

Addressing Spirituality at the End of Life

By Jennie Lee

Yoga therapists working with people at the end of life have a unique opportunity to help their clients cultivate a deep spiritual awareness. When physical healing is no longer being sought, people naturally begin to question what more there is to being. Through universally accessible practices based on the teachings of the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita, we can facilitate peace at a time when both assurance and meaning are needed.

Many yoga therapists and clients alike are uncomfortable talking about death and spirituality. The practices below are offered as a framework for compassionate exploration of these essential aspects of our shared nature. Initiating a spiritually focused conversation to explore personal beliefs, addressing the fear of death through the *kleshas* (spiritual hindrances), and employing Patanjali's eight-limb path to expand awareness beyond the body can help us serve clients and their caregivers. We may also come to integrate an acceptance of our own mortality with the understanding of our true immortality.

Scope of Practice

Yoga therapists by nature frequently attend to clients' anxiety, depression, fear, and sadness, and the teachings of yoga offer many practices to manage these feelings. The entire Yoga Sutras point toward the need to cultivate an identification with pure consciousness to overcome the various forms of suffering caused by our perception of separateness. Therefore, assisting clients in this regard is well within our scope of practice and should be seen as an essential component of any ongoing therapeutic relationship.

In my sessions, regardless of why someone has sought help, I always approach the spiritual aspect of their current experience, inquiring as to whether their beliefs bring them a sense of peace and what practices keep them tethered to the transcendent aspect of their being. Many people don't have the opportunity to converse about their spirituality in daily life and really appreciate it when I open the door for dialogue. This conversation becomes particularly essential for those in their ending of days.

Initiating the Spiritual Conversation

To exemplify how we can address spirituality with clients at the end of life, I will take you through the work I did with "Nora," an 84-year-old woman dying of lung cancer. I was offering yoga therapy as a hospice volunteer, and she expressed interest in having me visit. Nora had been a devout Christian Scientist her whole life, and because the Christian Science religion relies heavily on prayer for healing of the body, this had always been her choice and practice. However, being at the last stages of life, she realized that physical healing was no longer possible, and so she began to question her previous beliefs and also the very nature of being. She was new to yoga and had very little knowledge of the yogic teachings. But she was open to dialogue, so I began asking her open-ended questions to get her talking about her spiritual thoughts and experience.

The first and most important aspect of any session is to provide the client with a compassionate space in which they can explore what is arising internally. I listened empathetically, allowing Nora the space and time to go at her own pace, to examine her beliefs, and to wonder anew about things she had always held to be true. I made sure not to insert my opinions or beliefs and used questions, like the ones below, to keep our conversations flowing.

- Do you believe you are more than this dying body?
- What do you think is happening right now?
- Would you like to talk about your spiritual beliefs?
- Do you believe in a Higher Power and if so, what do you believe is the nature of it?
- What do you believe happens after we die?
- What gives you peace?
- What is the most loving thought you could hold onto right now?

We should not introduce or impose our own beliefs and we do not need to offer answers or solutions.

By creating loving, nonjudgmental space for clients to explore their own spiritual beliefs, much healing and integration can occur. To facilitate a client's inner inquiry, it is essential that we use inclusive language rather than religion-specific terminology. Operating under a philosophical system that honors the divinity within all creation, we as yoga therapists can recognize the expression of that divinity through all spiritual paths and religions. Please note, though, that we should not introduce or impose our own beliefs and we do not need to offer answers or solutions.

Nora really appreciated our talks and the time to explore what was changing within her belief system. She felt heard and accepted and thanked me many times for being there with her. Even if you have not initiated this type of conversation before or you have not worked out your own spiritual beliefs, you can still have a respectful conversation, one that enables a depth of self-expression for the client.

Addressing Fear

"Our real self, the soul, is immortal. We may sleep for a little while in that change called death, but we can never be destroyed. We exist, and that existence is eternal," writes Paramahansa Yogananda in *The Divine Romance: Collected Talks and Essays on Realizing God in Daily Life*. "The wave comes to the shore, and then goes back to the sea; it is not lost. It becomes one with the ocean, or returns again in the form of another wave. This body has come, and it will vanish; but the soul essence within it will never cease to exist. Nothing can terminate that eternal consciousness."

This assurance becomes essential when the fear of death arises, and it is the second component to addressing spirituality with a client at the end of life. As Nora's physical body deteriorated, she felt untethered from her concept of self, and her crisis of faith brought up a lot of fear about leaving what was known.

To help her understand the basis for her fear and shift her identification from body to soul, I began sharing the teachings on the kleshas. As described in the Yoga Sutras, the kleshas are the veils that obstruct our perception of our true nature. There are five major kleshas:

1. *Avidya*—ignorance of our spiritual essence,
2. *Asmita*—identification with the personal sense of self,
3. *Raga*—attachments formed by the personal self,
4. *Dvesa*—aversions formed by the personal self, and
5. *Abhinivesa*—fear of the death of the personal self.

I explained to Nora that it was because of our perception that we *are* our bodies that the fear of leaving them arises. The fear of death is more psychological than physiological, resulting from the immortal soul's misidentification with, and attachment to, its mortal home. This fear can aggravate physical pain and make a dying person resist what may otherwise be a very peaceful transition.

