

Yoga for Grief & Loss

With Karla Helbert, LPC



“No Place Like OM”
Original art by Karla Helbert

Framework of the workshop

- Centering, Grounding, Setting intention

OM – Purnamadah Purnamidam Purnat purnamudachyate.

Purnasya Purnamadaya Purnamevavashisyate

OM, shanti, shanti, shanti

~

OM – That is whole, This is whole. When a portion of the whole is removed, what remains is whole.

Om, peace, peace, peace.

- What is yoga?
- Cultural perspectives v. Yogic perspectives of death, dying, grief, loss

Branches of Yoga

Hatha – yoga of the physical body

Jnana — yoga of the mind, of study, of intellect, scripture, yogic texts, other enlightening text, the path of the sage or scholar

Bhakti — yoga of devotion, seeing the Divine, the Oneness in everything

Karma — yoga of service, of selfless acts to serve others, volunteerism, acts of kindness, the path of self-transcending action

Raja — the “royal” path, based on the teachings of the 8 Limbs of yoga with meditation as a focal point of practice. The 8 *Limbs of Yoga*: the *yamas* (ethical standards), *niyamas* (self-discipline) asana, *pranayama*, *pratyahara* (sensory withdrawal), *dhyana* (meditation), *samadhi* (liberation)

Tantra — yoga of ritual, to experience what is sacred (actually is not all about sex!), appeals to those who enjoy ceremony and relate to the feminine principle of the cosmos, what yogis call *shakti*.

- How yoga and its philosophy moves us toward the realization of wholeness & peace
- The Breath: *Pranayama* *Prana* = Life Force *Yama* = Self-control, discipline
Deep Belly Breathing, 3 Part Yogic Breath, Alternate Nostril Breathing
- Asana: “A Steady, Comfortable Posture” ~ Patanjali. Never a competition or comparing, even with yourself. Cultivating Acceptance. Moving to your edge — “Comfortable discomfort.”
Adapt, adjust, accommodate.
- Yoga Nidra or “Yogic Sleep” = A conscious awareness while in a deep restful state
Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Deep Relaxation, Meditation
- Closing

Why Yoga for Grief?

In Sanskrit (the language of ancient India where yoga originated), the word *yoga* means “union.” We can think of this union as the connection of mind, body and spirit. The goal of yoga is to strengthen and make us aware of that connection. Side benefits include increased strength, flexibility, stress relief, and overall improvement of major body functions (digestion, elimination, immune system, circulation, regulation of emotions and sensory processing).

The Sanskrit word for the physical poses, which most people immediately associate with yoga, is *asana*. The word *asana*, which is usually interchangeable with “pose,” means “a comfortable, steady posture.” Comfortable, so that you are not in pain, that you are not pushing yourself past your limitations. Steady, so that you are firm and balanced, experiencing your own strength within the moment. At a place yoga teachers often refer to as your “edge,” a place where you are experiencing strength and challenge, keeping your mind focused on the here and now, but never inflicting harm on yourself.

The essential feature which separates yoga asana from any other form of exercise, is the focus on the breath and the mindfulness of movement combined with breath. In yoga, we return to the breath again and again. Generally, exhaling with any contraction and inhaling as we expand. The breath is always flowing with the movement of the body. We use the breath to help us deepen postures, as a focus point, and to energize, as well as relax the body and mind.

Yoga teaches us to be present to what is, to be accepting of where we are right now, in the present moment. It teaches us to adjust as we need to, in order to be comfortable, yet steady; to adapt and to accommodate in order to maintain our comfortable, steady posture as well as our peace of mind.

Yoga for a grieving person addresses the needs of the body, the mind and the spirit. Along with increasing circulation, strength, flexibility and bringing needed oxygen to the brain and bodily tissues, yoga is an excellent stress management tool. It can help us to be more spacious, to open our hearts, even when they are breaking, and to trust that we can find ourselves stronger and steadier than we believed we could be.

Yoga recognizes that grief is a process that demands ritual. It provides an ideal tool and a means to use ritual to manage our grief and lends itself to personalizing your own practice and ritual, weekly, daily or as needed. The very definition of yoga encourages the grieving person that he or she can connect with something outside the pain that isolates us. This fundamental axiom of yoga gives us hope and a concrete tool to assist us in bridging felt chasms between us and our loved ones, us and Spirit, us and nature, us and others. Yoga teaches us that we are perfect and whole as we are.

