

A Yogi in the Real World

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A letter to students, September 2001

This was written a few days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I have retained the language, even though it was so time-sensitive. It addresses the issues of that moment, while looking at the larger questions that every yogi must face.

What Should I Do?

It is terrible. It is horrible. It is real — the World Trade Center towers are gone, as are so many human beings. I practice ahimsa, non-harming, but clearly there are others in the world who do not. How can I move through this world as a yogi? What can I think and say, what should I do, how do I deal with my feelings? This is the question that Arjuna asked Krishna in the Bhagavadgita.

Coincidentally, I was teaching from the Bhagavadgita when we got the news on Tuesday morning. We went from the text to life itself, and found that they are the same. Abhyasa (continued practice, diligent and consistent) and vairagya (letting go, again and again) will keep you sane in this crazy world, peeling the layers of the kleshas, the root contractions that cause all your suffering:

1. When you feel abhinivesha (fear, terror or anxiety), look into it. You find aversion – afraid you might have to experience something you don't want to experience.
2. Dvesha (aversion, shock or horror) are covering an unrecognized desire– you want it to be a different way. It isn't, but you want it to be.
3. Peel away raga (the feeling of desire) instead of indulging it, you find your own limited and dependent sense of self – how you construct your sense of “who-you-are” and “how-you-are” by watching the landscape (tracking what others around you are doing and by how they are feeling).
4. Peer closely into that limited sense of self (asmitaa), you find a feeling of not being enough, an inadequacy that you can never make up for, no matter what you do or say – because you do not know the true reality at the deeper level of your own being.
5. Look inward, past that foundational not-knowing (avidyaa), and you find that you are consciousness, the fully expanded divine Reality that exists in complete ecstasy. You see that everything that exists is a manifestation of that One, including you and everyone and everything around you, even including the events of the last few days.

The trick is that we have to do the stair steps. We have to do them again and again. In a time like this, we have to do them more. Do more yoga. Do the asanas, or breathe. Repeat a mantra — offer each repetition to someone in pain. Chant when you drive. Peel the layers again and again, using every tool you know. This is the real yoga.

How About the Way I Feel?

I have watched my own range of responses to the events of the last few days. I have found that every thought and feeling fits into one of three categories.

The World

The world has changed. We used to be able to count on airplanes arriving at their destinations and people going to work and returning at the end of the day. It has all been turned upside down. More accurately, that old world is blown to bits. We navigate our life by landmarks: the house with the big tree out front where I turn left to go home, the people I see every day, or the shape of the New York

City skyline. Some of those landmarks are gone. New ones have appeared. The outer landscape has changed.

I find myself holding my breath sometimes, waiting for it all to pass and everything to “go back to normal.” But it will not. When things do settle, it will be a new “normal.” The needs of my students have changed. The things I used to say to help students with their minds might work now, or they might not. What they need has changed because their thoughts have changed, because the world has changed.

Feelings of shock and anger are widespread reactions. Fear that something could happen turns into constant anxiety. Irrational fear has you closing the drapes and locking your bedroom door at night, even as you know that it cannot stop an airplane from flying into your building.

Denial and avoidance sound like this. “It is so surreal.” “I keep thinking it is a dream and I’ll wake up. Then everything will be fine.” It looks so much like a scene from a movie that you have to keep watching the plane fly into the building, so you can try to fathom that it is real. At one point, they announced that they had removed 5,000 tons of rubble (10 million pounds) and it has not made a dent in the pile that is over seven stories tall. They call it “Ground Zero,” like the point where the bomb exploded in Hiroshima.

The continuing changes in our world will include new security measures at airports and other public buildings. There will be the political and military effects. These will have a real effect on your life, which may take years to play out. Yes, the world has changed. You must know this. As a yogi, you must know and accept the world you live in. You can also choose to work to change it, but you must begin by knowing and by accepting the reality of what does exist. This is the new “it.”

At the same time, you can (and you must) honor the lives of those who have died. Pray for and offer your help to those who survive. And remember, one of the survivors is you. So, send your prayers and blessings to all who are in pain, including yourself.

My Understanding of the World

In California, there is no smoke in the sky. Relatively few of us have family or friends who were in those buildings or airplanes. There are no external signs of change. Everything goes on the same, but it isn’t the same at all. The biggest change is in the inner landscape.

