

# Yoga's lesson for a young psychiatrist

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I have often turned to yoga for my own reprieve; I find the heat, breath, and movement exhilarating. Training to become a yoga teacher has taught me that medicine, not unlike yoga, requires patience and resiliency.

It is 3 AM. I am an intern in psychiatry, 2 months out of medical school, and tonight I am on crash working the trauma bay. The attending is an uncompromising intellectual who graces the ER like Meryl Streep on the red carpet. She smiles at me with only a slight movement from the corner of her mouth, "You know you're gonna have to do some sutures before you finish your rotation."

4 AM. I am feeling gross, and I hate wearing scrubs. I scan the patient list, looking for more psychiatry cases. Three more hours. A nurse approaches me with a gravid look on her face. "Dr. Brown, we have a code blue coming in. I think he overdosed on something. We're going to need all the hands we can get." Less than 2 minutes later, I am running toward a man who had been rolled in. Clothes drenched in vomit, matted hair. And CPR starts. The attending runs the code like a ballad, her central nervous system bathed in adrenaline, crimson blood boiling in her veins. I'm observing in the corner of the room, praying that this guy does not die. I am so uncomfortable; this is not a comfortable feeling. "Dr. Brown, you're up."

Let me tell you, when you're getting certified in Advanced Cardiac Life Support, you go to a class on a Saturday, there are snacks, and your instructor will probably be a paramedic who is earning side cash teaching CPR. You will watch funny videos—we

even danced to the Bee Gees' *Stayin' Alive*. But this is not funny, nor is it fun. And my head is spinning so fast, the sound of the Bee Gees smears to silence.

I take off my white coat and trot to the center of the room. The lights are bright, I am hot, and people are moving really fast. I feel like I'm in a vignette. It seems like we're in the fourth movement of a Shostakovich symphony, the attending is cueing, up and down, like Bernstein conducting the Philharmonic, her arms are flailing; this production is hers and everyone is in sync. The man's skin is pale, almost gray, he smells like sweat and urine and vomit. His irises are blue, blue like the ocean. His beard is thick and opaque, speckled with premature dots of gray. He looks calm. Listless. Dead. He is looking at me, like the Mona Lisa, as if beckoning me to save him, to give him another chance. At life. I put my hands gently on his sternum and I start my round of chest compressions. His skin is rubbery. I feel like I'm breaking his ribs, am I? This is not like the class. The cardiac monitor flatlines. Was it like that before? I think so, I'm not really sure. The attending stops conducting and runs over. Someone taps me and says it's time to switch. Shortly thereafter, time of death is pronounced.



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"Damn it," I hear the attending exclaim quietly but deliberately. I am hot, and I have a headache. I take off my gloves. Where's my cell phone? I'm going to check Facebook, maybe ESPN.com. I feel heavy. And then I'm sitting at the computer screen again, after the rain. The attending comes back to her seat. She has a green smoothie, she takes a sip, and is slow to return the oversized cup to the table.

This night 3 years ago remains vivid. I am looking at her now. The unabashed attending. We are all looking at her.

She pulls out a petite makeup case and opens an oval mirror. She applies 2 thin

lines of lustrous lip gloss, smacks her lips, grounding herself, then places the mirror back in her bag. She takes one deep breath, pauses briefly, and, letting go, she sits up tall, her dignity restored, then looks at me and claps, "Come on, doctor, we've got more patients to see."

That night in the ER, I experienced how troubling it is losing a life with the burden of responsibility, but also the beauty of Aparigraha, letting go, and moving forward. I learned this lesson, unspoken, from an admirable attending, and was reminded of it 3 years later as I pursued a deeper understanding of yoga.