When a portion of this wholeness is removed, what remains is still whole and perfect.

~Translated from the Upanishads

Some Suggested Yoga Asanas and Practices for the Relief and Release of Grief

~ Mountain Pose — *Tadasana*. Energizes the whole body. Practicing complete stillness and full activity of all the major muscle groups while opening your heart, increasing breathing and strengthening your whole body. You can do this pose anywhere, anytime.

~ Sun Salutation — *Surya Namaskar* (any version you like) A flowing series of asanas combined with inhalation and exhalation. Energizing, strengthening, increases flexibility and circulation. Helps to perform this every day to establish a ritual and energize the body and mind, helps to counteract feelings of depletion and sadness.

~ Yogic Eye Movements — Helps to relieve eye strain and soreness (from crying, reading, staring at computer screens), also helps to balance both sides of the brain's hemisphere. This can be very helpful when processing thoughts and memories of traumatic grief (or other kinds of trauma) over time.

~ Cat/Cow — Strengthens and relaxes the spine. Can be done in a chair or on hands and knees.

Backbends

All back-bending postures increase flexibility and strengthen the back as well as create dynamic energy and open the chest wall as well as the heart chakra area. *Be aware that very often, backbending asanas are followed by strong emotional response in the heart and belly area.*

~ Cobra — *Bhujangasana* — This pose can help facilitate feelings of strength of self and openness toward others and the world, a posture of giving and receiving without judgment.

~ Bow Pose and Half Bow Pose — *Dhanurasana & Ardha Dhanurasana* — Half bow pose done from a hands and knees position is also a great balancing posture.

~ Camel Pose — *Ustrasana* Caveat: In my experience, this posture in particular can open emotions and release painful feelings stored in the chest and heart area.

~ Bridge Pose — *Setu Bhandasana* I also recommend a supported Bridge posture, using a yoga block at the sacrum. This posture “re-sets” the sacroiliac (SI) joint as well as the sympathetic nervous system, helping to facilitate a shift from stressed to calm. Hold this posture restfully for at least a minute, or longer if it's comfortable. To come out of this pose, lift the hips, remove the block gently and ease your lower back and hips back to the earth.

Provide a counter pose to balance the energy created in backbends with forward bending postures such as Child's Pose, Standing Forward Bend and all seated forward bends.

Standing and Balancing Poses

These asanas below help to increase strength, help us to increase our balance and flexibility. There are many others, these are my favorites.

~ Triangle — *Trikonasana* — Many yoga teachers say to imagine you are sandwiched between two panes of glass to keep correct alignment in this pose. How many of us feel that way in grief? This pose can help us transform that feeling to one of balance and strength.

~ Warrior I and II — *Virabhadrasana I, II, III* — This pose serves to remind that you *are* a warrior! Feel your own power. Emotionally, this posture helps to facilitate courage and bravery. Excellent for days when we are fearful that we cannot do this. Whatever “this” is.

~ Tree Pose — *Vrksasana* — Strong, beautiful, flexible, grounded, soaring—what kind of tree are you? This pose helps to create a feeling balance and harmony on all levels.

~ King Dancer — *Natarajasana* — Nataraja is another name for the Hindu God Shiva the destroyer. Paving the way for change, he is not only destruction in the natural sense but destroyer of old patterns, “stuckness.” Without Shiva, there can be no creation of anything new. Standing in the power of Shiva’s pose, we can find the strength and grace to move with changes as well as facilitate the ability to create change in ourselves.

~ Eagle — *Garudasana* — With this posture we can help facilitate the energy of the eagle within, able to serenely soar above in our mind’s eagle eye; focused, far-seeing, balanced.

All Spinal Twists

Spinal twists help increase spinal flexibility and relieve tension in the back and regulate digestion. Emotionally and spiritually, twisting to the left allows us to acknowledge our past. Twisting to the right encourages us to look toward our future. Coming back to the center after twisting toward each side, symbolizes recognition that we are living in the present moment, honoring what is.

Inversions

All inversions calm the brain and promote a soothing feeling that is noticeable after coming out of the pose. Hold the poses only as long as you feel comfortable.

