

EMBRACING THE END:

How Yoga Therapy Stands to Transform End-of-Life Care

By Natalie Buster and Cassandra Jones

In a society that often defines life by the pursuit of longevity and the avoidance of discomfort, the topic of death frequently remains shrouded in fear and resistance. What if we could create a world where death is not feared, but rather embraced as a natural, integrated part of life in an approach that allows us to live fully until we die?

This question lies at the heart of what we see as an evolution in end-of-life care, one that aims to merge the ancient wisdom of yoga therapy with the compassionate presence of end-of-life doulas to create a holistic, person-centered approach. Here, we define the possibility and promise of the end-of-life yogi doula.

A Call for Compassionate Care of the Underserved at Life's End

The journey toward the end of life is a deeply personal one, marked for many by isolation, medicalization, and a lack of holistic support. People who are dying may also represent underserved communities, with this lack of support frequently compounded by layers of intersectionality that include chronic homelessness, advanced age, lower socioeconomic status, and institutional and systemic marginalization.^{1,2} These vulnerable individuals are often in critical need of care that extends beyond the

purely medical and addresses physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, as well as deep-seated fears and anxieties.

Yoga therapists, with their rich toolbox of practices, are uniquely positioned to serve such populations alongside caregivers and professionals within the death industry. However, challenges to taking up this avocation can arise from our own socially conditioned and personally held fears surrounding death, a universal experience that yoga philosophy has contemplated for millennia.

Abhinivesha: Confronting the Fear of Death

The fear of death, known in yoga philosophy as *abhinivesha*, or clinging to life, is a fundamental human experience. The ancient texts provide profound insights into this deep-seated aversion: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, authored around 450 CE, state that "Fear of death carries its own essence and predominates [the consciousness of] even the wise" (2.9).³ This acknowledgment offers a sense of comfort, reminding us that our apprehension about mortality is not new or unique.

The Upanishads, particularly the Katha Upanishad, challenged this fear even earlier, asserting that the true essence of humanity (*Atman*)

is eternal, transcending birth and death, and ultimately identical to *Brahman*, the universal consciousness.⁴ Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita, in “The Way to Eternal Brahman” (8.5), elucidates death as a natural and inevitable aspect of life and underscores the imperishable nature of the soul.⁵ These texts invite us to reframe our relationship with death, moving from a position of fear to one of understanding and acceptance of the eternal nature of consciousness.

Despite this ancient wisdom, modern culture has largely medicalized death, rendering it a clinical event rather than a sacred transition. We have become paradoxically numb to its presence, often refusing to engage in meaningful conversations about this rite of passage. Death has largely occurred in institutions since the 1950s, removed from the quotidian and familial landscape of the home and relocated to the sterile hospital. Prior to this time, in typical scenes of Western death women cared for the dying person within the home; men’s role was public, involving the service and burial. Erosion of these roles has resulted in the silencing and sanitizing of sacred transitions and transferred the care of the person and the body to the jurisdiction of the doctor.⁶ This paradigm shift strips away cultural skill around death and dying and can contribute to experiences of isolation and fear for the dying and those who love them.

Contemplative End-of-Life Care and the Yogi Doula’s Work

Against this backdrop, the concept of contemplative end-of-life care emerges as a beacon of hope. This holistic approach supports individuals by emphasizing presence, awareness, and inner peace. It thoughtfully integrates principles from contemplative traditions—such as mindfulness, meditation, compassion, and spiritual inquiry—into existing whole person-centered palliative and hospice settings.

This contemporary framework calls for the development of specialized end-of-life yoga practices,^{7,8} particularly individualized bedside yoga. Crucially, this approach also advocates for relationship-centered care that offers therapeutic benefits to caregivers and healthcare professionals and mitigates compassion fatigue, a prevalent challenge in these demanding roles.

Hand-in-hand with contemplative end-of-life care is the burgeoning death-positive movement, largely spearheaded by end-of-life doulas, also known as death doulas.⁹ An end-of-life doula is a nonmedical professional who provides invaluable guidance to individuals nearing death and their caregivers.⁶ They offer emotional, physical, and educational support, striving to make dying as peaceful and dignified as possible.

Yoga therapy seamlessly integrates into this framework, providing end-of-life doulas with specific techniques to support clients through each phase of the dying process. This natural synergy has led us to propose the cultivation of a specialized, innovative practitioner, the end-of-life yogi doula.

Understanding the Dying Process Through Panchamaya Kosha

One of the most useful lenses through which yoga therapy can illuminate the dying process is the *panchamaya kosha* model. This concept describes five illusory sheaths (*pancha* = five, *maya* = illusion, *kosha* = body or sheath) that encase the authentic self at the core of our being. We can conceptualize death as a gradual shedding of these koshas as we release attachments to our earthly body and the elements that comprise each sheath.

