out imagined solutions to these events) often characterize such depression. Meditation feels impossible, and slow *vinyasas* and quite a lot of calming pranayamas should be done in order to quiet the mind before attempting to meditate. Chanting of prayers and listening to soothing music is also helpful. It is important to eat regular satisfying meals, and not snack in between, and to refrain not only from most of the tamasic foods listed above, but also from stimulating foods, such as caffeine, white sugar, and hot spicy foods. One should check the dominance of the nostrils in this case also. If the left nostril has been dominating for more than two hours, plug it with cotton, or open the right nostril by inserting the little finger coated with ghee, or by pressing a ball of cloth under the left armpit.

#### AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVES

An acquaintance of mine once asked my guru what to do for depression. He replied: "Either dig out the root, or take herbs to decrease vata." In other words, deal with the problem of *ahamkara*, which sets the stage for our attachment to pain, or deal with the problem from another angle, that of Ayurveda. To fulfill our duties in this world with wisdom and compassion, while remaining inwardly immersed in the inner blissful peace of Divine Consciousness, is the ultimate healing. Ayurvedic techniques approximate, in one way or another, this state of inner equilibrium by balancing the *doshas*, and, I speculate, by creating a chemical environment in the brain which approximates, as best it can, the aftereffects of mental peace and clarity produced by the regular practice of deep meditation. It is probably no accident that a great many of the sacred herbs of India that are used in ritual and ceremony are also used internally in the treatment of emotional disorders and imbalances. A person suffering from chronic depression or emotional trauma should see a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner in order to receive an appropriate individualized formula, but some principles apply generally and can be discussed here.

In Ayurveda, it is important that the cause of the illness, in this case depression, and the events leading to it, be understood. Immediate triggers of illness, which can imbalance the three doshas (*vata*, *pitta*,

and *kapha*), may be either internal, or external, or both. For example, seasonal changes and harsh weather conditions, traumatic experiences, the negative wishes or intentions of others, poor nutrition, and a stressful or irregular lifestyle can all affect us to greater or lesser degrees. Internal causes of illness include ignoring our inner wisdom, imbalanced relationships with the sensory universe, and the maturation of negative *samskaras*.

Any of these can provoke the doshas, disturbing either the *manas* (mental) *agni* or the *jathar* (digestive) *agni*. The term *agni* literally means "fire," but its implications include the concepts of discrimination and digestion. Ayurveda recognizes a natural connection between the brain and the gut, and maintains that just as the *jathar agni* must properly discriminate between what should be absorbed and what should be excreted in the process of digestion of food, so must the *manas agni* digest the experiences of our emotional world, deciding which experiences should be retained within our awareness and which are best released. Due to the close connection between these two agnis, it is a tenet of Ayurveda that if either becomes imbalanced the other will follow, unless the balance is quickly restored. Since proper functioning of the *jathar agni* is also directly and immediately related to the energy level of the body, the link between mental clarity and peace, on the one hand, and good digestion and physical vitality, on the other hand, becomes an obvious and clearly articulated principle in both Ayurvedic medicine and in *hatha yoga*. That is why there are so many *yoga* practices for enhancing the digestive fire—such as *nauli*, *agnisara dhauti*, and the bow and wheel poses—and why there are so many dietary and lifestyle rules in both disciplines.

These triggering events for illness can befall any of us at various times in our life. When depression comes, as Baba Hari Dass says it does to almost all yogis at some stage in our practice (*Silence Speaks*, p. 149), an understanding of Ayurvedic principles can help us. If *vata* dosha seems to predominate in our depression—that is, if we feel dry, agitated, constipated, cold, and are unable to sleep—then warm, soupy, easily digestible foods, along with ghee and warm milk, will be helpful, as well as lots of boiled brahmi tea. Cold foods and ice water are to be strictly avoided. *Vata* depression often stems from trauma and is characterized by feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, loss, helplessness, and a mind which cannot slow down. Slow *vinyasas*, chanting, *brahmari* pranayama, and soothing, nurturing meditation practices, such as deity practices or those involving inner light or mantra, will be helpful. The various oleation methods of Ayurvedic *panchakarma* may be crucial in treating this type of depression.