~ Downward Facing Dog — *Adho Mukha Svanasana* Classic and widely recognized, the inverted “V” pose strengthens the arms and upper back as well as uses all major muscle groups. The energy of Downward Dog is submissive and accepting, counteracting anger and aggression.

~ Standing Forward Bend — *Uttanasana* Folding from standing (*tadasana*) at the hips, this pose encourages calmness and a deep awareness of the breath.

~ Handstand — *Adho Mukha Vrksasana* Including supported handstand using the wall, this pose gives an entirely different perspective to everything. The whole body is literally turned upside down. Calms the brain and promotes restfulness afterward. Many people feel afraid to do this pose, even with the support of the wall, but feeling afraid and doing it anyway can help us to cultivate this sense of bravery in other aspects of our lives.

Restorative Poses

~ Legs Up the Wall Pose — *Viparita Karani* With your bottom as close to the edge of the wall/floor as possible, support yourself with your arms and bring your feet straight up the wall. Lie back onto the floor. This pose is very helpful before bed. Relieves swelling in the feet and legs and encourages relaxation. Emotionally, legs up the wall helps us to feel a liberated relief, that we may not have to work so hard all the time, that we can put our burdens down and accept that we are supported (by others, by the Universe, by our own inner peaceful Selves).

~ Bound Angle Pose — *Supta Baddha Konasana* Bringing the soles of the feet together, lie back comfortably on a pillow or bolster. If your knees are higher than your hips place pillows, bolsters, rolled up towels or yoga blocks under your knees. Also helps to facilitate emotional restfulness.

~ Child’s Pose — *Balasana* A fetal position, big toes touching, knees as wide as comfortable, folding the upper body over the thighs with the arms where ever is most comfortable for you.

~ Salutation Seal or Heart Seal — *Anjali Mudra* can be done sitting or standing, hands in prayer position at the heart center, pressing both palms equally together, allowing a space at the center of the palms, representing openness of the heart, mind and spirit. *Mudra* = a symbolic hand gesture or posture in yoga that is thought to “seal” certain kinds of energies within the body/mind/spirit. There are many types of mudras. See resources section of handout.

Relaxation

Corpse Pose — *Savasana* Teachers say this is hardest pose of all. Allowing every single muscle in our bodies to fully relax. Most yoga classes end with *Savasana*.

Yoga Nidra (deep restfulness with conscious awareness)

Breathing Exercises — *Pranayama*

~ Noticing Your Breath

This is an exercise in simply noticing your breath. Becoming aware and mindful of your own breath as it moves in and out of your body.

To begin, sit in any comfortable position, on the floor or on a chair, with your spine long and straight but not stiff.

Find a comfortable position for your hands, either folded gently in your lap, or resting on your thighs or knees — palms up or down, whichever feels right to you.

You may close your eyes if that feels comfortable. If not, find a spot on the floor a few feet in front of you and allow your gaze to soften. As you sit, begin to notice the temperature of the air on your skin, notice any sounds you may hear within or outside the room. Begin to notice your body's weight as it is supported by the chair or the floor. Notice the feel of the floor or the chair under your sitting bones, under your legs. Notice the feel of the floor beneath your feet. Expand your awareness to noticing the sensations of your entire body without feeling the need to change anything, simply notice.

Now, begin to notice and follow the movement of your breath as it moves in and out of your body, as you inhale and exhale. As you inhale, notice the temperature and the vibration of the air as it flows through your nasal passages, down your throat and trachea, on its way into your lungs. Notice the different sensations of your belly, your ribs, your chest as they expand. As you exhale, notice the temperature of the air, the movement of the tiny hairs of your nose, the feeling of your lungs empty of air as it leaves your body. Simply notice these things and any other sensations that occur as you continue to breathe, easily and naturally, in and out. Simply notice your breath as it moves in and out of your body without the need to change anything at all.

Just Breathe.

Karla Helbert, LPC
© 2012 All Rights Reserved

~Simple Deep Breathing

Sit in a comfortable position with your hands relaxed, either in your lap or resting on your thighs or knees.

Relax your shoulders. Pull them up toward your ears, then roll them back and down, creating space between your shoulders and your ears. Allow your shoulders to relax.

