

Introduction: The Open Secret

When we dwell in the pleasures of our senses, attractions to further pleasures arise. From attraction comes attachment, the desire for possession that leads to passion and burns into anger. Passion and anger cloud judgment and lead to confusion, the inability to learn from past mistakes and the failure to choose between what is wise and what is unwise. This is the path of separation. But when we move in the world of the senses, yet keep our senses in harmony, free from attachment to attraction or aversion, we rest in the wisdom heart of our True Nature, the true equanimity of Being, in which all sorrow and suffering cease.¹

I was first introduced to the rudiments of Yoga Nidra in 1970, during my first ever Yoga course. At the end of my first lesson, after slowly performing an exquisite sequence of asanas that heightened sensitivity to every part of my body, our instructor led us through *Shavasana*, the traditional yogic pose for inducing deep

relaxation while lying completely still on the floor. The instructor expertly guided us into being conscious of sensations throughout our body, as well as to opposing experiences such as warmth-coolness, agitation-calmness, fear-equanimity, sorrow-joy, and separation-oneness. I was invited to rotate my attention through the sensations elicited by pairs of opposites until I was able to embody these opposing experiences with neither attachment nor aversion to what I was experiencing.

I drove home that evening feeling totally relaxed and expansively present. For the first time in years, I felt free of all conflict, radiantly joyful, and attuned with the entire universe. I experienced life as being perfect just as it was and felt my self to be a spacious, non-localized presence. Instead of my usual experience of being in the world, I was having a non-mental experience of the world being in me; similar to experiences I had known as a child.

This experience continued to resonate and left a longing in me to consciously awaken into and fully abide as this sense of presence. It awoke in me the strong desire to deeply understand the art of Yoga and especially the process of Shavasana, which I would later learn as Yoga Nidra. My yearning would eventually lead me to study with some of the most renowned teachers in the world; I became a teacher of Yoga and an adept in the application of Yoga Nidra through years of practice and by guiding thousands of students in its process during innumerable group classes, individual sessions, workshops, and meditation retreats.

During that first Yoga class, I recovered a secret that I now know is open to everyone who is interested in finding true peace of mind, equanimity that remains undisturbed, free of circumstance or situation. And I know that if I can realize it, so can you. The key to inner peace is not some impenetrable secret. While seemingly obscure, it is actually in plain sight and readily available to you—an “open secret.” Let Wu Wei Wu explain.

The old Masters were fond of a little joke. One of them might say that the Buddha had a secret, but that Mahakashyapa let it out. Mahakashyapa, you may remember, was the bodhisattva to whom the Supreme Vehicle, chiefly represented by Ch'an and Zen today, is attributed. He it was who understood the famous sermon when the Buddha held up a flower and spoke no word. Then one Master would remark that only as long as you do not understand, is it a secret. And, indeed, do not all mysteries and miracles only appear so, in so far as we may not understand how they arise or occur? Then another might add that once you do understand, it is Mahakashyapa not keeping the secret. Therefore a secret is only something that people in general do not understand and Mahakashyapa not keeping the secret was the real secret of the Buddha. Thus the secret that is not kept secret is what is meant by an Open Secret.²

Most of us know the kind of fragile peace that is easily disturbed by the onslaught of daily life. Through the exquisite practice of Yoga Nidra, I discovered an unshakable equilibrium that is present under all circumstances and situations. If it weren't, it wouldn't be real peace. I know that this is true peace because I've tested it over many years in my daily life: in my job, in the marketplace, and in family life. And we're all aware that the true test of inner peace comes not in the meditation hall, but in our daily life and relationships. Yoga Nidra revealed to me the peace of *Presence, Being, and Equanimity* that remain steadfast and true during even the most intense and difficult times of physical pain, interpersonal conflict, and current events. I've uncovered it. I've tested it. Now it is my heartfelt desire to share it with you.

THE ORIGINS OF YOGA NIDRA

The origin of Yoga Nidra can be traced back to ancient Eastern teachings of Yoga and *Tantra* (Sanskrit: *tan*—extending everywhere), which are a vast array

of techniques designed to extend our understanding in order to overcome our mind's penchant to divide unitive True Nature into separate objective parts. Tantra and Yoga are not concerned with philosophical intellectualism or second-hand information. These teachings are concerned with firsthand knowing of who we actually are, where we stand free of psychological, cultural, and philosophical conditioning in the truth of what actually is.³ Various yogis have revitalized the practice of Yoga Nidra throughout the past half century, most notably through the teachings of Swami Sivananda and his various disciples such as Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, Swami Satchitananda of Integral Yoga, and Swami Vishnudevananda of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center; Swami Rama of the Himalayan Institute and his direct disciple, Swami Veda Bharati of the Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama; and Sri Brahmananda Saraswati (Rammurti S. Mishra) who was an initiate of the Radhaswami School of Surat Shabd Yoga, among others.⁴

