

## The Courage to Heal; The Courage to Change

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The issue of courage is often apparent when confronted with a serious problem or illness. Fear, the other side of the courage coin, is an emotion that very often limits our potential to heal, to change, and to be who we really are.

Healing is a very complex, multi-dimensional process that involves our mind, body and spirit. Receiving a treatment or remedy is relatively easy compared to the work that is required for a true healing. However, we know intuitively that to make superficial changes is only a short-term fix. So why don't we make the profound changes that we know we need? Often we fear change, opting to maintaining a known unhappiness rather than seeking a possible greater happiness.

Sometimes these fears are partly real, such as those of an abused spouse who cannot yet leave their home. Sometimes these fears are the product of the mind and have very little to do with reality. We have all encountered others who stop themselves with clearly unfounded fears. And yet, when it comes to ourselves, it's so hard to work our way out of such fears.

Yoga philosophy and practice provides some insights into this subject. The philosophy gives us an understanding, and a yoga practice gives us the direct experience of ourselves and of personal and universal truths. The experience of "insight" is a non-linguistic realization of these truths.

Yoga philosophy (and other Eastern traditions) suggests that consciousness is composed of five different states, called vrttis, or versions. The first, pramana, is real perception or correct knowledge. The second, viparyaya, is illusion based on false perception. The third, vikalpa, is imagination, which is a creation of the mind without substance. The fourth, nidra, is sleep, and the fifth is smrti, or memory. This classification suggests that many of the products of our mind are based on misperceptions and imagination. Memory can hold on to, and further distort, misperceptions and imaginations. Many of our fears are born of such inaccurate information.

Furthermore, yoga philosophy suggests that there are five types of afflictions of the mind, or klesas. These are 1) lack of spiritual wisdom, 2) egoism or individualism, 3) attachment to pleasure, 4) aversion

to pain, and 5) holding onto life. These afflictions can be thought of as the source of fear. The courage to face our fears can come from practicing the opposite of these afflictions! These include, 1) gaining spiritual wisdom, 2) connecting to a community and giving of oneself, 3) simplifying one's life, 4) making a commitment to a path, and 5) living in the now. Let's expand upon this "how to" list of ways to enhance courage:

1) Gaining spiritual wisdom. This does not require participating in organized religion, though it may. If one defines spirituality as a sense of being connected to a greater whole, or force, then even gardening, or enjoying the arts, can be a source of spirituality. Reading great works of philosophy can also be inspiring (see suggested reading list below)

2) Connecting to a community and giving of oneself. Our society is based on a strong commitment to individualism. While that protects our freedoms, it also lends toward a sense of isolation. Corporate America, which demonstrates progressive loss of humanistic values, has moved from individualism to selfishness, greed and lack of responsibility. Connecting to others, whether via some organization, support group or even a yoga class, helps one feel less isolated. Giving of oneself, through charity or volunteering makes one a bit more appreciative of what we have, and sometimes puts our fears in perspective.

3) Simplifying one's life is a way of rebalancing the fear of loss of objects and loss of control. Making our lives simpler, by getting rid of the things that control us, creates a lightness of spirit and frees up energy to invest in meaningful activities.

4) Pleasure is short-term by its very nature. Even those with wealth do not have lives of pure pleasure. Life is life, which by its very nature has periods of pain and pleasure. Making a commitment to a path is a way to place life in the context of a journey, with its pains and pleasures. A commitment to self, to growth replaces short-term pleasure with long-term significance.

5) Holding onto life is based on the fear of death and fear of the future. So many of us do not enjoy the "now" due to a preoccupation with the future. However, in truth, the future is a function of our imagination. It does not yet exist, and cannot be

predicted. All of us have positive and negative events in our lives that we could have never predicted, some of these events life-altering. Sometimes a serious illness or accident of oneself or a loved one does wake a person out of the illusion of the future. Sometimes we put our lives on hold, planning to do important things tomorrow. The fear that tomorrow won't come, and therefore not having time to do meaningful things, is very real. Focusing on the now, making sure that every day is meaningful, helps reduce the anxiety of not having a future.

Sometimes, fears are so ingrained that professional help is needed. There are many styles of psychotherapy, some very efficient, that can help one break out of the loop of fear. Journalling (see article in previous Yoga Living) is a way to work through our fears in a safe way. A yoga practice, focusing on the classic eight limbs, can help one work through fear as well.

#### **For More Information**

- O See my related articles on Alternative Medicine, Journaling and Listening to Pain.
- O The Pulitzer Prize winning book, Denial of Death by Ernest Becker (New York: MacMillan, 1972 (1997), ISBN 0684-832-402) offers profound insights into what lies behind many of our fears.
- O The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck (New York: Touchstone, 1978 (1997) ISBN 0684-847-248) is a highly popular book about personal authenticity and discipline.
- O Many Masters, Many Lives. by Brain Weiss MD (Simon & Schuster, 1988, ISBN 0671-657-860) offers a very interesting story and perspective on the topic of past and future lives.
- O Dr. Cheikin offers Workshops on Journalling, Chronic Pain, Weight Management and other topics, and classes in yoga, meditation, and other styles of personal health and wellness. Call for information or to be placed on our mailing list.

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