Breathe normally in and out for a few breaths. Notice how your belly rises and falls easily as you breathe naturally. Your chest should not rise a great deal as you breathe in and out. If you like, you can place a hand on your abdomen to help notice the movement as you breathe in and out.

When you are ready, breathe in — and on the next exhalation, breathe out slowly your nose, counting to five. During this exhalation, tighten your abdominal muscles, and pull your diaphragm inward, toward your spine, squeezing all the excess air out of your body. When all the air is squeezed out, pause for two counts, and inhale slowly again, to the count of five, allowing your belly to expand as you breathe in.

If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes and continue to repeat this easy deep breath, 5-10 times.

If you find that your mind wanders during this exercise, don't worry. Simply bring your focus back to your breathing and begin your counts to five again.

You may find it helpful to think of a happy color (such as yellow or pink) or a calming color (like blue or green) as you breathe in and a dreary color (like grey or tan) as you breathe out.

You might choose to imagine breathing in a calming pleasant emotion such as peace or love as you inhale and breathing out stress or anxiety as you exhale.

As your awareness of your breath increases, it will become easier to practice your deep breathing without focusing so much of your attention on it.

~The Three-Part Breath

The three-part breath is a specific breathing technique used in yoga practices and can be very useful in times of stress or whenever you need to relax. This type of breathing triggers your parasympathetic nervous system or the “relaxation response” and allows your body and mind to more easily release stress and tension.

Practicing the three-part breath before bed can be very helpful with sleep issues — a common problem for bereaved people.

Again find your comfortable sitting position, allowing your hands to be relaxed. The three-part breath may also be done lying down. Practicing this breath while lying in bed before sleep is a good choice if you have difficulty clearing your mind and falling to sleep.

To begin, inhale. Then, with your mouth closed, exhale slowly through your nose as you did with the simple deep breathing exercises, using your abdominal muscles to pull your diaphragm inward. Squeeze all the stale, excess air completely out of your lungs.

As you prepare for your next inhalation, imagine your upper body as a large pitcher. As you inhale, you are filling the pitcher from bottom to top.

First, fill the diaphragm and lower belly, allowing them to expand and completely fill with air.

Next, continue to allow the pitcher to fill as you notice the lower, and then the upper, parts of the ribcage expanding outward and up.

Next, fill the upper lungs, noticing the chest expanding, the collar bones and shoulders rising, as the pitcher is filled completely to the top.

Pause for 2 counts.

Exhale in the opposite way, allowing the pitcher to empty from top to bottom.

As you slowly exhale, allow the shoulders and collar bones to slowly drop, the chest to deflate, the ribs to move inward. Again pull your diaphragm in, using it to completely empty the air from the bottom of the lungs.

Repeat the process, re-filling the pitcher slowly from bottom to top. Continue with the complete and full exhalations and inhalations, emptying and filling your pitcher.

The three parts are bottom, middle, top—expanding and contracting as you slowly and completely fill your body with fresh, cell-nourishing, life-giving oxygen and then slowly and completely empty it of carbon dioxide, toxins, and tension held in the body and mind.

As you increase your practice and the muscle movements become familiar, you may wish to add the counting of your breaths or your color visualizations. Ideally, the exhalations should be about twice as long as the inhalations. Initially, if you count to 5 as you inhale and exhale, gradually try to make your exhalations to count of 6, then 7, then 8, and so on until you feel more comfortable lengthening your exhalations.

If you feel dizzy or lightheaded while practicing the three-part breath, or any other breathing exercise, stop the practice immediately and allow your breathing to go back to normal. Sometimes if we are not used to a great deal of oxygen, the change can cause lightheadedness or dizziness. Know your own body and be mindful of the changes you notice.

Other *Pranayama* Practices

~ Alternate Nostril Breathing — *Nadi Suddhi*

Nadi = channel through which prana flows *Suddhi* = purification.

This purpose of this breath is to purify the energetic channels in our body. *Nadi Suddhi* also promotes relief of anxiety and helps to calm the mind and body.

To practice, make a *Vishnu* mudra with your right hand (Vishnu is the Hindu god of preservation). Stretching out the fingers of your right hand, fold in your index and middle fingers. You will use your extended thumb and ring fingers to alternately close off and release your right and left nostrils as you practice *Nadi Suddhi*.