For *pitta* depression, characterized by heat, anger,

frustration, resentment, or hatred, asana styles which emphasize body awareness, long relaxations in corpse pose, *shitali* pranayama, *nadi shodhanam*, *prachardan-vidharana*, and meditation on *Om* in the heart can be quite helpful, as can a cooling, sweet diet which includes warm milk, grains, cottage cheese, and sweet fruits, and excludes hot spices and acidic foods. Sandalwood and brahmi tea should be taken frequently.

Kapha depression is characterized by despondency, immobility, lack of appetite, excessive sleeping, and lack of interest in life. In such circumstances, boiled ginger and brahmi tea, vacha and myrrh snuff, aerobic and heating forms of asana, *ujjayi* and *kapalabhati* pranayamas, gayatri mantra, and *ajapa* meditation at the *ajna* chakra are particularly helpful practices. Cold, bland foods, ice water, and dairy products should be

extremes (such as undereating, overeating, or eating too frequently; too-frequent sex; overwork or underwork; or too much or too little exercise). Ojas is enhanced through balanced daily routines of spiritual practices, selfless service, *satsang*, work that fulfills us, and avoidance of unnecessary stress.

Yogis dramatically increase their prana and their reservoir of ojas through the regular practice of pranayama and *bandha*. Pranayama also calms and quiets the mind, interrupting the cycle of distraction, pain, depression, nervousness, and irregular breathing. When we practice certain pranayamas and meditation together regularly, pranayama provides sufficient energy to carry our concentration deep enough to attain samadhi. Through practicing samadhi, our nonattachment develops gradually and naturally. Our

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avoided, and a diet of well-spiced grains, beans, and fresh vegetables should be eaten.

We are all more prone to depression when stressed, and it is obvious that individuals vary in their resilience to various forms of stress. In part this is due to constitution (vata-dominant individuals are more easily thrown off balance than other *prakritis*, while those dominant in kapha are able to absorb life's blows more easily); in part it is due to differential experiences of being nurtured or not nurtured during childhood; in part to the level of physical and social stresses experienced during our lifetime; and in part to lifestyle habits. Nevertheless it is still possible, through the regulation of diet, yoga, lifestyle, and the cultivation of inner equanimity, to build our reservoir of vital energy so that our resilience is strong and our boat remains afloat amid the waves of the universe.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRANA

In teaching pranayama to beginning students, Baba Hari Dass once remarked: "When we don't have enough prana, we are in pain physically and emotionally. And to reach the highest stages of yoga, so much prana is required. That is why these practices are taught." Prana is nourishment. We receive it through the breath, from the sun and the stars, from the earth, and through our food. Prana as *ojas*, the reservoir of vital energy in the body, gives us a sense of abundance, stability, resistance to disease and negative influences, and the confidence to meet life's challenges. Ojas is cultivated through living in respectful balance with the natural world, taking neither more nor less than what we need; practicing *yama* and *niyama*; eating a healthy and nourishing vegetarian diet appropriate to our individual body; and avoiding

feet are now starting to walk on the path toward avoiding the pain of the future. Patanjali also tells us that by the practice of certain pranayamas, the covering which veils the inner light is removed (2.52), and that the mind can be fixed in this inner luminous state, which is beyond sorrow (1.36). Through the regular practice of yoga asanas, we assist the prana created during sitting practice to flow in an unobstructed way through the physical body, where it acts to maintain the health and balance of the physical structure. Through living a pure and balanced life in accordance with nature's laws, and through sincerely and regularly practicing the eight limbs of ashtanga yoga with an attitude of nonattachment and selfless service, we can relieve our depression of the moment while we progress toward attaining eternal peace for our future.

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