

see the light

*During this darkest of seasons,
kindle your heart's flame and share
your spark with the world.*

visoka va jyotismati

Or, the light within which is free from all suffering and sorrow

Yoga Sutra I.36

Every year during the first week of December, the students at my children's school participate in a special ritual to mark the shorter days as we approach the darkest time of the year. A large spiral of evergreen boughs with a lit candle at the center is arranged in the dark auditorium. Each child is handed a shiny cored apple that holds a single unlit candle. One by one, in quiet darkness, the children walk along the spiral of boughs to light their own candles from the candle at the center. On the walk back out of the spiral, each child chooses a spot along the path of branches to place his or her lit candle. By the time all of the children have taken their turn, the entire spiral is alight with candles twinkling in the darkness.

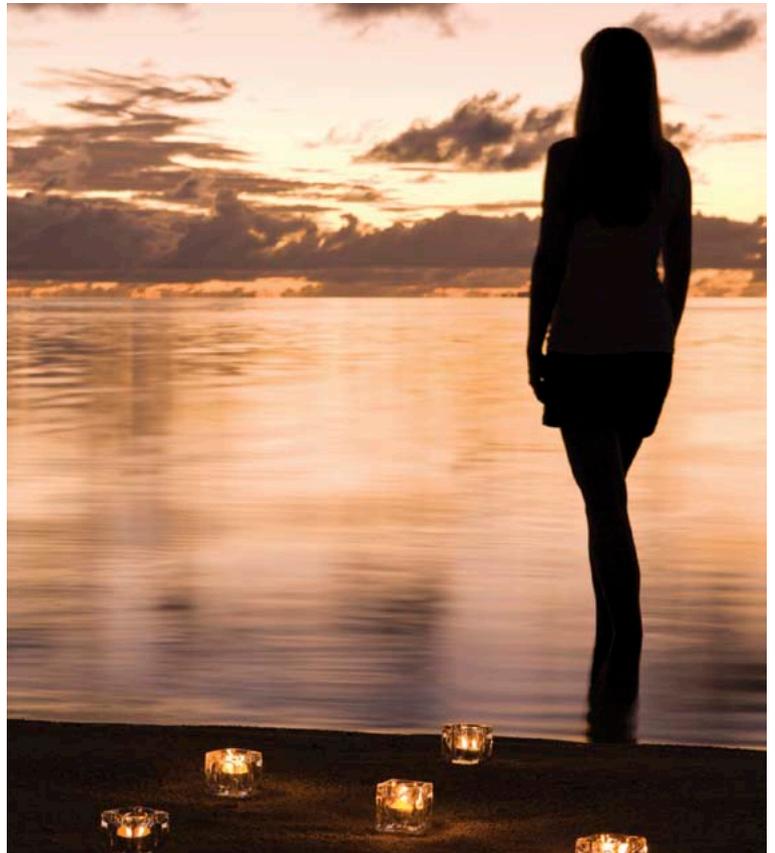
The unspoken symbolism of this annual tradition is that—particularly at the darkest time of the year—it's important to take time to go quietly inward and connect with our inner light and then to carry its spark into the world to share with others. It's a deeply moving ritual and a beautiful link, in my mind, to one of my favorites of Patanjali's yoga sutras: I.36, "Or, the light within which is free from all suffering and sorrow."

Yoga Sutra I.36 is one of the many suggestions Patanjali offers in the first chapter to help you quiet a restless, agitated mind and attain a level of stability and clarity. The Sanskrit word *va* means "or," indicating that this sutra is one option among many.

If it resonates with you, it's there for support. If it doesn't, there are several other tools in this chapter of the Yoga Sutra that you might choose instead, such as inquiring into your dreams,

lengthening your exhalations, adopting certain attitudes, seeking the counsel of someone more experienced, or meditating on an object of your choosing. What is noteworthy about Yoga Sutra I.36 is that it does not contain any specific instructions. Instead, it simply offers the image of *jyotismati*, or our **inner light**, which is free from sorrow or grief (*visoka*), and it purposely leaves the way open for the application of the sutra to be varied according to each person's individual needs and beliefs.

For one person, simply entertaining the possibility of this light within that is free from suffering could be enough; someone else might find it helpful to meditate on this image or incorporate



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»ignite your spark

Try this practice for connecting with your inner light.

In a quiet place, sit comfortably with your hands resting in your lap, palms open. Begin by taking several relaxed, easeful breaths. Start to visualize the light within your heart. As an image comes to mind, continue to breathe comfortably and focus your attention on that light within. When the mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the inner light. To help you focus, you may want to softly speak or chant the words of Yoga Sutra I.36 or a translation of its meaning in your own words, such as "My inner light shines."

Once the image of the light feels strong and clear, add a simple movement to the visualization. As you

inhale, extend your palms outward. As you exhale, place your palms over your heart. Repeat this three times and then sit quietly for a few moments, continuing to take deep, relaxed breaths.

When you feel ready, repeat the gesture of inhaling as you extend your palms outward and exhaling as you bring the hands back to your heart (or place them on another part of your body, if you wish). Focus for three breaths on bringing the light into each of these areas: somewhere in your own body that is in need of support, your mind, your relationships, and your community.

Again, sit quietly for a few moments, breathing comfortably, until you are ready to open your eyes.

it into an existing practice. Depending on your personal beliefs, this sutra might evoke and support your connection with God or a higher power. In short, the ways in which this sutra can support you are many, and by offering the image without any instruction, Patanjali does not limit its potential power or resonance.

RADIANT LIGHT

Commentators on the Yoga Sutra have described this light as a tiny spark on the tip of a thread in the darkest recesses of a cave within the heart. For me, the image of the thread with a bit of light at the tip has always symbolized that, no matter how far removed you may feel from the light, the spark of that light is always within, free from grief, from pain, and from sorrow and affliction. Even when you doubt its existence, it's there—and reflecting on that can be a great source of support in difficult moments. You might think of following that thread to the light at the tip as a way of finding your way home again when you're unsure of the way, and all around you seems dark.

The end of the year can be an appropriate time for reflecting on the importance

of cultivating and nurturing your inner light. Just as the ritual at my children's school suggests, if you take the time to travel to that quiet place within, you will find your own light and with it a sense of hope, joy, and clarity. When you connect with that light, you can bring it forth and share it with the world around you.

This sharing need not be any specific outward action, and in fact it might be quite subtle. You might share your light with others by cultivating your own sense of wonder, joy, or compassion, thus affecting your way of being in the world. Sharing your light might mean deciding to volunteer, calling an old friend, or simply inspiring others through the quiet reflection or inspiration behind your actions and deeds in the world. However your deepening connection with your inner light manifests, when you cultivate it, you will come to know this source of inner support that's always there to help you find a greater sense of peace and ease, even in the darkest of times. ❖

Kate Holcombe is the founder and president of the nonprofit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco (healingyoga.org).