Exhale fully and then inhale through both nostrils. Close off the right nostril with your thumb, and exhale through the left nostril.

Keeping the right nostril closed, inhale through the left nostril. Close the left nostril with the extended ring finger, and exhale through the right nostril.

Keeping the left nostril closed, inhale through the right. Close the right nostril and exhale through the left, inhale through the left.

Close the left and exhale on the right, inhale through the right. Close the right nostril, exhale through the left, inhale through the left. Continue for as long as you wish.

~ Conquerer Breath — *Ujjayi Pranayama*

Known for the soft hissing sound the breath makes as you direct the breath over the back of your throat, this breath practice helps to slow the breathing, focuses awareness and, allows for a smooth flow of breath.

To practice *ujjayi*, exhale fully. Inhale and as you exhale, open your mouth wide and make a whispering “HAAAAA” sound, as you exhale. Repeat several times. When ready to try *ujjayi* through the nose, slowly close your mouth during the “haaaaaaaa,” shifting the exhalation to the nose. This breath is also called the “unspoken mantra.”

Meditation practices — *Dhyana*

Meditation is helpful for reduction of stress and anxiety and can help us to become more aware of the messages we send ourselves. This practice will help you learn to become more aware of how many thoughts come into your mind at any given moment, and to become more adept at noticing them when they come at points throughout your day, when you aren't engaged in practicing meditation. Over time, this practice can help you become better at not getting involved, or hooked into, every thoughts that might come at any given moment.

There are many different meditation techniques and none is necessarily better than the others, it depends on individual preference. Because the breath is always there with you, I suggest using the breath as a returning point. I suggest labeling the thoughts as they come because it helps us to notice them more easily when they come during non-meditation time, and also because labeling the thoughts help us break self-identification with our thoughts. You are not your thoughts and you don't have to believe everything you think. You can control how and what you think.

I suggest starting with a small goal of 2 minutes a day and work up slowly, adding a minute on to your time weekly. Use a timer so that you don't feel compelled to check the clock.

Turn off your phone and other technological devices that could interrupt you. Find a comfortable spot—you can sit in a chair or on the floor. If you sit on the floor, you might want to use a pillow to sit on. If you choose to sit in a chair, let your feet be flat on the floor. Allow your hands to rest in your lap on or your knees in a comfortable position. Allow your spine to be long and tall, but not stiff. Roll your neck from side to side to release tension. Using the three-part breath, take a few deep, cleansing breaths deep into your belly. Allow your breathing to return to normal.

Then, simply begin to notice. Notice how the floor feels beneath your feet. Notice the feeling of your body at the points where it rests either on the floor or against the chair, how your clothes feel on your body. Notice the feeling of the material of your clothing against your skin. Notice whether you feel any tension in any area of your body. Simply notice. Begin to notice the temperature of the air, notice how it feels on the parts of your body that are uncovered. You don't have to do anything to change, just notice. Begin to notice the sounds that you hear around you; in the room, outside the room. Just noticing. Notice any sounds you may become aware of within your own body—again, not having to change anything, simply noticing. Begin to bring your awareness to your breath. Notice how it feels as it moves in and out of your body, not changing anything, just being with what is and noticing. Allow your attention to remain with your breath, in and out, notice the temperature of the air as it enters your nose, moves down your trachea and into your lungs. Notice that it is warmer and more moist as it gently leaves your body. Notice the movements of your abdomen, your ribs and your chest as your breath moves in and out of your body. Just breathing and noticing.

Continue to simply stay with your breath. If you wish, you can count your breaths, in and out, 1, in and out 2, and so on to ten and then return to 1. You might want to use color visualizations with your breath—imagine breathing in a color that you associate with a feeling state you would like to achieve, such as peace or calm, and then breathing out a color you associate with a feeling you would like to be rid of—fear, stress, anxiety, etc. You might want to use a mantra with your in/out breaths. On an in breath thinking, “I am...” on an out breath, “calm.” Some other examples might be:

In breath: “All is...”

Out breath: “well.”

In breath: “I am...”

Out breath: “Loved.”

You get the idea. Come up with whatever works for you to help you stay with your breath.

