

The Knife's Edge

The only thing that can prepare you for the way life cuts

the heart and the mind is study, reflection, and practice.



RECENTLY, WHILE PREPARING a dharma talk, I began leafing through my old copy of *Bliss Divine*, a collection of spiritual essays by Swami Sivananda. The book had belonged to my dear friend Prema, who gave it to me more than 20 years ago. When I started looking through it, I found the dried double hibiscus, a rarity in nature, that Prema had placed between its pages for me to discover. I smiled and once again marveled at how beautifully Prema celebrated life in small ways. I was searching for a quote from Sivananda on the subject of whether you can rely on your spiritual practice

during difficult times. But instead of quoting Sivananda, I decided to talk about Prema and how her spiritual practice helped her during a terrible ordeal.

Prema began her practice of yoga in the 1960s when relatively few Americans were involved in yoga. She was 55 years old, recently widowed with four grown children, and wondering what to do with her life. One day while on a visit to the Caribbean, she was walking along a beach when she came upon a sign for a yoga ashram that promised “peace and tranquility.” She had no knowledge of yoga but was intrigued, so she went inside to see what it was about. She did not leave for many months.

Prema had found her calling. She practiced asana, pranayama, chanting, and meditation twice a day, month after month. She did everything from cooking to cleaning toilets and even gave the Swami money to help keep the ashram going. Eventually she became the manager, overseeing everything from guest registration to building maintenance. Although it was not her ambition to teach, she often found herself leading a hatha yoga class or giving the evening talk. She did not have the most beautiful poses, nor was she the most charismatic in her teaching. But she was trustworthy and caring, and this gave many people the confidence to move more deeply into practice.

Many of the yogis came back to the ashram year after year because they loved Prema, her willingness to listen and her generosity, which led her to give away anything she possessed that another seemed to need or admire. She was by no means perfect and her personal story, like everyone’s, was a mixture of beauty and pain, happiness and sorrow, wise and poor decisions, inseparably woven together.

I was introduced to Prema by my first yoga teacher who had gone to the ashram for teacher training. She wrote me saying I had to meet this remarkable woman who managed the ashram. I was then in my mid-20s and had just started doing yoga. Fool that I was, I had no expectation that yoga would make any dramatic improvement in my stiff body, and I did not believe that yoga was going to be a big factor in my life’s

unfolding. But I had enough sense to realize that it is rare to get to know a remarkable spiritual seeker, so I left for the ashram immediately.

When I was first introduced to Prema, she was saying good-bye to a group of people who lived in a Buddhist retreat in Nova Scotia. It was the first moment in which I realized that people like myself were finding a way to live a life built around spiritual practice. I was deeply immersed in making my way in the world, but already there were signs that my heart called me to another way.

Prema and I eventually became the best of friends despite there being almost 30 years difference in our ages. It was in a yoga class with Prema that I first experienced Headstand. Our deep friendship led me to stay in the yoga world long enough to discover my affinity for it.

I went to the ashram frequently to visit Prema. She was often the only senior instructor there during the summer, teaching the small group of yogis who were willing to endure the intense heat of those months. Prema had grown accustomed to the heat and joked that her Greek heritage had prepared her for it.

It was on one such summer night that Prema's life changed. The air coming off the ocean was heavy and hard to breathe. On those nights she would open her balcony doors and the entrance door to her room. She slept with little or no clothes on, not even a sheet pulled over her because the touch of fabric was uncomfortable in such heat.

As she lay sleeping, an intruder came in off the beach and entered through the unlocked kitchen door downstairs. He paused and picked up a small butcher knife that someone had left laying on a cutting board. He stole up the stairs and into the room where Prema was sleeping. She awoke with a hand over her mouth, a weight on top of her, and a knife pressing at her throat. The attacker told her to be quiet or he would kill her, then started forcing her legs apart.

At first Prema was filled with excruciating, mind-numbing fear, but then she experienced an unexpected, almost unimaginable shift and her mind trans-

formed into a state of calm, bright clarity. Although everything was happening very fast, she now experienced it in slow motion. There was space for consideration, time for decision-making.

She was not paralyzed by the threat of rape; even in that moment of terror she somehow knew she would not be emotionally destroyed by it. But there was the issue of her vow of *brahmacharya*. In the West we would call it a vow of celibacy, but *brahmacharya* is a much bigger commitment than chastity. It involves a sacred marriage to the transcendent that is both within and without, a commitment to be in union with and be absolutely faithful to Brahman as the Loved One. Although she had always told herself she might reconsider if the right man came along, was she willing for the vow to be violated in this manner? Was life so precious to her that she would simply give in? Prema answered her own question with action. She reached with her left hand and grabbed the sharp edge of the knife with the palm of her hand and closed her fingers completely around the blade. She held it tightly—with the strength and concentration she had learned from hours of yoga practice.

She began to fight furiously, using her strong legs to dislodge her attacker. He was startled by her resistance and her strength. They struggled for control of the knife, their hands flailing back and forth. When he tried to pull the knife out of her hand, she would extend her arm. If he pushed it toward her, she would bend her arm and stop his movement. At no time did her mind tell her what to do; her actions arose out of an instinct she never realized she had.

