Big Reveal: My Cancer Diagnosis

by Timothy McCall, MD

For a variety of reasons, when I needed to undergo chemotherapy and radiation at the beginning of last year, I decided to keep it private. Although I know I would have received tremendous support from many of you had I revealed what was happening, my intuition told me it would better not to. I felt like I just needed to get through it. So I only shared my situation with an intimate group of friends and family, who supported me every step of the way.

The diagnosis was an HPV-related cancer in my tonsil that metastasized to three nodes on the opposite side of the neck. The good news is that I had a complete response to the treatments. The other good news is that the various holistic measures I used in addition to my conventional medical treatments got me through those treatments with greater ease than most patients and with minimal lingering side effects.

This pose, Prone Bharadvajasana, was a lifesaver during my treatments. It was deeply restful and helped maintain range of motion in my neck.
Of course, many yogic tools, including asana, pranayama, chanting, visualization and meditation alongside Ayurvedic approaches before, during and afterwards made a huge difference. In fact, the major purpose behind my most recent trip to India, in which I underwent more than three months of Ayurvedic treatments, was to allow me to continue to heal from the toxic effects of the treatments. But I also used other tools including fasting during chemotherapy, acupuncture, and ongoing myofascial release (MFR) treatments, which among other things helped to break up scar tissue from the radiation. And in perfect alignment with yoga, MFR frees the neck by opening the entire body.

When Kallyani, the matriarch of my Ayurvedic therapist’s family, needed to go to a doctor’s appointment, they put her on a bicycle and walked it across the paddy field to the road.

All I’ve done to heal — I counted it up, I used 27 different holistic tools — has me feeling better and stronger now than at anytime in the last several years. As you might imagine, the experience changed me, deepened my yoga, plus I learned a ton along the way about cancer, about holistic healing and about myself.
One thing that surprised me, once I got to India and settled in last winter — surrounded by coconut palms and birdsong and with time on my hands — was that a book about my experiences poured out of me. When I’m writing at home, I consider 1000 words to be a productive day. In India, I knocked out more than 250,000 words, two or three times the length of most books, almost without effort.

After I teach at the Harvard Continuing Medical Education (CME) course on Yoga and Ayurveda for Cancer and Palliative Care this coming weekend in Boston, I’ll have the rest of the summer to stay home, continue my healing, and get the book edited. The release is planned for October 16th, my brother Tony’s (who I lived with in Charlottesville, VA during my treatments) and late father’s birthdays. Here’s the planned cover for the hardcover (though things could change).
Speaking of that Harvard Medical School CME course, I put that in the you-couldn’t-make-this-stuff-up category (though I don’t usually say "stuff.") There I was sitting in Kerala, using yoga and Ayurveda to heal myself from cancer and cancer treatments, when the invitation came in. None of the people who invited me knew where I was or what I had just gone through. The universe works in interesting ways!

And since I’m writing a book about my journey through cancer — how I figured out which holistic practices to use, the complicated negotiations with my doctors to avoid treatments I didn’t want, and what unfolded during my amazing return to India — I realized it was time to go public. Last month, it occurred to me that I should do it at last weekend’s International Association of Yoga Therapists’ (IAYT) annual conference in Reston, VA. That turned out to be a good decision.

After I gave my plenary address, followed by a raucous standing ovation (full disclosure: they gave quite a few of those this year), IAYT’s incoming president Amy Wheeler asked the crowd to take one minute to go inside and direct healing energy my way. I soaked it in and then we all chanted a powerful Om. All that love and support filled me up.

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Timothy McCall, MD is a board-certified internist, Yoga Journal’s medical editor since 2002 and the author of the bestselling Yoga as Medicine. He contributed to and co-edited the 2016 medical textbook, The Principles and Practice of Yoga in Health Care. Timothy practiced medicine for more than 10 years in the Boston area before devoting himself full-time to investigating, practicing, writing about and teaching yoga therapy. He is the founder and director of Yoga As Medicine Seminars and Teacher Trainings, teaching and lecturing worldwide. He lives in Burlington, Vermont.