Eventually, you will notice you are no longer aware of your breath and instead, you are thinking about something else. This is ok, and it will happen. When you notice a thought (or an emotion), simply label it and then bring your attention back to your breath. You don’t have to get involved or take the thought or feeling to the next place it might go. Simply label it and come back to your breath, knowing that if you really want to think or feel that thing, it will be there when you are finished with your practice for the day.

Label your thoughts and emotions with what they are: thinking, worrying, planning, doubting, judging, fantasizing, anxiety, fear, impatience, irritation, etc. And then bring your attention back to your breath. “I’m thinking”...come back to the breath...“I’m planning”...come back to the breath...“Anxiety”... come back to the breath...“Judging”...come back to the breath.

Continue in this way until your time is completed for the day’s practice.

After your timer goes off, take a moment to notice how you are feeling. Take a couple of deep breaths and go on with your day.



A Short Yoga Flow to Help With Stress & Tension

Begin on the floor on your knees, sitting back on your heels

Bring your hands to your heart center (*Namaste*)

Take 3-4 cleansing breaths

Inhale arms up to “standing” on your knees, arms reaching upward

Exhale into Child’s Pose

Come to a table top position (hands and knees, neck neutral)

Inhale Cow

Exhale into Downward Facing Dog

Inhale back to Cow pose

Exhale to Child’s Pose

Inhale up to knees, arms reaching upward

Exhale back onto your heels

Repeat 2-3 times as desired

Hands return to Namaste at the end of your flow

(Knees, child, cow, dog, cow, child, knees)

The Wholeness of Grief
by Karla Helbert, LPC

When he was three months old, my firstborn child was diagnosed with a choroid plexus carcinoma, a rare, aggressive brain tumor that grows on the structure inside the brain that makes cerebral spinal fluid. Two weeks after the initial resection of the tumor, and two more subsequent surgeries to drain fluid from his brain, he endured his first chemotherapy treatment. Three days following the administration of the chemo, a CT scan revealed that his brain was completely destroyed. The scan showed no healthy tissue. Doctors called it “total neurological devastation.” If somehow, after 70 weeks of chemotherapy, more surgery and radiation treatment, he were to defy all odds and survive the tumor, the neurological devastation would ensure that my son would have very little, if any, independent functioning. The likelihood of survival was minimal. We didn’t want him to endure any more suffering caused by chemotherapy or excessive surgeries. We chose to discontinue treatment of the tumor and bring him home to love him, take care of him and make him as comfortable as possible. Exactly six months after the diagnosis, my beautiful baby boy died at home with his father and me, our arms enfolding him. During those months and after, we endured grief upon grief. We experienced intense pain, sadness, and fear, but there were also beautiful moments spent with him, peaceful and sacred times. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been granted those months with him, to have experienced the joy and wonder of his arrival in this world and to have had the deep honor of being there with him as he left. The pain and sadness are still with me. Along with all the rest of who I am, I will always be a bereaved mother. I have learned, though, that one can travel from the dark depths of grief into a place of warmth and light, where it is possible not only to survive the pain, but to thrive.

During times of great grief, we look for anything that can bring any small comfort. Among other things, I am also a student of yoga, which has been a source of peace to me in some very dark times. One of my favorite yoga practices is that of chant—the repetition of a mantra—words repeated over and over, to calm the mind and lift the spirit. One of my most beloved chants is a verse from the Upanishads, sacred texts written thousands of years ago in the Sanskrit language. Some revered teachers have said that if all other verses from all sacred texts were lost, they could all be re-born and re-written from this one verse, known as the *purnamidah*. These are the words:

*OM, purnamadah purnamidam purnaata purnamudachyate
purnasya purnaamadaya purnameva vashishyate
Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*

The verse is translated to mean:

*This is whole and complete, that is whole and complete. This and that are whole and complete. From wholeness comes wholeness. When a portion of wholeness is removed, that which remains continues to be whole and complete.
Peace, Peace, Peace.*

The message of the *purnamidah* is that wholeness, fullness and completeness enfolds us all. All beings, souls, things, objects, planets, trees, stars, rocks, animals, all energy and all matter are part of the wholeness. Nothing can be separated from that wholeness or completeness. In this

belief, there is no death, no separation. The notion of separateness is false. All is One. A little bit of what is whole and complete cannot be broken or taken away from that essential wholeness.

