

# BEYOND WORDS: THE YOGA OF TRANSFORMATION

The stroke happened suddenly. One moment, I was healthy and vibrant. The next, I was forced to never be the same again. The brain damage paralyzed the right side of my body from head to toe. Even more dramatically, I lost the ability to think.

The stroke had made me aphasic, obliterated my language. It was as though my mind had been emptied out of words and their meanings. I could not think in sentences and could not hold simple images in my mind before they faded away. I did not even miss the sound of my voice.

The loss of language erased all connections with anyone or anything I had ever known. It isolated me from the rest of the world and from myself. With 21 years of life and my whole personality gone, I did not know who I was anymore. My ego had died. I still had a form of consciousness, but without any consciousness of self.

A state without language or thought is described in the book *Yoga Philosophy Of Pantanali With Bhasvati* (University of Calcutta 2000). Swami Hariharananda Aranya states, "The wise man, by inhibiting speech or ideation by language, should retreat to and stay speechless at the speech center of the brain or mind." By quieting the effort involved in knowing, one merges in the pure I-sense. After that, by abolishing all phenomenal knowing, one realizes the Absolute.

A sheer sensing state of consciousness—without words or thoughts—immediately after the stroke has something in common with what Swami Hariharananda Aranya calls "I-sense," but is far from identical. He describes a mind that is intact, but through years of practice and patience can free itself of ordinary distractions and movements. This is the state of pure awareness and freedom. In contrast, my state after the stroke was the result of an injured brain with no choice. It was not a temporary state. It was brain damage, but for the first few hours, it left me euphoric.



**A stroke shattered my ego and quieted the disturbances of my mind—but also left me unable to connect to myself and others.**

**This is the story of my journey through recovery, a story of how Yoga led me to the miraculous discovery of the infinite self, beyond language.**

*By Barbara Newborn*

The world had opened up with wonder and delight. Very alert and awake, my being was a part of what was happening at the moment. But I could not hold onto any images or think about them. I sensed everything and had no perceptions or intellectual thoughts.

I had no worries. After all, with out any thoughts, I had no past or future. My memory and future were erased. My awareness was confined to the immediate present. I could not remember what happened yesterday or even a second ago. And I did not know the meaning of tomorrow or the next moment. It was all the same. Instead, my entire being was surrounded by spaciousness. I did not question who and what I was. I did not feel in danger but part of this entire universe. I felt protected forever there, in the present. The moment was real, no pretentiousness and no lies. As real as real could be.

However, when I was taken to a hospital that night, the world became smaller and frightening. The professionals wanted words out of me. Every time I tried to speak, nonsense sounds slurred in my mouth beyond recognition. They stared in disbelief. I became painfully aware that people did not understand me anymore. And from this peaceful state of language loss, I was then retuned to my ego. I was whirled and tossed back to being inside my disabled body and mind. The image of my broken self was emotionally unbearable.

The grace was now forgotten. Now, I had to go and take this uncharted journey alone, redefining myself through the chaos of language loss. During this terrible isolation that I was feeling, I did not have any words to echo how I felt.

At first I wanted my old self back. I wanted everything to be exactly the way it used to be. I tried to imagine myself performing as I used to, but I could not see all the necessary steps. All I had were partial memories, just broken pieces of me, which faded in

and out of focus. It was impossible for me to form a consistent image of myself the way I used to be.

When I began to speak a few months after the stroke, my language difficulties were overwhelming and complicated. It was impossible to make my speech spontaneous. Forgotten were all the joys of pure consciousness in the moment, without thinking. Now, I just focused on what I could no longer do. I could no longer express my feelings or ideas. I could no longer persuade or influence. I could not make polite small talk or ask simple questions. I could not count to 10 or tell a story. I could no longer delight in the sound of my voice. I could no longer laugh like I used to.

The speech pathology lessons in the hospital were tortuous. I had to repeat constantly the sounds of vowels and consonants. Left on my own, I had no idea how to make these noises come from my mouth. Without words in my mind, the world and I had no way of connecting or making meaning. I was very anxious every time I opened my mouth to try and speak. Many times, speech came out so slurred that a stranger might have wondered if I was drunk. The communication malfunction in my brain created severe problems connecting to others. I needed to find some other way of external expression to socialize and declare some identity to the world.

