

OF THE MANY CRISIS CALLS I've received, one in particular stands out. A good friend had awakened one morning to a note on her pillow: Her husband was leaving her for another woman. Though the marriage had been rocky at best, she was devastated. "Why did this happen to me?" she sobbed. "I just want to be married again!"

When things fall apart, as they did for my friend, it's tempting to try to piece them together as quickly as possible and get your old life back. Yet when you do that, you miss what a crisis can offer: an awakening to what's not working in your life, an opening to the potential for change.

It's human nature to avoid the emotional roadblocks that pepper the path to spiritual maturity, to seek instead the slow and steady pace of the ordinary traveler. Yet reaching higher spiritual ground requires an extraordinary traveler. It demands the kind of sea change that arrives at key junctures and can transport you to a higher level of spiritual functioning.

A spiritual initiation—an exceptionally difficult life passage that shakes your foundations and makes you question your purpose—is just this sort of sea change. It's an opportunity disguised as loss; a chance to strengthen the thread of awareness that connects the outer part of your being to the inner, to descend deeper into the soul.

As a psychologist, yoga instructor, and yoga therapist, I have helped many clients through initiations. Going through this process, I've noticed that yoga, which helps reveal the workings of the mind, provides tools to help you navigate an initiation and jump-start your progress on the spiritual path.

LOST IN TRANSITION

Spiritual initiations are transitional; they leave you between worlds. Like a snake undergoing a brief period of blindness after shedding its skin, you're temporarily sightless: You're neither your old self nor a new one. This amorphous, transitional feeling can be challenging—and it can manifest itself in all areas of your life.

A client of mine in her late 50s who had been on the verge of a life change for years came to me with acute anxiety and insomnia. During class, I noticed she moved through the transitions between



The Awakening

A personal crisis can be a gift on the path to spiritual maturity. Learn to accept this gift and you'll feel reborn.

poses with her eyes closed. She similarly "spaced out" during life transitions, hurrying through or avoiding them, which built up internal pressure. The mission during spiritual initiations is to slow down and look straight into your soul, and to root out the *kleshas*, the afflictions of spiritual ignorance that can block your progress. (For more about *kleshas*, see "Klesha Karma" on page 118.)

HEEDING THE CALL

The feeling that your life is coming undone is the call to awakening that begins an initiation. The

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call can take many forms: illness or accident, betrayal by a spouse, the death of a loved one, an urge to enter psychotherapy or to begin a period of self-examination, the recognition of an unhealthy situation or relationship. This is an opportunity to transcend the lament "Why is this happening to me?" and to seek a greater purpose behind the crisis. During this acute phase you'll most likely experience a *klesha* called *asmita*, which is a disruption of the ego, or sense of "I am," and a tendency to cling to old definitions of Self: the Provider, the Responsible One, the Caretaker, the Black Sheep, the Boss, the Martyr, and so on. When you answer the call to awakening, you leave behind, at least for a while, this familiar territory and may feel unmoored.

You can counter this instability by centering yourself with restorative yoga and by connecting with your breath, either through formal pranayama (breath control) or by simply focusing on the inflow and outflow of your breath. Imagine that thread of awareness connecting your outer

mind with your deepest inner Self; with each exhalation, descend further down that thread of awareness into the center of your being. This growing connection to your deepest Self will help during the most difficult parts of your awakening.

FACING THE VOID

As you leave your unhealthy world behind, you may experience a profound sense of separation. This letting go has a parallel in your yoga practice; you may need to temporarily relinquish your usual form of yoga in exchange for a more grounding, internally reflective practice.

One of my yoga therapy clients, diagnosed with cancer, struggled to maintain his vigorous vinyasa practice while exhausted from chemotherapy. If he couldn't practice vinyasa, he felt, it wasn't worth practicing at all. Gradually he realized his harsh mental attitude was interfering with his recovery. He began a restorative practice and discovered that its quiet and calm gave him needed support, helping him mobilize his inner resources toward healing.

[con-verge] - v. come to or towards the same point

in the end, the two became one

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This is where another klesha, *dvesha* (an aversion to pain), comes into play. Your challenge now is to take a good look at the way you've been living and to weed out old habits and beliefs that once fortified your ego but no longer serve you: an abusive or lifeless relationship, an addiction, a history of powerlessness, overwork, or the

A spiritual initiation is like a carving knife—it cuts and pierces, but also refines and reshapes you.

glare of self-hatred, for example. As you do this, you're left to face the great canyon of emptiness that lies underneath. While it can be frightening, facing this inner void clears the slate, making way for change and regeneration.