This lens invites the end-of-life yogi doula to meet clients exactly where they are in their dying process, guiding them gently to release and surrender into death. A yoga therapist grounded in panchamaya kosha can effectively companion both the client and their caregivers as they navigate the sensorial changes and potential losses that accompany this transition. By honoring this embodied wisdom and sharing contemplative practices, the yogi doula can provide therapeutic interventions that alleviate pain, help with processing of existential and moral distress, address feelings of loneliness, and ease the anxieties and fears that often arise during dying. This guidance fosters a state of living with dying where profound healing can occur.

A closer look at panchamaya kosha can guide yoga therapists and clients through the signs and stages of dying philosophically and practically.

1. *Annamaya kosha* (food body), characterized by the physical body, is associated with the earth element and corresponds to the muscles, joints, bones, skin, and hair. In this first stage of dying the body weakens, arms and legs become heavier, eating patterns change, and skin and hair begin to thin. We can honor annamaya kosha through gentle movement and positioning for comfort, acknowledging the body’s decline with care.
2. Oscillation between sleep and wakefulness may come next, exemplifying *pranamaya kosha* (energy body), associated with the water element. Sleep increases; saliva, urine, and sweat output may decrease; lips and skin become dry; and incontinence may occur. Pranamaya kosha is supported with breath awareness and practices that ease anxiety and promote energetic flow.
3. We can soothe *manomaya kosha* (mental/emotional body) through meditation and mantra to release fear, regret, or attachment. The manomaya kosha is composed of thoughts, the five senses, emotions, and is associated with the fire element. At this stage, interest in activities and current events may decrease. The digestive fire decreases and food is no longer desired. Blood withdraws from the periphery, and the body may become cool, with mottled skin. Emotional fluctuations and outbursts can arise.
4. Entering the next phase, where *vijnanamaya kosha* (wisdom body) predominates, marks a shift from practice to witnessing. We can support access to vijnanamaya, associated with the

air element, by encouraging insight, clarity, and acceptance of impermanence. This kosha relates to inner knowing, sense of self, and faith foundations. As the stages progress, skin may become translucent and acquire a slight radiance. Breathing can become irregular and apneic, and cognitive disorientation can occur.

5. We experience *anandamaya kosha* (bliss body or Awe) through witnessing a sense of peace and unity beyond the physical that points toward the deep stillness and transcendence often experienced near death. Through *anandamaya kosha*, related to the ether element, a shift occurs toward joy, peace, and acceptance. This time is marked by feelings of peacefulness, a gentleness, and an experiential flow of timelessness. Guests may appear more loving or seek closure. Consciousness shifts as lucid dreaming and hallucinations occur, marking a liminality between waking and sleeping, living and dying as people transition.

Through gentle attention to each kosha, end-of-life yoga helps individuals find wholeness, dignity, and spiritual connection as they transition.

Techniques and Tools for Compassionate Care

End-of-life yoga actively supports physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort, complementing the death doula's role in providing holistic, nonmedical care and guidance from serious illness through life's end. The end-of-life yogi doula creates a compassionate space for acceptance, presence, and peace.

Although information and knowledge can be cultivated by studying yogic tools, true embodied wisdom emerges when the practitioner sits at the bedside, cultivating a practice of living with dying alongside the client. Here, breathwork (pranayama), gentle movement (asana), yoga philosophy, and meditations (e.g., yoga nidra) offer physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort.

Recognizing that traditional yoga sequencing is likely inappropriate for this population, the end-of-life yogi doula model we've explored in our own practices provides a flexible recipe that encourages the yoga therapist to adapt and swap out "ingredients" based on the client's current state. As with any yoga therapy, all practices should be adapted to the individual's comfort and capacity, emphasizing ease over technique. For example, when we introduced this recipe to one client who was bedbound at an end-of-life care home, he responded favorably to several ingredients, especially the gentle movement and attention to breath. It's important for end-of-life yogi doulas to pay attention to clients' verbal and non-verbal cues—in other words, we meet the client where they are in the present moment.

1. Centering: Before any practice, both yoga therapist and client center and ground themselves. Creating a *sankalpa*—a heartfelt intention or resolve—provides a direction for energy. For this population, goals shift from achievement to how they wish to feel, who they are, and what is important in this final chapter. Simple affirmations like "I am . . ." can be deeply comforting.

2. Mudra: Gestures (mudras) are powerful tools for guiding the client's energy toward their *sankalpa* and acknowledging their stage in the dying process. Simple hand mudras are best, and the end-of-life yogi doula can gently assist clients who cannot form the shapes themselves or perform the gesture themselves for the client to contemplate.

- **Prithvi mudra (gesture of the earth):** Promotes grounding and centering, acknowledging the earth element, often the first to be shed.



- **Vittam or jala mudra (gestures of energy body and water):** Encourages flow and ease, holding space for the water element, which is often the second to be shed.





- **Anjali mudra (gesture of reverence):** Fosters a sense of divine union between *purusha* (consciousness) and *prakriti* (nature) as the dying process unfolds.

3. Pranayama: Our last breath is as significant as our first. In end-of-life yoga, pranayama is practiced gently and mindfully to promote calm, ease discomfort, and support emotional and spiritual well-being.