Imagine yourself a stranger in a foreign country, not knowing the customs or the language. You cannot order food or even ask for directions. Your first utterance would be self-conscious and error-ridden. To the natives, your words and thoughts would make no sense at all. A native, not comprehending what you were saying, would be apt to interrupt you and eventually walk away.

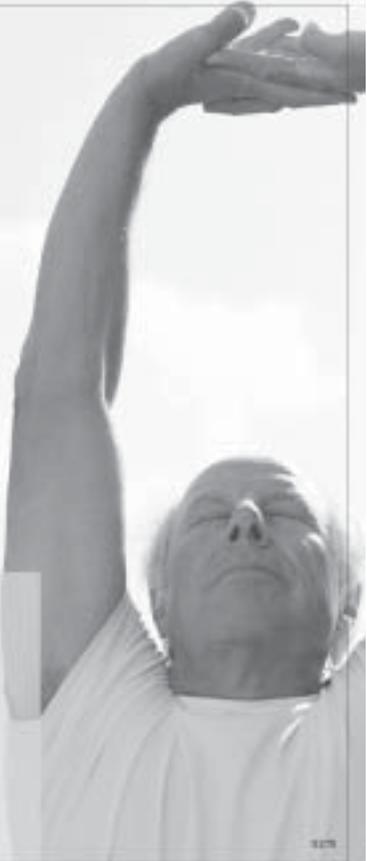
Such is the case with aphasia. Aphasics are always strangers in a strange land. Being aphasic, I always worried about what I was going to say, how to say it, and how to keep command of it. I had to carefully choose each word and then plan how to form, arrange,

and utter those words and sounds. Precise thoughts overloaded my mind. My thought processes were so damaged that the higher functions of my mind, like rational judgment, were destroyed. I could no longer control the world or myself. Many times it took all my faith to keep from giving up.

It was well into the fifth month of recovery when my transformation started taking place. One day stands out, different from all the rest. In therapy, I tried to move my flaccid arm. Like all the other attempts, it would not budge. My body immediately filled with tension. This time I had to find a way to calm down. Taking one long breath, I shut my eyes and concentrated one more time. Totally unaware of anything else in the room, I found myself focused on the electric current running through my arm. I saw the movement before it happened. As time stopped, my mind connected with my arm's energy. In slow motion my arm became aware of this signal and hesitantly moved an inch. I was amazed and thrilled at the impact of this.

I began to appreciate the concept of "mind over matter." Despite the physical destruction caused by paralysis and aphasia, I was now determined that nothing should prevent my healing, knowing this. I knew the inspiration for recovery was within me, my spirit connecting with my mind.

A whole new world opened up when I learned some simple meditation techniques of Yoga from a friend. My friend showed me how to close my eyes and focus on my breath. I would slow it down and begin to listen to the sound. With the same damaged brain, I began to discover that I could connect once again with my innermost self, the core self that remained undamaged. In that peaceful stillness, I could hear what my intuition was telling me, reminding me that everything was all right. I held on to these words and they became my *mantra*. During my meditation, I was



**YOGA THERAPY IN PRACTICE**

**AGE-OLD TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE AGING HEALTH**  
It's never too late to gain the health benefits of yoga, meditation, and breathing, even for the oldest of students. As teachers of yoga, we can help elderly students begin the journey safely and effectively.

Join Duke Integrative Medicine to learn how to address the specific needs of older adults in our workshop "Teaching Yoga to Seniors." This yoga therapy intensive will prepare participants to teach yoga to older adults in community, health care, and senior home settings by providing practical strategies for adapting the yoga practice to older bodies, minds, and spirits.

The training program grants a certificate of completion as a Yoga-for-Seniors instructor and Yoga-for-Seniors therapist.

**Teaching Yoga to Seniors: Workshop for Yoga Instructors**  
April 2-6, 2008 and October 22-26, 2008  
For more information, call 1-866-313-0959 or visit [dukeintegrativemedicine.org/yogatherapy](http://dukeintegrativemedicine.org/yogatherapy).

 **Duke Integrative Medicine**

thrilled that my injured, disabled mind could arrive at this place of peaceful beauty. It was as though my mind had never been injured, or that the injury had brought me to this place where I always belonged, in a state of total oneness with everything, where I no longer felt so separated. In that silence, the terrible isolation I felt simply did not exist. That special time in the morning gave me strength and courage when I needed it most during the day.