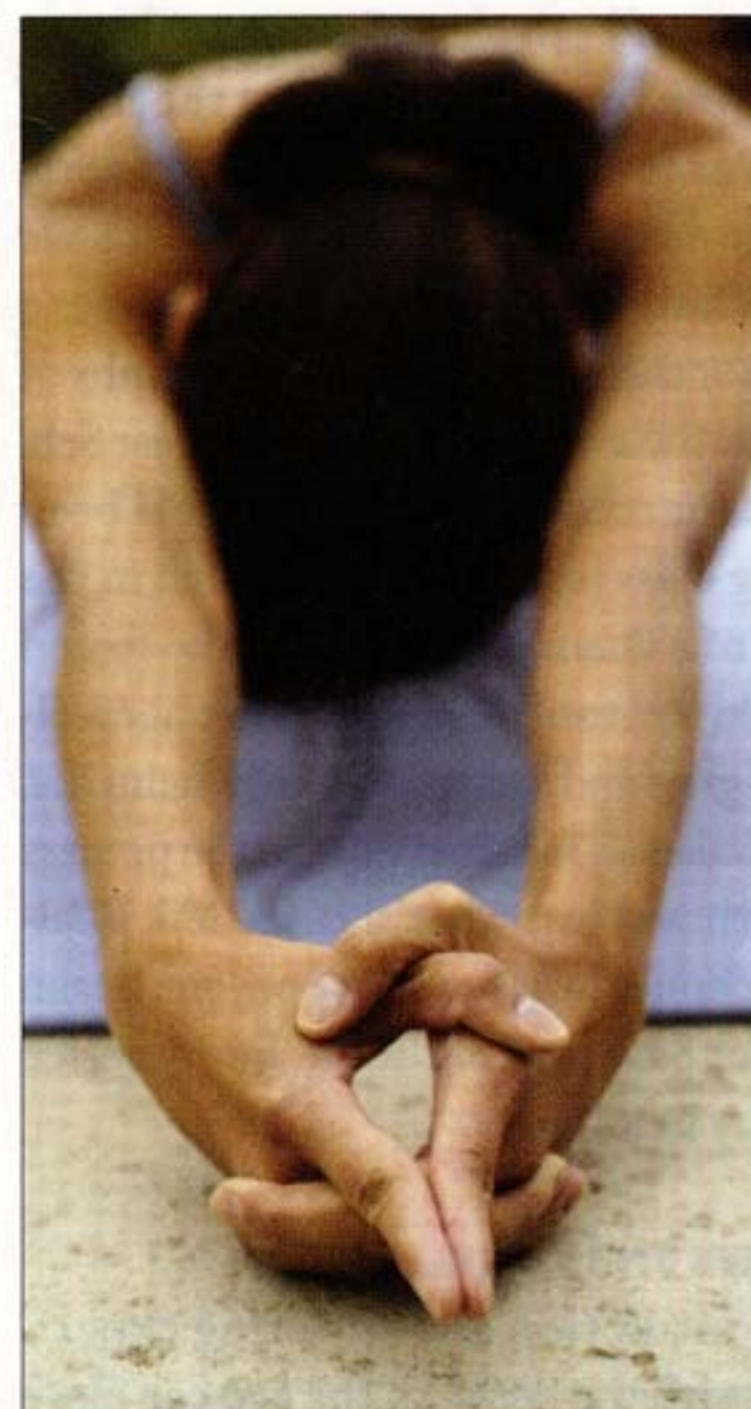
To renew and conserve energy, you can cultivate *pratyahara* (a turning inward of the senses), which is the fifth of the eight limbs of yoga. Pratyahara helps you sit with pain without being consumed by it or overidentifying with it.

EXPLORING THE DARK SIDE

Now you're ready for an extraordinary pilgrimage into the depths of your own Underworld. Here, you simultaneously suffer the death of who you thought you were and encounter your shadow side: the parts you keep hidden, the qualities, behaviors, and motivations that may be difficult for you to acknowledge.

The tasks of facing the Underworld and your shadow provoke the klesha called *abhinivesha*, which is a fear of death and the tendency to cling to life. Though painful, the death of the ego is essential so that, like the mythical phoenix, you can rise from the ashes and come to life again in a more mature form. Suffering and death break through the defensive structures that frame our personalities, so we can get closer to our souls.

To emerge intact from this stage, it's helpful to explore *samadhi* (the eighth limb of the yogic path), a total absorption with



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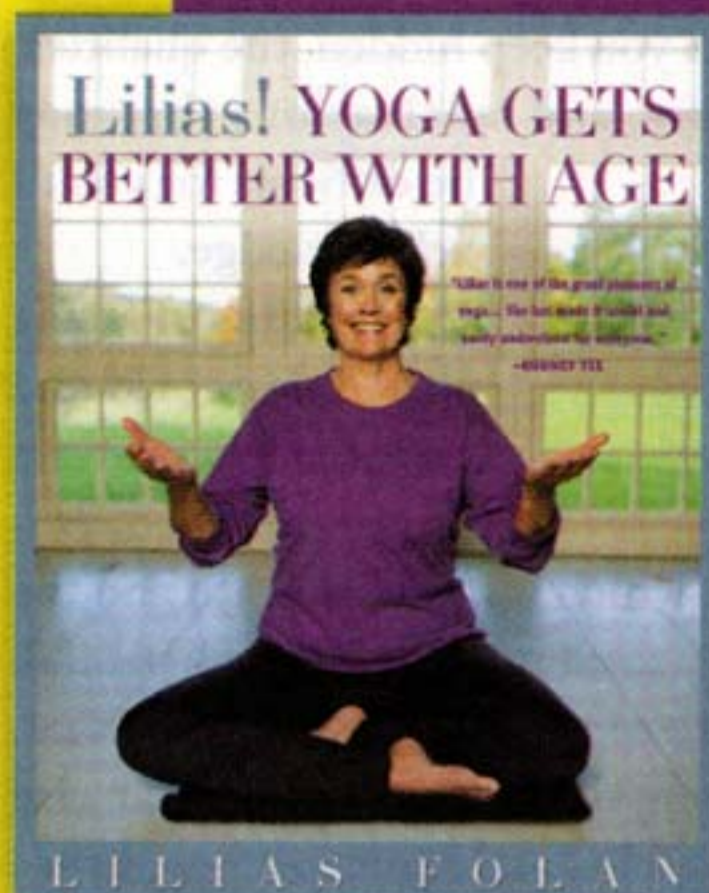
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klesha karma