Your chances of a violent death have not really increased at all. There is still the ever-present danger of a car accident. Your chances of getting cancer or being killed in an earthquake, hurricane, flood or other natural disaster haven’t changed. I know of a nineteen-year-old college athlete who just dropped dead in the middle of a workout, for no reason that the doctors can find. You have always been at risk, in every moment. Death stares you in the face.

What has changed is your sense of self. This sense of “me” is based on the outer landscape. External changes impose an unexpected (and unwanted) change in the “me.” As an American, that sense of self-included complacency about the reality of the world. The “favored status” that Americans have enjoyed is gone. We now know the threat of terrorism is real, is personal and is daily.

The illusory sense of self was the real target, not the buildings or the people in them. Let it go. You must let go of the illusory sense of self every time you become aware of it. If these events can make you aware of where you get stuck in your superficial sense of self, use them to propel yourself forward on the path of transformation and transcendence.

If you think the world has changed, you are suffering from major myopia (nearsightedness). You are now seeing reality. This is only the most recent event in decades of attacks on innocent civilians. People throughout the world live under the constant threat of terrorism. Continuous wars have raged simultaneously in multiple locations for the last several decades. Unfortunately, the planet is never without war and terrorism. America was safe, we thought.

The chain of violence has been escalating in the U.S., from the gunman killing the McDonald’s customers in San Diego, the ex-employee shooting up the post office, the Oklahoma City bombing, and now the teenagers shooting each other in high school. Teens have always been the “canary,” playing out society’s undercurrents in stark living color. The movies and spy novels, along with the

video and Internet games, laid the whole scenario out in detail long before it became reality. Unfortunately, it is now closer to home than any of us wanted. And that makes you look at the world and at yourself in a different way than before. Your inner landscape has changed. Who are you now?

Deeper Inside

It is so easy to take on the heaviness. Having been developing the subtle levels of awareness, it is too easy to feel everyone else's pain and to take that on, or to lose myself in it. I can cry and wear a long face, lost in grief, to prove to the world (and to myself) that I care. I can obsess on the minutiae of the constant press reports, talking with everyone about the latest developments. I can indulge myself in agitation, anxiety and fear. I can develop a righteous anger and cry out for retribution.

To go in a different direction, I can take on the persona of being spiritual. I can hold myself together through constant effort, and become exhausted from the strain of appearing to have it together. I can project an aura of peace and serenity that will calm those around me, while I suppress my own undercurrent of turmoil. Or I can continue on with the daily tasks, completing the incoming emails and preparing for the upcoming courses, pretending that nothing has happened. I can ignore it all.

All of these are true possibilities, but are still choices of how to be stuck at the superficial level of being. If you make your choices at this level, you are not really a yogi. You must dig deeper. You must find that deeper dimension of your own being, for it is always there. It is from this level that the inner support arises and the healing comes. It is from this foundation of being that peace spreads through me and all around me.

I cannot support or serve others effectively when I am coming from despair or dismay. Yet, I cannot withdraw and deny the reality of life's events in order to create or protect my "state." That state must become completely portable. It must be poured into each conversation, each email, and every continuing breath. I must dive deeper in order to be of genuine service, not merely to fulfill my selfish desire to be calm and happy.

If yoga were about diving deeper by leaving the world, it would be too easy. Worse, you would be on a path of awareness that depended on you cutting off awareness. Your primary practice of becoming less aware of the world would be your means of cultivating awareness. You would be trying to overcome ignorance (being not-enlightened) by cultivating stupidity (not-knowing of the tangible and material realm). This could never work. You are called to a higher goal.

You must practice ahimsa, even if the rest of the world does not. Patanjali listed it as a key practice several thousand years ago, which means that the world was not a peaceful, non-harming place then. It is not now, either.

At the same time, you must be the warrior. You are Arjuna, on the battlefield with Krishna's advice ringing in your ears. You must be active in the world, for new reasons. You must cultivate the ability to stay open to everything that happens. Accept it as it is, and be who you are. Only then can you help. Only then can you serve. This is the only way you can fulfill your life's purpose.

You must live up to the highest purpose of life, even if others do not. Do not allow others to make you close up. When you close up on the outside, you shrivel up on the inside. You must stay completely open, outside and inside. If that means you cry, then cry. If that moves you through stages of fear and anger, then go through it — but do not "be" it. You are consciousness. So is everyone who died. So is everyone who mourns someone who died. So is everyone who was involved in creating this horrendous event. It is all consciousness.

I offer blessings and prayers for all.