This is true throughout life. Whenever we feel separate from our underlying spiritual essence, we experience suffering, anxiety, and fear. And whereas physical pain may be manageable with the assistance of medical science, such mental anguish can only be assuaged through greater awareness of our divine Self.

"When this I shall die, then I will know who I truly am," writes Yogananda in *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita*. He affirms that the more we practice transcendence and nonattachment to the body in life by getting to know our eternal nature, the less fear and suffering there will be at the time of death.

When we recognize that we *inhabit* bodies, but that we *are* the souls within, which never cease to exist, fear diminishes. Life-force energy does not disappear; it simply changes forms. The transition from our individual expression of life to the expansive state of pure consciousness can indeed be easeful.

As yoga therapists supporting someone during their time of transition, we too must face our fear of death and manage our own limiting beliefs about who we really are so that we don't contribute to any fear that may be present for a client. If you feel uncomfortable in this realm of practice, consider a personal exploration of why this is so. Employ the help of a mentor, counselor, or trusted religious leader to examine your own beliefs and concerns.

Expanding Awareness

To guide Nora beyond the identification with her limited personal

self, I offered accessible practices from Patanjali's eight-limb path. She was at the stage of barely being able to move her physical body, but she was still able to focus on her breathing. So, we began with the fourth limb with a basic pranayama, *sama vritti* (equal-ratio breathing), which helped her calm the mental fear when it arose.

"A balanced, rhythmical pattern steadies the mind and emotions, causing the breath to become motionless," writes Nischala Joy Devi in *The Secret Power of Yoga* about her perspective on Yoga Sutras 2.51–2.52. "As a result, the veils over the inner light are lifted."

As is natural at the end stages of life, Nora was already moving into a state of sensory withdrawal (*pratyahara*, the fifth limb), as her

attention was being drawn toward that which lies beyond the physical. I taught her the *sambhavi mudra*, or third-eye gaze, to focus her mind (*dharana*, the sixth limb). Concentrating on the third eye, the center of transcendent consciousness, does for the mind what concentrating on the breath does for the body—it soothes and calms. The proverbial "light at the end of tunnel" described so often in near-death experiences, may in fact be the soul passing through the spiritual eye, consciousness expanding to a grander state of being.

Nora enjoyed having me guide her into the deep stillness of meditation (*dhyana*, the seventh limb.) Once she was focused on the third eye and breathing rhythmically, we would begin silently repeating the simple mantra, "Aum," with each inhalation and each exhalation. When she was too tired to concentrate, she enjoyed having me read a guided meditation on expanding perception beyond the body, which I had written for her. It is included at the end of this article for your use.

In the moments when her breathing became labored, she would silently affirm an intention I suggested, "I command my body to relax into Love." This helped her quiet the fearful thoughts and sensations. Together we invoked the remembrance that Divine Love is all around us and within us. Using these practices, Nora was able to soothe her nervous system and identify more and more with pure consciousness—so much that her fear diminished and she rejected all pain medication.

I don't know if she ever reached *samadhi*—the eighth limb, which Patanjali describes as the ultimate experience of unified awareness, when individual consciousness unites with the Divine Consciousness and all illusions of separateness dissolve. But I do know that Nora was at peace and experienced no struggle when she crossed over.



Conclusion

To be with someone at the time of death is as great an honor as it is to be with someone at the time of birth. By initiating meaningful conversation with open-ended questions and listening compassionately, we help clients navigate their way into a peaceful resolution of their personal beliefs. Drawing upon the teachings of the kleshas, we help them overcome the fear of death based on an attachment and identification with physical form. And through the eight-limb path, we help them establish a blissful awareness of true Self. **YTT**



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Jennie Lee Shares a Guided Meditation to Experience Your Spiritual Nature

Settle into a comfortable position, making sure that you feel supported and completely at ease. Allow your body to relax into stillness. Notice any places in the body that may be holding subtle tension and direct a gentle breath there now to help them relax. Resting your awareness on the breath, continue sending slow, full breaths into any places of discomfort. Tell yourself that it is now time to relax this body completely. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do. It is just time to rest. Be with the rhythm of the breath as it rises and falls. Feel the heaviness of the physical body as it releases into the support beneath it. The body is relaxed and heavy. Just being. The breath, rising and falling. Just breathing. Continue this for several minutes until you relax into a state of calm presence and easeful awareness. (Pause.)

Now allow your inner vision to turn upward to the point at the center of the forehead, the center of transcendent awareness known as the third eye. Keep your focus gently here on whatever you see within as you enter this sacred space of inner stillness. This is a place of peace. Here there is just awareness. Here, you exist in the flow of being-consciousness itself—being, breathing, expanding. Simply be here, now, relaxing into the preciousness of your own pure being. All holding, all resisting, all fear, melting away with each gentle breath. Here, in this quiet place of pure awareness, all restlessness subsides, all concerns dissipate. Here you know that you are not the sensations that rise and fall in the body. You are not the thoughts that come and go in the mind. You are not the feelings that ebb and flow in the heart. You are the spacious awareness that exists within and beyond all of these. Feel the freedom as you expand beyond these limitations. All identification with the outer self is fading into the background. You are the energy of spirit and of light. You are the light of pure consciousness. You are the energy of pure love. Rest here in this spacious, peaceful awareness of who you truly are.

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