I was introduced to the actual term, Yoga Nidra, through the teachings of Swami Satyananda Saraswati in his many literary offerings, especially his book entitled *Yoga Nidra*. Over the years I've had the privilege of studying with many renowned spiritual teachers who have helped me directly and indirectly refine this exquisite art of meditative inquiry through both my studies in psychology and spirituality.⁵

Through Yoga Nidra, I discovered a profound process that teaches us how to carefully and systematically investigate the nature of our beliefs that define our personal identity and differentiate the world around us into separate objects. For instance, we believe that we are solid and separate and that there is an external world that exists independently of us. But we may never have deeply examined the actual reality of these beliefs. During Yoga Nidra, we investigate our actual experience so that we can understand the nature of who we actually are and what the world really is. Yoga Nidra helps us investigate and dispel the roots of our

conditioning that underlie our misperceptions of reality. Yoga Nidra dissolves the obstacles that stand in the way of our leading an authentic life of purpose and meaning, and, for those who are interested, it can awaken us into living an enlightened life of self-realization as our True Nature.

USING THIS BOOK AND CD

In this book and the accompanying CD, I share with you the basic steps of Yoga Nidra, what each step leads to, some of the interim benefits that you will realize along the way, as well as the ultimate discovery that Yoga Nidra reveals. At its minimum, Yoga Nidra will lead you to experience profound relaxation, the release of chronic stress, restful sleep, resolution to many of your life's conundrums, and a greater sense of harmony in your daily life and relationships. In its ultimate revelation, Yoga Nidra points directly to your True Nature, to peace that is beyond description and is your birthright. This peace is not an empty promise or only for a selected few, but is present and available to you right now.

I take great comfort in sharing this delicious practice with you. For me it has withstood the test of time and delivered its promise, and I trust that it will do the same for you. I believe that there is good reason why Yoga Nidra has found its way into your life in this moment. I pray that the practice of Yoga Nidra will be, as it has been for me, your companion for life. It's a trustworthy ally through thick and thin.

I suggest you read this book in its entirety before proceeding to the CD. Orienting your mind to the underlying perspective of Yoga Nidra allows your mind and body to relax as you listen to the actual practice sessions. That said, if you are a person who doesn't like reading manuals, then by all means, dive into the practice. Firsthand experience is the best teacher. But after using the CD, do come back to this text in order to deepen your understanding, which will

enable you to obtain maximum advantage from each practice session. I do advise, however, before listening to the CD, that you read through the segment entitled “Setting the Stage” at the end of this introduction so that you can derive maximum benefit from your first experience with Yoga Nidra.

What’s in the Book

Chapter One provides an orientation to the perspective of Yoga Nidra. Reading about Yoga Nidra is a bit like reading a description of sugar before you’ve ever tasted such a treat. The actual taste is beyond words. But I have learned that understanding helps the mind relax and allows us to plunge more deeply into the experience. Keep in mind that Yoga Nidra is not a philosophy. It is a series of experiments you engage in to discover the living truth about yourself and the world. In the final analysis, the proof is in the tasting.

Chapter Two is an overview of the stages of Yoga Nidra, which are presented as actual practice sessions on CD. The CD is set up so that you can work with one or more of these stages of Yoga Nidra, depending upon your need of the moment.

Final reflections on Yoga Nidra are presented in Chapter Three.

The final items in this book will help you further refine your practice of Yoga Nidra. After you’ve listened to the CD several times, make a copy of the Yoga Nidra Worksheet on pages 73–78 and fill it in with the emotions, beliefs, images, and so on that are specific to you, so that you can personalize your practice within a particular mini-session of Yoga Nidra. Yoga Nidra should never be mechanical. You want the practice to be alive and meaningful. You will learn to adapt the practice to suit your individual needs respecting your gender, age, cultural background, and stage of life. Keep in mind the adage, “*Make the practice your own.*”

The References section provides resources for further studies that will provide continuing support for your practice of Yoga Nidra. Why reinvent the

wheel? Take advantage of those who have come before you. We have much to share in our journey together.

