

# WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU

...yoga and Buddhist meditation techniques can help you cope

By Melinda Copp

Everyone knows that life isn't easy and that sometimes, bad things happen to good people. And everyone knows how it feels to be angry, sad, desperate, and afraid. Unfortunately, these emotions are all part of being human.

"Buddhist meditation and yoga traditions are focused on suffering, called *duhkha*, and both were developed as strategies for coping with, and finally ending suffering, or *duhkha*," says Stephen Cope, director of Kripalu's Center for Extraordinary Living, a senior yoga and meditation teacher, and author of the new book, *The Wisdom of Yoga: "Suffering" in Buddhism*. "Suffering" in Buddhism includes all the emotional states associated with being human, such as fear, jealousy, anger, and sadness. In other words, these are all the emotions that we normally don't like feeling. And although most people never escape these feelings altogether, your yoga and meditation practices may help you come to terms with these emotions during difficult situations and life challenges.

S  
N  
O  
M  
E  
L

## HOW TO MANAGE DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Maybe someone you thought was your friend has done something to betray you, or maybe a co-worker stepped on you to get ahead, or maybe you have experienced something more tragic, such as a death in the family or some kind of disaster. In any of these situations, your emotions can take over and guide you towards potentially harmful actions. Training yourself to recognize these emotions before they get the better of you is the key to managing negative emotional states.

"We often don't know what we're feeling until it's escalated," says Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society and author of *The Force of Kindness*. "If you can be aware of your feelings, you have a choice on how you react." The more you meditate, the more tuned into your feelings you become. So when something bad happens to you or something doesn't go your way, you can identify your feelings at the very beginning.

When you start to feel your emotions welling up inside you, you ultimately have a choice. Either you can allow your emotions to take control, or you can give yourself some space to think about how you want to react to the situation. For example, if you clash with a person from work over an important issue, your anger, if you allow it, may take control of your actions. You may find yourself furiously typing a nasty e-mail and hitting "send" without thinking about the consequences of your actions.

But if you take a moment to give yourself some space, you can step away from your anger and assess the situation more clearly. Anything that helps you be in the moment—such as taking a breath or grounding yourself by focusing on the feeling of your feet against the ground—will help prevent your emotions from taking control. But this doesn't mean that you aren't standing up for yourself. "You're not being a doormat, and you're not giving in," says Salzberg. "You're just realizing that no good can come out of your anger and taking time out, mentally and physically." You can still defend yourself and take strong actions to make change when necessary.

Before reacting to any difficult situation, think about what you really want. If your personality clashes with someone, whether at work or within your social circle, do you want to walk away for good or do you want to develop a civilized relation-

ship with the person? Chances are, a civilized relationship is a better choice because no matter where you go, you won't always get along with everyone. "If you're being treated unfairly, then you may need to take action to rectify the situation," says Salzberg. "But if it's just a personality clash, try looking for one good thing about the person."

For example, if your boss is condescending and difficult to work for, either you can focus on his negative qualities and allow your anger to build inside you, or you can look for some redeeming quality. Maybe he is a good father, or maybe he does charity work in his spare time. By focusing on a positive quality, you allow yourself to hold the person in a different light. "You're not ignoring all the bad things, you're just not categorizing the person so wholly," says Salzberg. "Learn to really listen, give people another chance, and try to understand. Sometimes, there are good things to come."

## THREE STRATEGIES FOR COPING

Buddhist meditation and yoga traditions incorporate three different strategies for facing difficulties in life: absorption, investigation, and practicing the opposite.

"In absorption, which happens when you're sitting or doing walking meditation and in yoga, you train your mind to get very absorbed in one specific object," says Cope. For example, in sitting meditation, you focus on your breath. And in yoga postures, you focus on the physical aspects such as your breathing, strength, and energy. Absorption will calm your mind and allow it to settle down. It draws your mind away from whatever your difficulty is

to one particular point. "When your mind becomes fixed on this one object, it becomes very quiet and very absorbed and very calm," says Cope. This is a great strategy to cultivate over time so when you really need it, you can use it right away.

