

Facing Traumatic Situations

-- Rajvi H. Mehta

“Decisions are always difficult when there is a dispute between the head & heart.”

Just two weeks before the commencement of Guruji’s 90th birthday celebrations, terror struck Mumbai with an attack on its prestigious hotels, hospital and railway station. Many foreign students who were busy packing to make this memorable trip to India were in a dilemma. Their hearts wanted them to be present for these celebrations but was it safe? To add on, many governments had given a directive to their nationals - not to travel to India, especially Mumbai and Bangalore, unless absolutely essential and not to visit any places where there would be a large gathering of foreign nationals.

E-mails started pouring in inquiring with us on what they should do? Decisions are always difficult when there is a dispute between the head and the heart. More than 100 people, who had a desire to participate, had to change their plans - either due to the economic slowdown, some because of the terror strike and some because of personal tragedies.

Disasters either man-made like the Mumbai attacks, wars, or natural disasters like the tsunamis and earthquakes, can strike any place at any time. The scars that they leave behind form solid lines which have led the medical fraternity to coin a term for it called as post traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms range from recollection of these events, phobia of the place and people associated with events and chronic emotional and mental disturbances like sleep problems, irritability,

anger, poor concentration, blackouts or difficulty remembering things, increased tendency and reaction to being startled, and hypervigilance to threat.

Can practice of yoga help people who have witnessed such distressing situations in life? Can something be done so that one does not develop a full-fledged disorder? It is easy to advise that we need to learn to cope with these situations but the question is how? These were some of the questions that were being asked.

The answers for these have been practically provided by Guruji as long ago as in 2001. The residents of Gujarat, the western state of India were hit by a massive earthquake. A group of 20 teachers were deputed over a period of 5 weeks to guide the victims. An old lady who attended all the classes made a very poignant statement. “Many doctors and counselors have come and lectured us that we have to cope with this situation. We know that we have to cope. We have to endure our grief; nobody can take it away from us. You are the first group who has taught us how!” Reports on this experience have been published in *Yoga Rahasya*, (2001).

A few months later, when New York was hit by the suicidal air attacks, our concern made us inquire about the safety of our fellow students in New York. Bobby Clennel, a teacher in New York responded on how people were traumatised and fearful after the attacks. I promptly sent her the sequence of āsana-s and the advice that Guruji had given us before we went to Gujarat. After all, the impact of both the disasters was the same although one was natural and the other man-made!

When Bobby decided to pass this sequence on to all the yoga teachers in New York, we felt that it was prudent to get some more advice

from Guruji. There was a practical difference between the Indian and American situations. In India, we were to teach in relief camps where we did not have an access to props; we had to win over the members of the camp to 'try and experience' yoga as they were still struggling to meet their daily needs of food and shelter! While in New York, the people had an access to a yoga class and many were regular practitioners. One could do much more justice to them. I took Guruji's advice and the sequence of āsana-s that Guruji gave spread all over the USA within days with the courtesy of the electronic mails. Responses started pouring in and the impact that it created was phenomenal. Before we realised it, a chance correspondence gave much solace and support to hundreds.

Very soon, I started giving this 'sequence' to individuals in the grip of personal tragedies. One incident that comes to mind is that of an Israeli woman who had lost her young son and was finding it very difficult to come to terms with her grief.

After the Mumbai attacks, we were once again asked whether yoga could help overcome the trauma of such disasters. We were also approached by scientists who are attempting to study the impact of yoga on war veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder looking for 'material' on this subject. The American military has unveiled a \$4 million programme to investigate alternative (to conventional medicine) modality of treatment for its troops returning home from war torn regions.

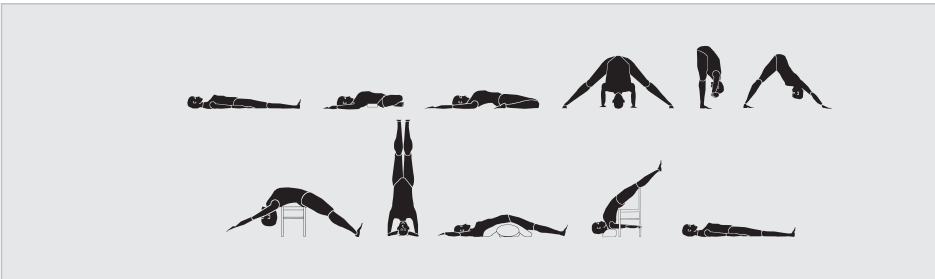
We felt that it is time to make this advice of Guruji public through Yoga Rahasya. In any case, it had been made public through extensive private circulation!

List of āsana-s to cope with traumatic situations:

- Savāsana
- Supta Baddhakonasana (with support for the spine)
- Supta Vîrāsana (with support for the spine)
- Prasaritha Padottanasana (with head support)
- Uttānāsana (with head support and legs spread apart)
- Adhomukhasvanasana (with head support)
- Viparîta Dandāsana Chair (with head support)
- Sirsāsana - Viparîta karani
- Setubandha Sarvāᅅāsana
- Sarvāᅅāsana - Viparîta karani
- Pranayama - with a very short kumbaka after the inhalation.

As Guruji has clearly said, āsana-s are not prescriptions but descriptions, here are some hints for the teachers on how to progress with this sequence.

- The emotional strength in these students needs to be built up and that is what we need to work at.



Asana-s that help recover from trauma.

Please refer to the text for the modifications to classical asana-s.

- Do not make them do standing āsana-s or backward bending āsana-s in this state.
- All āsana-s (including Savāsana) should be done with eyes open. They can focus their eyes at any point in front or on the ceiling. They tend to relieve the terrible memories when they are asked to close the eyes.
- Ask the students to imagine as if their eyes are located at the temples and ask them to “open” these eyes.
- Do not insist on a perfect āsana in the current situation. What is important is that they do the āsana and stay in it as long as they can.
- While breathing in any āsana (especially supine) -- ask them to breath in such a manner that the breath touches the lateral side of the chest during inhalation.

As much as we hope that nobody should face such traumatic situations in their lives, we do know that it is not possible. In the current scenario, this is bound to happen somewhere sometime and we do hope that this article helps people cope with the trauma that awaits them in life.