- **Dirga pranayama (three-part breath):** Encourages full, relaxed breathing into the belly, ribs, and chest, reducing anxiety and promoting grounding.
- **Soft ujjayi (ocean breath):** When practiced lightly and without effort, offers a soothing, rhythmic sound to calm the nervous system.
- **Chandra bhavana (left-nostril breathing):** Activates the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting relaxation, which is especially useful for encouraging sleep or easing agitation.
- **Sama vritti (equal breath):** Balances inhale and exhale, creating steadiness in mind and body and promoting peace and control.
- **Simple breath awareness:** Focusing on the natural rhythm of the breath without altering it fosters mindfulness, presence, and nonjudgmental acceptance of the moment.

4. Asana: A useful movement tool for bringing a sense of bodily relaxation and comfort is the joint-freeing series. We can invite the client to see, feel, or move their bodies joint by joint, starting with the toes and perhaps assisting with gentle movement as needed.

5. Meditation: A beautiful way to honor and celebrate a life well lived is through a gratitude meditation using *panchamaya kosha*. The yoga therapist gently guides the client through the five koshas, inviting them to visualize or contemplate the *panchatattvas* (five elements)—earth, water, fire, air, and ether—associated with each kosha as they journey inward. The client is invited to sense, reflect, and offer heartfelt thanks, moving through a body scan that expresses deep gratitude for all the ways the body has served and supported them throughout their life. This tool can soften the edges of fear, inviting stillness and grace as we walk the sacred path toward letting go.

A Word About Touch

People are often worried about touching those at the end of their lives. “Is that within my scope of practice?” “Shouldn’t I do less and be more?” We believe that individuals need compassionate touch at the end of life, when they may experience a lack of touch or medically based touch only. End-of-life yogi doulas are in a unique situation to consensually provide contemplative, loving touch.

One patient captured the deep sense of isolation experienced at the end of life when they told palliative care and family medicine physician Shireen N. Heidari that they realized they were dying when even the most basic touch—that required to check her heart and lungs—had stopped. (Read Dr. Heidari’s 2021 essay in *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(21\)00028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(21)00028-X))

Assuming that there are no legal prohibitions in their jurisdictions, yoga therapists can fill a void in compassionate touch after medical intervention ends. As a client transitions, they may hold space and can encourage caregivers like (chosen) family, if in good relationship, to not fear touching or holding their dying loved one. As Margaret Atwood wrote in her novel *The Blind Assassin*, “Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth.”

Facing Unconscious Bias and Aversion

Serving individuals at the end of life can inevitably bring forth the *klesha* (obstacle) of *dvesha*, or aversion. This aversion may manifest as sensorial or visceral reactions to the physical aspects of the dying process. Unpleasant odors, being present with bodily functions such as bowel movements or urine output, or wounds on the body can all trigger feelings of discomfort or revulsion for those providing care.

Furthermore, the intersectionality of the populations we serve at life’s end, particularly those who are chronically unhoused, can challenge our preconceived notions and biases. Clients may present with matted hair, dirty fingernails, or lack any personal possessions beyond their hospital gowns. It is crucial to remember that every

individual has an inherent right to a meaningful and dignified life, as prescribed by the ethical guidelines of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, extending all the way to their final moments.

The practice of yoga therapy offers powerful tools to address our inherent aversions and confront unconscious biases. Although this work may not suit all of us, by cultivating mindfulness, self-awareness, and compassion, we can learn to recognize and navigate these internal reactions to ensure that every person we serve at the end of life, regardless of their socioeconomic background, appearance, or circumstances, is treated with the profound care, respect, and dignity they deserve, as we would the Divine.

Confronting Fear, Experiencing Dignity and Peace

The emerging role of the end-of-life yogi doula is positioned to integrate ancient yoga therapy with end-of-life care, confronting societal biases and offering a holistic approach—one that empowers individuals to confront the fear of death and experience dignity and peace throughout the dying process. We can look to the panchamaya kosha model to not only understand the dying process, but also how to meet clients where they are. The koshas' evocative imagery captures the liminal nature of dying, moving us between the elemental stages and beyond the physical body. This framework can create a deeper understanding and acceptance of the yogi doula's own mortality, making them a more effective companion in dying. And our yoga techniques allow for compassionate, person-centered support that addresses physical, emotional, and spiritual needs and ultimately enables clients to live fully until their final breath. ●



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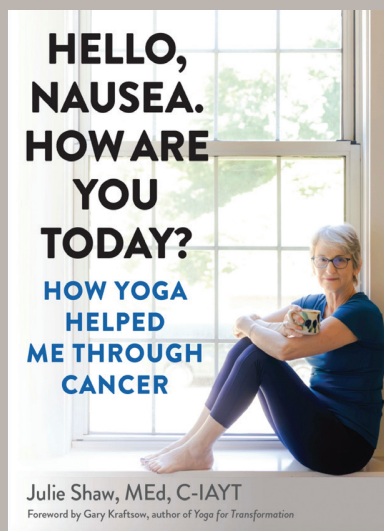
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Further Reading

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