I chanted the *purnamidah*, which I learned in a yoga workshop years before, to my pregnant belly. I sung it as a lullaby to my son after his birth, during his illness, and also after he died. I knew the translation of the chant, but had never really given it much deep thought. One night, about a month after his funeral, deep in grief, I was soaking in the tub, which I often did. Hot tears mixing with hot water, the big, deep cradle of the Victorian tub was one place I felt a small bit of relief. As I soaked that night, I began to sing the *purnamidah*. As I cried and sang, I could feel the words, the sound vibrations, ancient and comforting, begin to take on a new significance, a depth of meaning and substance I had not fully experienced until that moment. In an instant, a pause, a space between sound and breath, I had a direct experience with the immense truth of those words. I understood it on several levels at once. It was as if multiple layers of knowing fell one on top of the other into my brain and into my spirit. Suddenly, the literal interpretation of the words, as they applied to me, led me to comprehend the immense truth of the words on many different levels. I understood it literally, spiritually, existentially. When my child was inside my body, he was part of the whole that was me, and when, through his birth, he was removed from me, he was, on his own, a whole and complete being. I also remained whole and complete. I was whole and he was whole, yet we were still connected on a physical level through DNA and physical molecules. The food I ate, the air I breathed had become part of him. We were also connected on a soul level to each other, mother to child, person to person, soul to soul. Those connections could never be broken, he would always be a part of me.

After his death, that is still true. I no longer experience his physical form co-existing here with the physical form that is me, but the connection between us remains. Even in death, he cannot be removed from me. When I understood truly that he was not separate from me, even in death, I also suddenly understood the concept on a Universal level. I understood that as this was true of my child and me, and it was also true of us all. We are all connected. We are all made of the same matter, from the same source. We are connected to each other and to that source from which we can never be removed. Whether it is understood as a physical matter, that we are all made of the same ancient stardust, or on a more spiritual level, we are all pieces of the same. No matter where we go or what we do, we are always connected to that wholeness, and cannot be removed from it and through that we are also connected to each other, and to all of creation. The threads of connection are ever-present, in our daily lives, with those we love, on our shared planet with its interconnected eco-systems, in our place in the Universe, on physical, spiritual and energetic levels. We are part of the same whole.

Each person's journey through grief and loss is highly individual, yet all grieving people are connected by the shared experience of the pain, the aloneness, the chaos, the knowledge of what it is to be shaken to your core. Regardless of a person's spiritual or religious beliefs, grief is always a crisis of the spirit. My spiritual self was deeply shaken by the death of my child. I am still re-building that part of me. I was fortunate in that moment in my bathtub to have had the experience of knowing that I was held, even in my deep pain, in wholeness, connected to my child, and also to something bigger than myself or my grief. Mother Teresa once said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." Peace can easily be forgotten in the midst of grief. In that moment, I remembered (and re-remembered) that peace. My moment of remembering that we belong to each other, that we are all part of the same wholeness,

was a gift. My grief is still present, but I try to remember the gift of that moment. Even when I don't feel connected to anything at all, I can remember the truth of that experience and know that simply because I cannot feel it in the now, does not mean that my connection to that wholeness does not exist. I don't always have to feel it to know it is true. That is what is meant by faith.

In the midst of grief and pain, it can feel next to impossible for any of us to believe that we are connected to anything at all, much less to something whole and perfect. Many days, weeks or months may pass without our feeling part of something whole. If you are grieving and bereaved, sometimes, holding on to even the thinnest thread of hope is all that you can do. If it is the hope that you can get through the day, or even through the next moment, hope is never a small thing. The act can feel very difficult, but reaching out to those from whom you gain support, with whom you feel connected, will help you to feel less alone, will help you grow the hope you need to sustain yourself and bolster you on your way towards healing.

If you are a person who knows or loves someone who is grieving, reach out to that person. Be there to listen, to offer support. You don't have to know the right thing to say or do. There is no right thing. Each instance of caring, each phone call, every card, every visit, each moment of sitting with, being with, talking, not talking, holding hands, being there—offers a tangible thread of connection. Each act represents a thread of hope for wholeness. When someone is alone, confused, angry, desolate, desperate, broken, bereft—one thread of hope can be a lifeline.

