

Was It an Accident?

By Swami Nirmalananda

I fell. On the stone floor, directly on my right hip, at an angle that is the culprit in many a broken hip. My hip did not break. I bounced. I bounced but I did not bounce back up. It was painful, and still is sometimes. I'm not walking yet; I'm using a walker to get around. Was it an accident? Is it a terrible thing that happened, a capricious act of fate, a disaster of life-changing proportions, or a gift of grace?

I fell on the stone floor behind Bhagavan Nityananda's samadhi shrine in Ganeshpuri India. Actually, some workmen pulled the rug right out from underneath me. They didn't see me there, and gave the rug a big yank. I wobbled, righted myself and took another step, toward the edge to get off the rug. Then they pulled even harder and I went down. It was over an hour before I could get up.

What an eventful hour! I closed my eyes and Ganesha showed up. What surprised me was that he was standing in a pose that I had never seen before. I was surprised by his new look until he was replaced by Bhagavan, who was standing in exactly the same pose. Kundalini began to move, creating spontaneous pranayamas, which pumped prana, oxygen and blood through the injured areas. My body began to move into angles that have Sanskrit names, like Bala Shalabhasana and Uddhiyana Bandha. For hours, both on the stone floor and when I got back to the house I was staying in, Kundalini continued to unravel the damage.

Right after Ganesha and Bhagavan showed up on the inside, one of the temple's priests came out to see me, having been told of my fall. The first thing he said was, "Swamiji, how lucky you are. You have been saved from some terrible thing – something so much worse has been lightened for you." I knew he was right. Was this an accident? Am I suffering? My answer to these questions is a clear no. But you have to answer these questions too. When you see me limping; you will wonder about having a teacher who is injured. What does all of this mean to you?

Pain is a curious thing. I thought I knew pain, from two previous car accidents and a couple of other injuries. The classical pain scale, from 1-10 is often described as being from a paper cut (1) to childbirth (10). Yet, having given birth to three living children, I know the pain of childbirth. Somehow the fact that it has a purpose makes it different than pain from an injury. In the midst of the intense pain from this, I asked myself, does it have a purpose? When the priest blessed me with his insight, I knew the answer was yes, this pain has a purpose. I answered him, "Prasad, I saw Ganesha." He chuckled and said, "Swamiji, this is Ganeshpuri – Ganesha's place." Then I said, "I saw Bhagavan." He nodded, "Of course."

Consider the pains you are facing, whether they are physical, mental or emotional; whether they are current events, a continuing review of historical events, or a prediction of future pain. These are all intertwined. They must all be unraveled. This unraveling is the undoing of lifetimes of karma. It's a big job.

I've been through many stages in this unraveling. After the first 12 years, an intense process at the feet of my Guru. I began teaching this unraveling as a simple physical process: "Just start at your tailbone and open up your spine." As you already know, it is an amazing physical process, but the best part of it is that it precipitates a deeper opening into a profound spiritual experience. Yet it works the other way too. When you explore the profound inner realms of your own existence, you precipitate changes in your body. However, it is not simultaneous. Unfortunately your body lags behind your inner state. Your body is still carrying tensions that are express who you were two years ago.

Your body is denser than your mind; your mind is denser than your divine essence. It takes longer to get changes in denser matter, thus your body lags behind. Your mind and emotions shift more quickly than your body. We call it insight or breakthrough when you suddenly “get it,” and you can never go back to the way you used to be. But it takes your body a little longer. Thus, when you experience a profound spiritual shift, it takes a while for your body to catch up.

For me, that two-year time warp is pre-swamihood. About six months after I took sannyasa, my body began a new process: the catching up. I’ve been through this process before. I’ve placed myself again and again in places where I would be propelled into the innermost depths of beingness. It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted. Each time I returned, I’d have to go through a physical process, but this time it was bigger. I couldn’t stay ahead of it. Even with increased asana and meditation time every day, I was sometimes limping, physically limping.

