

Yogic Sleep Finds its Way into the Mainstream

“Do not sleep...” These are the last words I heard before waking up 40-some minutes later at the sound of the bell that ended my first yoga nidra experience. Feeling only slightly guilty, and quite satisfied by the deep rest I’d enjoyed, I resolved to stay awake for the next day’s session. The next day I made it five minutes longer into the somewhat murky-sounding cassette that guided the practice before conking out yet again. In the subsequent half-dozen sessions, I never made it past the ten-minute mark.

This was 2001, and I was sharing teaching duties with New Zealand teacher Donna Farhi at a two-week international yoga teacher training. I was exhausted, and the mid-afternoon sessions fell well within prime naptime for my body. These yoga nidra naps seemed somehow more restful than my usual midday respites—nodding out while reading the newspaper—so they seemed well worth the time. Still, as I listened each day to others in the class discussing what they’d heard and felt, I developed a compelling curiosity to learn more about what I’d missed.

In early 2002, I encountered yoga nidra again, this time in a five-day workshop with clinical psychologist and longtime yoga teacher Richard Miller. One afternoon at the midpoint of the retreat, I managed to remain awake throughout the entire process. Lying on the floor, enveloped in cozy blankets, we were taken on a guided tour of our own bodies and psyches. Miller led us through a body scan designed to release tension in the physical body, and also relaxed the areas of the brain that correspond to each part of the body. Then he guided us through a process of conscious breathing. We explored how opposite conditions such as pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness, can peacefully coexist within us. We took a journey through provocative images that elicited an amazing array of mental/emotional responses. Finally, we settled into a profound state of silence.

By the end of the yoga nidra practice the sense of my body as a solid physical entity had disappeared; there was only a shimmering sensation. Mentally and emotionally I felt light, spacious, clean and contented, to a degree

that I'd only previously felt after days or weeks of intensive meditation. I bought a six-cassette set of yoga nidra sessions, guided by Miller, and began an exploration of this vast and vital practice that continues to this day.

Relative to the many yogic practices that originated millennia ago, yoga nidra, often translated as "yogic sleep," is quite new. The processes that make up yoga nidra were culled from ancient tantric practices and brought together as a single practice in the last century by author and yogi Swami Satyananda Saraswati. While the term "yoga nidra" has been around for centuries, Satyananda was the first to organize the components of its practice in the way it is interpreted today.

Satyananda's inspiration to develop yoga nidra sprang from a life-altering childhood experience. After discovering that he had somehow learned vedic mantras chanted by his classmates while he was sleeping, Satyananda began rethinking his beliefs about what happens when we sleep. Though he had previously believed that sleep isolated consciousness from the outside world, he now knew that this was not the case. He began studying tantric texts, where he discovered practices that encourage profound relaxation of the *koshas* (body layers) recognized by the system of yoga.

From this he fashioned a process that systematically relaxes the whole person by addressing each of the koshas, which in Western thought correspond to the physical body, the energetic body, mental/emotional body, the intellect, the subconscious and the unconscious. The state of yoga nidra resembles sleep, but is distinguished by the presence of a trace of awareness. It promotes profound rest at all levels of being. Satyananda claims that an hour of yoga nidra is equivalent to four hours of sleep in terms of its restorative effects on the body/mind.

Miller first practiced yoga nidra in 1970 while studying with Swami Satchidananda. Later he studied with a Buddhist teacher where he learned more of the rudiments of the practice. Upon reading Satyananda's book, *Yoga Nidra*, all the pieces came together for him. "I took his skeleton and ran with it," says Miller. "His framework was designed for the Eastern mind in terms of the imagery used and the Easterner's tendency to be more open to suggestion.

Westerners are more suited to inquiry, to explore and come up with their own conclusions.”

Over a span of 30 years, Miller evolved the practice to fit the needs of Western culture, teaching mostly to “the choir,” his yoga students from all over the U.S. Then a most unlikely partner—the military—asked him to train people to teach the technique to their ranks. Miller offered a training and says “it just took off from there.”

“All of a sudden I was out in the public teaching to people who wouldn’t otherwise have come to meditation retreats. To see them responding and loving it, it felt as if the time had come to bring this practice to the mainstream,” he says. “Now I’m bringing yoga nidra to children, adults, soldiers, the homeless, even people of the Christian right. We’re talking to a Catholic priest to learn how to language it so that we can go into a traditional Christian community to teach these tools. It’s not a set of beliefs or a system to be imposed; it’s a way of exploring who we are.”

Recently Miller conducted a feasibility study at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, with seven Iraq veterans who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Soldiers participated in twice weekly yoga nidra practice for nine weeks. At the conclusion of the study, patients reported decreased insomnia, depression and anxiety, and increased comfort and control in their lives.

“We’re using yoga nidra to help soldiers heal through PTSD,” says Miller. “We teach them how to sense their bodies and be aware of subtle ways they may be defending against emerging materials such as repressed emotions and beliefs. We help them surface negative beliefs and self-judgments. And we’re introducing them to the sense of pure awareness so they can see that there’s a part of them that’s never been injured or hurt, that’s always been whole, healed and healthy.”

According to an article in the April 2007 issue of *Yoga Chicago*, study participants’ comments included:

“I feel more accepting of situations in my life that I cannot control.”

“When I come to the practice my thoughts become quiet...It’s empowering knowing I can change the way I feel and my mood.”

“I now have an inner place that I can go to that calms me down and brings me peace.”

“I didn’t want it to end.”

Yoga nidra has now become a regular component of Walter Reed’s program for addressing PTSD. Due to the success of Miller’s feasibility study, a large study that will include 200 participants from various V.A. sites around the U.S. is scheduled to begin in 2008.

Sensitive to the tendency for mainstream Westerners to attach a stigma to anything that includes the word “yoga,” Miller has renamed his unique variation of yoga nidra as “iRest,” short for Integrative Restoration. The title is easier for Westerners to get a handle on, he says, and it’s ultimately more descriptive. According to Miller, iRest “integrates the psyche and restores people back to their true nature.”

Miller sees iRest as a two-pronged discipline. “The practice can be either secular or very spiritual,” he says. Citing the secular side of practice, he continues, “Most people who come to yoga nidra are interested in healing, being kind, getting a good night’s sleep, being a better person. There’s been such a strong response from the homeless, the military, and abused women and children, all suffering from PTSD. They heal through all the negative emotions, beliefs and traumas.

“At a spiritual level, iRest introduces people to pure awareness. It gives them a sense of their true nature and brings about deep healing of a spiritual nature.”

In spring of 2008, Miller will offer a five-day, 42-hour iRest training in the Salt Lake area. The workshop will train yoga teachers and therapists how to fashion iRest to meet the needs of the unique populations they work with. “When I teach iRest I want to meet people where they are. I’m teaching it in a way that even though teachers and therapists are giving general instructions, all the people in the room feel as if they are being spoken to,” he says. “It’s an art to learn it. Sometimes it’s a big leap from trying to help somebody to helping them explore, and being comfortable not knowing where they’re going. There’s no agenda, no goal. We don’t try to change people; we help them to explore themselves. And that is where the healing happens.”

To learn more about the iRest training in Salt Lake City, visit www.iRestSLC.com.

Charlotte Bell has taught yoga and meditation since 1986 and is the author of the recently published book, *Mindful Yoga, Mindful Life: A Guide for Everyday Practice*. She has offered weekly yoga nidra sessions for two years. This article appeared in the Salt Lake City, Utah, publication *Catalyst* in December, 2007.