

YOGA AND AGING

SHIFTING
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YOGA

Workshop: Moving From Darkness to Light with Yoga led by Patricia Walden
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Authors: Patricia Walden with Jarvis Chen

All of us have, at one time or another, experienced feelings of sadness, grief, despair, worthlessness, anxiety, fear, and anger. Though we may feel that our situation is unique, or that the depth of our suffering is beyond anything experienced by anyone else, in reality, these experiences are common to all. They are part of being human: part of the way the mind can respond to the sense of separation or isolation and to the impermanence of the things around us. For some of us, there are times when these emotions are so intense that they take over our whole identity and threaten to overwhelm our consciousness. We identify so strongly with our emotions that we become our emotions. This is when negative emotions become ingrained and established within us as depression or anxiety.

Yoga is fundamentally concerned with the causes of human suffering, and the means to end that suffering. Through the practice of the limbs of yoga- yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhi- we learn to distinguish. Between that which is transient and painful, and the true Self, which is pure, eternal, and free from suffering. Along the way, we may have to confront difficult emotions and feelings. The practice of yoga- which affects us on so many different levels- helps us to cultivate the friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity that we need to overcome our fears, anxieties, attachments, and aversions.

One of the most important insights of yoga philosophy is that the mind which experiences negative emotions is not the Self, but just another part of our embodiment, like an arm or leg or any other part of the body. Just as the eyes are the organ of sight or the ears are the organ of hearing, the mind is the organ of thinking, perceiving, and feeling. But we tend to view the mind differently because we identify so strongly with our thoughts. When the mind is in the grip of negative emotions, we say, "I am depressed," or "I am anxious". But if you had a broken leg, you would say, "My leg is broken," not "I am broken." So perhaps it is more accurate to say, "My mind is experiencing depression," or "my mind is experiencing anxiety."

What yoga offers us is a way to see ourselves clearly and to transcend the tyranny of the mind. Beyond this temporary body and the constant fluctuations of the mind, which so easily experience pain, dissatisfaction, and discontent, is the pure consciousness of the Self. This is our true nature- serene, benevolent, sorrowless, and whole- but so long as we identify with the mind that is swayed by like and dislike, success and failure, we cannot partake of it.