According to the Yoga Sutra (Book II), there are five kleshas, or afflictions, that, like clever sorcerers, can knock you off balance or sidetrack you in your quest for spiritual evolution.

AVIDYA The inability to see things for what they are; this causes you to mistake transient, ego-related matters for permanent, soul-related ones.

ASMITA The tendency to overidentify with your ego; this keeps you from connecting with your soul.

RAGA The flame of desire that causes addiction to pleasure; this discourages you from leaving your comfort zone for more evolved territory.

DVESHA The aversion to pain; this creates a quicksandlike cycle of misery and self-hatred that sucks you under and suffocates your will to evolve.

ABHINIVESHA The fear of death or a clinging to life; this dilutes your focus and interferes with your ability to experience the spiritual freedom that is the goal of yoga. B.F.

the Divine, or deepest Self. You can do this most effectively in Savasana (Corpse Pose), which normally comes at the end of a yoga practice. All too often, we short-change Savasana, thinking perhaps we can't afford to lie and rest; yet it creates a space for the blending of all eight limbs of yoga for the awakening of our deepest Self. A student recently confessed she'd been leaving class just before Savasana; in the midst of a traumatic breakup, she feared it would feel too “deathlike,” that her feelings of grief and loss would overwhelm her. But Savasana's full surrender to the process of death was just what she needed. Realizing it could help her move on, she began to enter Savasana earlier in her practice and stay in it longer.

FINDING THE OASIS

The contraction and suffering experienced with the death of the ego can close your heart and make you feel dry, barren, and exiled. This may seem like a spiritual wasteland, but it's one of the richest and most verdant paths of your awakening. Although you might not yet see it, the seeds of your new self are sprouting



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beneath the soil of your awareness. This is often when the klesha *avidya* (ignorance or delusion) is stimulated: You can't see what you'll grow into. You may also have trouble recognizing the last stage of your transition for what it is—a passage through the birth canal.

Instead, *avidya* compels you to rush into your fledgling spiritual self, to restructure your life, to build a new ego and end this seemingly endless period of waiting. To contain the tension of waiting for your new form, you can call upon *dhyana* (meditation). *Dhyana* teaches patience, so you can sit with whatever is present and act in the context of mindfulness. It helps you tune in to the voice of the soul and let that voice guide you.

BEGINNING AGAIN AND AGAIN

Finally, after all this waiting, you move through the birth canal and are reborn. This is when the klesha called *raga* (attachment to pleasure) gets stirred up. Now that you've moved away from suffering and death, you're loath to reexperience it. You may rush to form an attachment to your new identity. Yet if you're interested in spiritual development, you don't want to get too comfortable. If spiritual maturity is truly your priority, you must be ready to leave the comfort zone and begin again and again, as many times as it takes. Don't get distracted by the siren song of *raga*.

A spiritual initiation is like a carving knife—it cuts and pierces, but also refines and reshapes you. Initiations allow you to reinvent yourself completely, to give yourself over to something greater. They are windows through which you can glimpse who you really are and what's possible for you. They're not just an emotional necessity; they're a spiritual imperative.

As you learn to recognize and accept the extraordinary power of change and develop the art of surrender, you'll be rewarded with an awakening of the natural alignment between body, mind, and spirit that already exists within you. ■

A doctor of psychology, Bo Forbes is also a yoga teacher and yoga therapist in Boston. For more information about her classes and workshops, visit www.elementalyoga.com.

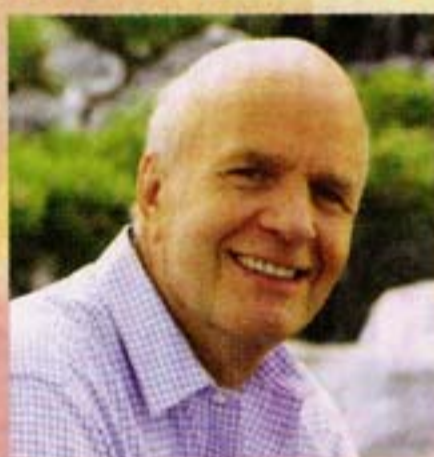
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