Mantra is a yogic component of the concentration-and-absorption strategy. By repeating a mantra over and over, your mind becomes very calm and focused. "Many yogis use mantras during difficult times because it ties the mind to one thing and away from the afflicted mind states," says Cope.

A mantra is usually a short series of words or syllables that you associate with a soothing thought or feeling. For example, your mantra can

**"The more you meditate, the more tuned into your feelings you become."**



be a simple sentence, such as "Everything is absolutely OK" and "I feel peaceful." You can use a mantra that you've heard somewhere before, maybe from a meditation teacher or a book. Or you can come up with your own mantra that is important or meaningful to you. Choose something that is soothing, peaceful, and helps focus your thoughts. "Keep in mind that your mantra is helping you with absorption and concentration so you want it to be short and to the point, so your mind can really focus on it over and over again," says Cope. After practicing your mantra regularly, you will be able to return to a calm and focused mental state just by saying it a few times.

The second strategy is investigation. With this technique, you move into your negative emotions—instead of away from them—and really examine how they feel. Where is your anger? What does it feel like? You investigate how your emotions feel in your body, and you notice your thoughts as they emerge from your mind. This is a good strategy for interrupting or interfering with difficult emotional and mental states. By examining your emotions in this way, even the most dense, seemingly permanent, negative feelings start to dissipate and ease away. "Emotional states are like the weather," says Cope. "They're just clouds moving through."

However, investigation is very counter-intuitive because it goes against everything you feel like doing. But when you practice this technique, it becomes natural and more automatic. Investigating your emotions is a good way to deal with difficult times because it can help you see and understand what you need to heal.

The third strategy is practicing the opposite. "In this

strategy, you actually practice cultivating positive mental states," says Cope. "So rather than focus on the negative difficult states, you systematically practice generosity, lovingkindness, sympathetic joy, and compassion."

For example, if you are in a traffic jam, frustrated and angry with other drivers, focus on the idea that you are all in this situation together. Realize that all the drivers on the road are just trying to get home to the people they love. This strategy is all about thinking kind thoughts. When you systematically practice these states, the difficult negative ones don't arise so often.

## RELIEVE STRESS WITH BODYWORK

All the techniques described so far work best when you have practiced yoga and meditation for a while. They aren't as effective if you haven't built up a practice and you attempt them in the midst of a difficulty, especially something major. But with bodywork, you can alleviate some of your stress even if you haven't practiced these other strategies. "After September 11th, we had many, many New Yorkers come to Kripalu and Healing Arts as part of their care for post-traumatic stress," says Courtney Gilardi, director of Healing Arts at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health.


Bodywork is a yogic approach to massage that enhances the integration of the body, mind, and spirit by incorporating meditation and stretches. It can alleviate stress and pain, and make you feel more clear and centered. "One of the biggest ways that bodywork can help release stress and release grief is through the quality of loving touch that is a part of the body-

work treatment," says Gilardi.

Bodyworkers aim to create a sacred space for you on the table, just as yoga teachers aim to create a sacred space for you on the mat. The techniques they use allow you to move into a witness consciousness so you can ride the wave of emotions that you feel during difficult times. Getting out of your head and into your body can be difficult when you're stressed out or upset. Bodywork is a way for a skilled practitioner to guide you through that process.

A bodywork session starts with conscious breathing and centering, which allows you to come back into yourself and connect with your own emotions and feelings, hear your own heartbeat, feel your muscles sink into the table, and feel your breath. Then, the practitioner works the tense muscles of your body, allowing you to release all the negative energy that's stored up in your tissues.

Bodywork can help you through a difficult period in your life by centering your mind, releasing the negative energy from your body, and helping you see your situation more clearly. "As you grow spiritually, your actions will come from somewhere besides anger or fear," says Salzberg. Essentially, those who practice yoga and meditate do so because of the way it almost magically makes them feel better. And these benefits build up over time.

So when you're faced with a challenge in life, why not put to use everything you've been practicing? "You have to work at it," says Salzberg. "Practice regularly, deepening your growth in mindfulness and awareness in meditation, so you can take these qualities into your life. 

---

**Melinda Copp** is a freelance writer from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.