



# KAYA-KALPA

## An Ayurvedic Practice of Longevity and Healing

**I**n this age of artificial light, which surrounds us day and night, there is a sense of urgency to rediscover the benefits of the night. Ayurveda has long recognized a practice for longevity and regeneration called *kaya-kalpa*. Derived from *kaya*, meaning “the body,” and *kalpa*, meaning “remodeling,” this ancient method literally rejuvenates you, profoundly transforms your cells, and breathes new life into all your physiological functions.

*Kaya-kalpa* involves secluding oneself in complete darkness, either alone or in a group. Traditionally, it is recommended to move as little as possible and to relax the body, whether lying down or sitting. Fasting accompanies Ayurvedic *kaya-kalpa*, with practitioners consuming raw milk and carefully selected herbs. In this regard, it is worth noting that Indian cows produce milk that is easier to digest than ours, and that this practice originated in an era without hormones or antibiotics. The more capable a person is of fasting in the dark, the more powerful the effects of the practice will be. However, light meals may be offered to those who are unable to go without food, so as not to deprive them of the experience.

### Reversing the flow of time

In complete darkness, the body secretes melatonin. In addition to its role in sleep, melatonin is known to be involved in regulating cortisol, the stress hormone. During the first few days in the dark, people relax by sleeping a lot; the nervous system calms down, shielded from stimuli, particularly visual ones. Burnout can clearly be alleviated by a prolonged stay in the dark. But the benefits of *kaya-kalpa* don’t stop there: for example, it boosts the immune system.

At the cellular level, many changes take place. Powerful antioxidants derived from melatonin enter the body—notably pinoline and betacarboline—which help neutralize mutated, cancerous cells. All cells undergo a profound regeneration. It even appears that telomeres—those markers of biological age that shorten each year—are actually growing longer. This shows that time has been reversed, literally rejuvenating the practitioner.

In the book *Maharaj*, the author<sup>1</sup> describes the extended *kaya-kalpas* of a yogi named Shriman Tapasviji. At the age of one hundred, the elderly man—balding, gray-haired, and stooped—senses that his time is drawing near and seeks a place in the Himalayas where he can die in peace. He has difficulty walking and has lost his teeth. On the trails of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Maharaj, a Biography of Shriman Tapasviji Maharaj*, T.S. Anantha Murthy, The Dawn Horse Press 1972.

Himalayas, he meets another, younger yogi who claims to hold the secrets to a rejuvenation practice. The man agreed to follow his guidance and spent three months in complete darkness. When he emerged, he walked like a young man. His teeth had grown back, as had his hair, which had become thick again. His skin looked younger, and his features were softer. He would repeat the feat of staying in the darkness later in life, on two separate occasions: first for a year, then for forty days, with the same results. If this book and the existing photos are to be believed, the Maharaj lived for several more decades. Of course, he was someone who had spent his life mastering his body and mind, a full-time yogi—free from the constraints of the modern, secular world. This also explains the extraordinary effects of his periods of intense meditation and his ability to remain alone in the dark for so long. The biography of this extraordinary figure also recounts how he guided others through the transformative process of *kaya-kalpa*.

For us Westerners, it's hard to imagine spending three months in the dark, but a week, nine days, two or three weeks—why not? If you have the right company and support, it's certainly possible. The longer you stay, the more the rejuvenation process continues, as does the hormonal process.

And if you're not quite ready to go on a retreat, you can completely darken your bedroom: spending eight hours in total darkness will allow your body to produce more melatonin, which supports vital functions.

## **The Power of Initiation**

As you might imagine, spending time in the dark like this isn't just a biological matter. Saskia John and her guide Holger Kalweit refer to it as "dark therapy." In 2003, she spent twelve days in complete darkness on one occasion and twenty-four days on another. During that time, alone, she explored the depths of her subconscious. Saskia John explains: *During my explorations, I gained deep insights into the psychic realm and the workings of the human psyche: the intertwined nature of the mind, soul, and physical body, and the effects of this interdependence on physical health.*<sup>2</sup>

His companion, Holger Kalweit, had the opportunity to undergo the forty-nine-day retreat in darkness (yangtik)—a practice typical of Tibetan Buddhism—under the guidance of a lama in Nepal in 1968. In the preface to Saskia John's book, he highlights the spiritual aspect of the practice: *The central process in darkness is characterized by an increase in the clarity of consciousness. Generally speaking, my consciousness tends to be clouded and weighed down by mental activity. As the mind empties, there is simultaneously a keener perception of the soul's journey. In Tibet, it is said that the clarity of consciousness increases sevenfold in the dark. (...) I repeatedly experience flashes of beingness and recognize the meaning and essence of Being (...) At one point, as if a curtain were being torn apart, I experience for a few seconds the indescribable primordial nature of the world.*<sup>3</sup>

Having attended dark retreats for several years and guided many groups, I can confirm that this practice is both therapeutic and spiritual. It is therapeutic because it allows a person to confront the contents of their subconscious—emotions that have been ignored for too long and aspects of the past that have not yet been processed—as if all of this were

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<sup>2</sup> Saskia John, *Retreat into darkness, A Path to Light*, Tao.de 2013, p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, Holger Kalweit, preface, p. 8-9.

displayed on a giant screen. As a result, a process of letting go can take place—a process of forgiveness and reconciliation—which restores the practitioner’s sense of wholeness. The practice is also spiritual. For those who are ready, there is an encounter with higher vibrational levels. The subtle body expands, allowing access to new perceptions and feelings of boundless affection, gratitude, and joy without object. Intuitions and insights may flow, providing guidance to the person who dared to enter the darkroom.

As with any practice, it’s a good idea to revisit it periodically—both to give your cells and physiology a boost and to continue exploring the depths, picking up each time right where you left off.

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[www.darknessretreat.org](http://www.darknessretreat.org)

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