

The Yoga of Being Sick

Be a witness to the spectacular number of tissues that have filled your days of late. Do not get caught thinking "this is who I am - I am the one blowing my nose 50 times a day." You are the one watching the one blowing his nose. You are neither the cold nor the victim of the cold. You are the witness of the cold.

This is a surprisingly difficult meditation. I recommend you try it the next time you get a chance. In the early and later stages of a cold it is not only fairly easy, but actually quite helpful in terms of keeping your spirits up. The tough part is when you are in the shivery grasp of a brutal, achy, pressurized cold. The mind becomes absorbed in its own suffering. One feels entirely helpless. Here the meditation takes an interesting twist. We must remain as the witness of the cold, and yet we must also simply abide by the cold. We have to learn how to let the cold be as it is. Don't try to change anything – do not wish that you felt better. Wishing to feel better only reinforces the suffering you are experiencing. Simply surrender to the cold.

I don't mean to suggest that you shouldn't indulge in whatever homeopathic, herbal, or traditional family "remedies" that you like when you are sick. Go ahead put back magical combination of oil of oregano, advil, and cold-fx. You know it won't work anyway. But take it because all your friends are telling you to. Stand on your head and endure some the nastiest sinus pain imaginable simply because you think you remember reading something about headstands and colds in a Yoga Journal three years ago. Take excessively hot showers and blow copious amounts of mucous down your drain. Seriously. Do all that silly "I've got to do something" stuff. Just don't get attached to results.

Do all of it hopefully and earnestly, but recognizing that you will have a cold until you no longer have a cold. Simple as that.

Surrender to the cold. Don't be a victim of the cold. If the cold makes you surly, be surlier than that. Let the cold be as it is. It is not going to kill you (we hope.) It will only test your ability to be fully present in every moment. Can you still be here and now in the midst of all this headaches and runny noses? Do you desire to be somewhere else? Someone else? Look closely at your desire to not be who and where you are. Is it really the cold causing your suffering? Or is it your aversion to the cold?

Being sick is really just an intensification of what we are all experiencing every day of our lives. There is a fundamental confusion that is the root of so many

problems. In the Yoga Sutras Patanjali says that *avidya* (ignorance) is the breeding place for what he terms “afflictions” – or things that make us suffer. In the 5th verse of the *Sadhana Pada* (chapter on practice) Patanjali says

Anitya asuci dukha anatmsu nitya suci sukha atma khyatih avidya

Or

Mistaking the transient for the permanent, the impure for the pure, pain for pleasure, and that which is not the self for the self: all this is called ignorance

(translation by BKS Iyengar)

When thoughts and feelings come to us we often mistake these impressions for something permanent and real, when in actuality they are like drifting snow across the highway. We mistakenly believe that “I am busy” when in reality we are experiencing a moment of busyness. We mistakenly believe “I am depressed” when we experience a moment of depression. And, of course, we mistakenly believe that “I am sick” when we experience a moment of sickness. The truth is that the “I”, the self, cannot be busy, depressed, or sick. The self is aware of the busyness, depression, or sickness – not identical with it. Realize this very simple truth and you are instantly free from sickness. The cold is no longer a problem.

I know - you really want to believe that the cold is causing your problems. Honestly, you would probably be happier without a cold. No doubt. But who meditates for happiness? Happiness, in the words of Adhyashanti, is an altered state of consciousness. Awareness is prior to happiness, and prior to colds and the suffering arising from our aversion to sickness. Be that awareness. Be that and know there is no cold that you can catch. You are immune to sickness. You are immune to death. And your body still has a cold. Bummer.