On my new journey into the unknown, I began to find peace again in a whole new way. Through Yoga, I went inside myself for meaning. The Yoga connection became my guide for transformation and the framework for my entire life. Breath and meditation guided me on this journey. They were promising lights, telling me that I no longer had to struggle to perform. It was only then that I began to not fear staying where I was entrapped. I began to realize I did not have to stay physically or mentally disabled.

The next five years brought me constant discovery about myself. When I experienced my first Yoga class, most of the *asanas* were difficult. But I discovered that if I slowed down my breath, it was easier to move my body. Eventually, I learned to flow. I began taking two to three classes a week. I found it was possible, through Yoga, to see myself not through losses and disability, but through uncovering new ways of movement.

I grew confident enough to redirect my life toward what I knew I had to do. The opportunity opened up for me to spend several months in Kerala, India to be trained as a teacher of Sivananda Yoga. I went there understanding that everything would be challenging, but that the process would deepen my wisdom.

Everyday in meditation, I experienced more and more of a profound peace. I allowed myself to be completely in the moment with all my attention, listening to the sounds of the universe. I was in a much deeper place. In India, I had a different quality of being and my mind was without any physical disability and aphasia disappearing. I finally reached a place beyond language that did not feel lacking or disconnected. Through the years, I went back to India many times to study Yoga.

The stroke that had destroyed everything had at the same time created room for a completely new beginning. Following that explosion where all my pieces came apart, I began to have a new feeling that I never was the "ego." I was whole. I still felt like me, inside. The stroke awakened a new path for the "infinite me" to exist beyond language. I began to understand that human nature can be distorted by the need to categorize and label. Often these judgments divide us from everyone else. We think we are our words. Nothing is further from the truth.

The stroke was my first teacher. The accident erased forever the layers and layers of identities that I coated on myself, teaching me that a much bigger and more brilliant universe existed. Yet, Yoga is my last and final teacher, allowing the infinite self to listen with awareness to the peaceful and joyful present moment. An oasis of compassion, where everything is perfect the way it is. In the infinite wisdom of Yoga, there are no beginnings nor endings, no time nor thought, in the presence that is beyond language. □

**BARBARA NEWBORN, MA, CRC, RYT-500**, now specializes in therapeutic Yoga practices. She has visited India many times, where she researched unique techniques of healing with T.K.V. Desikachar and A.G. Mohan. Barbara is the author of *Return to Ithaca: A Woman's Triumph Over the Disabilities of a Severe Stroke* (Element Books 1997). Contact: [barbnewborn@yahoo.com](mailto:barbnewborn@yahoo.com).

## For Yoga Professionals

*Healthcare Practitioners, Caregivers,  
Students, Educators and Researchers*

# The Heart and Science of Yoga



*A Blueprint for Peace, Happiness  
and Freedom from Fear*

**LEONARD PERLMUTTER**  
with Jenness Cortez Perlmutter

**"A sweeping, enthralling vision of how to live an integrated life."  
YOGA JOURNAL**

"A true work of art that explains the transformational power of classical Yoga Science in clear and practical terms. A manual for creatively meeting the challenges of everyday life."

**LILIAS FOLAN**  
Author and host of groundbreaking PBS yoga series, *Lilias!*

"A comprehensive and practical guide to the yogic practices as tools for transformation."

**DEAN ORNISH, MD**  
Author of *Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease*

"Comprehensively outlines the holistic benefits of yoga and brought joy to this heart surgeon's heart."

**MEHMET OZ, MD**  
Author, Radio Host and Professor of Surgery at Columbia University

"An admirable guide to one of the world's greatest wisdom traditions. This excellent book presents not only yoga techniques but also the philosophy behind them."

**LARRY DOSSEY, MD**  
Author of *Healing Beyond the Body and Reinventing Medicine*

**Recipient of Major National Literary Awards:**  
Nautilus Award, Benjamin Franklin Award, Eric Hoffer Award,  
ForeWord Magazine Award and the Independent Publisher Book Award.  
**AVAILABLE AT FINE BOOK STORES NATIONWIDE.**

**AMERICAN MEDITATION INSTITUTE**  
60 Garner Road, Averill Park, NY • Tel. 800.234.5115  
[www.americanmeditation.org](http://www.americanmeditation.org)

Call for a **FREE** subscription to  
**"Transformation," *The Journal of Practical Yoga Science.***