The blade cut deeper and deeper into Prema's palm and blood splattered through the air. Still she would not let go. The attacker could not keep his hand over her mouth, so she started to yell. Realizing he was defeated, he leapt from the bed, dashed through the balcony doors, and jumped over the railing onto the ground 10 feet below.

Staff came running into the room to find Prema sitting on the bed, still holding the knife in her cut hand and pulling

her clothes back on with the other. Some gave chase to the attacker, but he was never found. Prema's hand was cut to the bone and bleeding profusely, yet she felt no panic, only an aftershock to her nervous system. The staff bandaged her hand and took her in a boat across the bay to a local hospital. There a doctor cleaned and x-rayed her wound and put in 22 stitches.

A few hours later, Prema called me. She said only that she was okay and would not tell me the details of what had happened. I told her I would be on the next plane, but she said she needed a couple of days by herself. We agreed on a time to meet.

When I arrived at the airport, she was waiting. Rather than go to the ashram, we took a day by ourselves so that she could tell her story in her own time. She did so without tears or terror, at first in little pieces, then in full detail, then from her feelings. She did not experience herself as having been brave, nor did she think her actions were necessarily what another woman should have done. It was simply what she needed to do—not turn away, not give up, nor dissociate from her fear. It was as though all the meditation and yoga had led her to that moment of clarity. She loved life, yet she had discovered that she did not cling to it. Without being aware of it, she had developed freedom through her practice.

What Prema needed to know now was how to go on with her life. Her hand hurt a lot, and her nervous system, while not locked in terror, was still overstimulated and would stay that way for many months. But these were not her main concerns. She could cope with her hand, and she resumed her life at the ashram determined not to let fear be a factor in how she lived. But having found this freedom, how would she proceed? What do you do with your time, your life, once you've experienced this letting go? How do you organize yourself? What are your priorities? After such an experience, what do you do the next week, month, or year?

This is the great lesson of Prema's story, and if she were still alive, it is what she would be teaching others. Amazingly, without forethought, she made a crucial decision during the attack: She accept-

ed she would be cut, be wounded, and ceased to focus on it. Instead she concentrated on surviving, maintaining what was her priority—to avoid the rape. Most people confronted by an assailant with a knife will try to avoid being cut out of fear. But in trying to avoid the cut, they make poor decisions, expose vital parts, and take actions that are ineffective. Not Prema—she grabbed the knife’s blade.

In your life, again and again, there is a knife at your throat. It may be a bad relationship, a serious illness, fear for your child, a desperate need for financial security, loneliness, aging, or fear of death. It may be fixation on achievement or a need for recognition or approval. Sometimes you are aware it is there; other times you block it out of your mind. Always it shapes your behavior, for you do not wish to be cut. The immediate threat of the knife cutting you is so distracting and confusing to your mind that you do not have the clarity Prema experienced. This fear and wanting lead to bad decisions, to loss of energy, and they thwart finding peace in life. To your nervous system, an emotional knife at the throat is just as devastating as a physical knife.

The importance of meditation, yoga, and other spiritual practices is that they allow you to reconnect with your priorities over and over again. At least for a moment, you let loose of your fears, experience a touch of mental clarity, and feel the sweet breeze of a peaceful mind. You become accustomed to staying with yourself in moments of difficulty and learn not to let them consume your mind. You develop concentration that leads to strength of mind. Certain practices teach you to stay within the body in times of emotional turmoil. Most of all, you find a place outside the ego in which you can receive any experience without neglecting the ego’s needs. This is what Prema did. She did not abandon the ego which was afraid and being hurt, but she did not lose herself in it either. Every human being has this innate capacity to act outside the immediate ego panic. Spiritual practice makes it more likely that it will be accessible in a time of need.

If you wish to develop understanding,

kindness, and clarity in your life, it is the same for you. At some point you have to grab the knife’s blade. You must be willing to participate in the way life cuts the heart and the mind. The only thing I know that can prepare you for this is study, reflection, and practice. Simply wanting to be a certain way and declaring your intent to do so don’t seem to work.

In no way do I treat lightly the ability to grab the blade of the knife. It is hard to know when and how to do so and how to avoid being self-destructive. At the same time, you know that life is inevitably wounding. It will cut you in ways small and large, despite all your efforts. This is *dukha*, the unreliability of life that the Buddha taught as the First Noble Truth.

Prema never developed any great understanding as to what she should do next. She came to realize that life is almost always this way. At times you have to rely on life itself to be your teacher, even though you may feel clueless. This is the “surrender” referred to in so many spiritual traditions; it is the opposite of passivity or disassociation.

Eventually Prema left the ashram to devote her life to her family. She wanted nothing for herself, and she had no agenda for her family. It was simply what suggested itself as the truest service, and she trusted her heart to know. Just a couple of weeks before her death we spent a weekend together. Although she was practically bedridden, we talked and laughed with as much freedom as ever. She was keenly aware of the transition ahead, most curious as to what would unfold. She did not relish the agony of the body’s releasing, but she was not afraid. She knew what it was to grasp the knife’s blade. ■

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