This is called “Latent Disease.” My practice and my own state were rooting out the deeply hidden seeds of a condition that would have crippled me in my old age. Having it surface early means you can work on it before it reaches full blossoming, even though it is a serious or painful condition when it surfaces. I’ve seen people come down with serious illnesses, and ask, “But I’m doing yoga. This isn’t supposed to happen to me.”

Doing yoga doesn’t mean that you will never experience injury or illness. It means you handle it differently. One of India’s modern gurus, who is quite well known in the West, is Ramana Maharshi. In the last days of his life, as his disciples gathered around him for the final days, the cancer that riddled his body caused him pain. At night he sometimes moaned from that pain. One of his Ashram managers came to him and asked him to take pain medication at night. Ramana asked why, and the manager explained that the westerners hearing Ramana moan were having doubts about his state. Ramana said, “Tell them that I am in pain, but I am not suffering.”

Similarly, in the three days after my fall, I stayed in bed dealing with the pain and injury. I kept the blood flowing through the injured area so there was no bruising. The swelling was gone in two days. One person asked me about the pain. I said, “Whenever I feel a painful spot, I dive right into it. I go straight into the pain and unravel it.” She said, “Whenever I feel pain, I try to run away from it.” After three days of working on the injury, I could get around on a walker, which we were able to borrow from a neighbor. My first trip out was to the temple, to thank Bhagavan Nityananda for his grace. Not only did he knock me down, but he protected me from serious injury, and he eased the pain and the process all the way through – breath by breath. I knew his grace intimately.

The next day I began to catch up on email. My relationships and responsibilities to two yoga organizations and thousands of yogis had been neglected for several days. Not only do I care about all of them, but this is my *seva* (service) to my own Guru. *Seva* is my primary yoga practice. I dug into the backlog for several hours, sitting upright longer than my body was really ready for. I felt my spinal muscles spasming again, but kept on with the emails saying, “Just one more...” I knew I was perpetuating the pattern that had kept my body in the time-warp, but that didn’t stop me.

Then a butterfly flew into my room. I’d never seen such a butterfly in India! It had an 8” wing span, and was brightly patterned yellow and black. It wasn’t just the butterfly that stopped me; it was the presence that entered the room. “Bhagavan,” I whispered. He was well known for showing up at devotee’s homes in different animal forms. I was captivated as the butterfly flitted on the air currents generated by the ceiling fan. After a few minutes, it flew higher and got caught in the turbulent currents closer to the fan itself. I realized it was in serious danger so I jumped up slowly (as I could only move slowly) and hobbled over to switch off the fan.

The butterfly flew to the wall near the ceiling and flapped its wings slowly two or three times, and then laid them out flat against the wall. I turned off the computer. It stayed on the wall for an hour. We had a sweet meditation together. Then it moved its wings a few times and flew straight out the open door. I knew it was a teaching: it's time to stop.

The next day, another butterfly came to me. I was sitting in an open-air meditation hall, chanting the Guru Gita with 200 other people. This time it was the usual white butterfly, but it behaved very strangely. I was focused on the chanting book with the words to this beautiful Sanskrit chant, with 186 long tongue-twister Sanskrit words. The butterfly flew around my book in order to capture my attention. I laid the book in my lap and watched the butterfly flutter around so beautifully. Then it flew into the turbulent air currents near the ceiling fan, got exhausted and sat on the floor in front of me with its wings out flat. Out flat, resting at my feet. I sat with it for almost an hour before it moved its wings a few times and flew away.

Nature continued to bless me with teachings for the next few days. It's time to rest. I'm not just limping. I'm out flat, having founded and led three not-for-profit organizations over the last 20 years: Master Yoga Foundation, Yoga Alliance and Svaroop® Vidya Ashram. I'm on the cusp of moving into the Ashram that I have been moving toward for all that time.

I'm tremendously grateful to Master Yoga's Board, Trainers and staff for working so hard to relieve me of so many administrative functions in the last year, and now they're doing more. I'm deeply moved by the generosity of the Ashram community in funding our new home. I'm overwhelmingly grateful to my own Guru, Muktananda, and to his Guru, Bhagavan Nityananda, who are clearly taking care of me every step of the way – even when they make me unable to walk. It's a glorious life! And a piece of work!