All of us are part of the ultimate connection of wholeness, even when we don't feel it, or when we have forgotten that truth. There are so many grieving people and families in need of a reminder that we are all infinitely connected. That connection can be strengthened by family, community, friends, support groups. If you are grieving, finding a friend or family member who can be there for you, or attending a support group where others are experiencing similar things, can be incredibly helpful. Individual therapy with a grief specialist can also be very useful in finding your way back to wholeness. If you are grieving, reach out for help and support. If you love someone who is grieving, reach out to that person. Now is when they need you the most.

Every person's grief is different, every person's path toward healing is different. Finding, reconnecting, and remembering your way to wholeness is part of the process. It is important to know that you are not alone and that there is help. Taking the first step to finding your own path is an accomplishment. Perhaps simply reading this article is your first step to reconnecting to wholeness. Remember to be gentle with yourself during the process and take the time you need to find your way. You are not alone. We are all connected.

Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.

Om Peace, Peace, Peace.

This article was first published online at <http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/qrt/grief-loss-child-yoga-chanting/>

Karla Helbert, LPC
© 2012 All Rights Reserved

Suggested Reading

Broad, W. J. (2012). *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Chodron, P. (2008). *Comfortable with Uncertainty*. (Hilburn Sell, E., Ed.). Boston, MA: Shambala Press.

Hanson, R. & Mendius, R. (2009). *Buddha's Brain, The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, & Wisdom*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Helbert, K. (2012). *Finding Your Own Way to Grieve: A Creative Activity Workbook for Kids and Teens on the Autism Spectrum*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Helbert, K. (2010). *The Wholeness of Grief*. Retrieved from: <http://www.karlhelbert.com/the-wholeness-of-grief.html>

Helbert, K. (2011). *Breathing Lessons*. Retrieved from: <http://www.karlhelbert.com/breathing-lessons.html>

Helbert, K. (2011). *Noticing Your Thoughts*. Retrieved from: <http://www.karlhelbert.com/noticing-your-thoughts.html>

Hirschi, G. (2000). *Mudras: Yoga in Your Hands*. York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Reiser Publications.

Levine, S & Levine, A. (1982). *Who Dies?: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*. New York, NY: Random House Publishers.

Miller, S.(1999). *Finding Hope When a Child Dies: What Other Cultures Can Teach Us*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Shapiro, E. & Shapiro, D. (2011). *Be the Change: How Meditation Can Transform You & the World*. New York, NY: Sterling Publishing.

Shapiro, F. (2001). *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Rama S., Ballentine, R., & Hymes, A. (1998). *The Science of Breath: A Practical Guide*. Honesdale, PA: The Himalayan Institute Press.

Patanjali. (1990). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. (Satchidanada, S. Ed.). Buckingham, VA: Integral Yoga® Publications.

Weintraub, A. (2012). *Yoga Skills for Therapists: Effective Practices for Mood Management*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.

McGonicgal, K.(2006). *Interview with Molly Kenny: Yoga Therapy for Grief and Hospice*. Yoga Therapy in Practice. Online at: <http://www.yogachicago.com/sep06/yogagrief.shtml>.

Suggested Listening

Berezan, Jennifer. (2001). *Returning*. Hypogeum, Republic of Malta: Edge of Wonder Records.

Das, Krishna. (2001). *Breath of the Heart*. Los Angeles, CA: Karuna Music.

Premal, Deva. (1997). *The Essence*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Miten & PRABHU Music.

Roth, Gabrielle. (1996). *Stillpoint*. [Gabrielle Roth & the Mirrors]. Red Oak, NJ: Raven Music

Van Dyke, Deborah. (2001). *Travelling the Sacred Sound Current*. Vancouver, B.C.: Sound Current Music.

Wah!. (2001). *Savasana*. Los Angeles, CA: Wah! Music.

~~~~~

*OM Asatoma satgamaya. Tamasoma jyotir gamaya. Mrityorma amritamgamaya.*

OM shanti, shanti, shanti.

Lead us from unreal to the real. Lead us from the darkness to the light.

Lead us from the fear of death to the knowledge of immortality.

Peace, peace, peace.