The Enclosed CD

The first practice on the CD comprises a series of five mini-sessions, each representing a stage of Yoga Nidra. You can listen to an individual mini-session by itself, or flow through them all as a series that make up one entire practice of Yoga Nidra. As you become adept in your practice, you may wish to engage in only one or two mini-sessions to address an existing issue. At other times, you will enjoy flowing through the entire practice.

Yoga Nidra can be performed in a matter of seconds, a few minutes, or it can be an in-depth practice lasting an hour or more. Gandhi practiced Yoga Nidra on the train between speaking engagements. Swami Veda Bharati has used Yoga Nidra to learn a new language overnight. I've used it with students and clients to help them prepare for surgery and solve conundrums and interpersonal issues. Others have used Yoga Nidra to dissolve their fear of flying, resolve past traumas, and obtain restful sleep. And some of us have used Yoga Nidra to inquire into the mystery of life and awaken to our True Nature as Unqualified Presence.

The second practice on the CD is an integrated session of Yoga Nidra that you can listen to many times over. Multiple layers of understanding are imbedded within both Practice One and Two. This CD is designed so that you can return to it time and again over many years, gaining greater understanding and benefit with each practice. I have heard from innumerable students after they have listened to the same session countless times, *"I never heard that before!"*

SETTING THE STAGE

Before beginning your first practice on the CD, please read the following

guidelines, which will help make your first sojourn into this wondrous land of Yoga Nidra a fruitful journey.

- Find a quiet place to practice. It's important to practice Yoga Nidra in a room where you can be on vacation, away from external distractions. Think of this room as your personal sanctuary where you are on temporary retreat.
- Turn off the phone. Let your spouse and children know that you're not to be disturbed. When your support system helps you maintain your sacred Yoga Nidra retreat, they will witness the marvelous benefits that practice brings to your life. They will want their own retreat time for Yoga Nidra, too.
- Wear comfortable clothing. Clothing that doesn't constrict circulation or cause discomfort while you practice is best.
- Lie on a comfortable surface, preferably a soft rug or mat. I caution you against using your bed because your subconscious mind associates bed with sleep. While Yoga Nidra mimics sleep, you want to remain alert throughout its practice. When possible, practice in a room other than where you sleep.

Yoga Nidra may also be practiced in a sitting position on a comfortable chair or cross-legged on the floor. When sitting, keep the spine straight and the lower back in its normal concave position. Your knees should be lower than the rim of your pelvis, which enables your back to be upright and comfortable. Whether prone or sitting, keep your forehead, chin, and eyes lowered so that your gaze is toward the floor, rather than the wall. When chin, forehead, and eyes move up, thinking engages. When chin, forehead, and eyes are soft and down, thinking abates. During Yoga Nidra, you want soft eyes so that you are gazing out through the eyes of the heart instead of your mind.

- Cover your eyes with an eye bag or soft towel. Keeping light out soothes the brain.
- If you're lying down, place a rolled towel, blanket, or bolster under your knees. Bending the knees relaxes the lower back and allows your body to be totally supported by the floor.

Keep in mind that, ultimately, I want you to have the mental freedom to practice Yoga Nidra anywhere, in any room, on any surface, under all circumstances, dressed any way that you are. When you are oriented in the correct understanding of Yoga Nidra, nothing need stand in the way of your practice.

Welcome Discomfort, Emotions, Memories, and Your Natural State of Being
Discomfort arises.

But discomfort needn't disturb. Your body is a guesthouse and Yoga Nidra teaches you how to invite every imaginable guest in for "tea and conversation." When discomfort arises, don't try to adjust it away. First, receive and welcome it in as a messenger. Inquire as to what its message is. Sometimes discomfort simply wants to whisper something in your ear and then go on its way. At other times it may want you to adjust your body. Observe your tendency to react—your propensity to jump away from experience. Yoga Nidra is a path of *welcoming* where you are learning to meet, greet, and welcome everything that life brings to your table. Only then will you uncover your innate clarity, right action, and peace of mind.

Emotions and memories do arise.

There are times in Yoga Nidra where you will even seek out emotions and memories and invite them into your guesthouse for "tea and conversation." You

possess an innate intelligence that knows exactly what to do in every situation that life brings to your table. When you are willing to be with “this” moment “now,” your intrinsic resources are always nearby, ready to acknowledge and engage right action. Fear is always about the future, and reactivity about the past. Right action resides in the “now.” Yoga Nidra is a practice that reveals and teaches you how to live in the now so that you can access your native intelligence and inborn ability to respond appropriately to every situation.

Open to Being

Yoga Nidra reveals that your body, mind, and the entire universe live in you, in your awareness. During practice, you may experience an expansion beyond the confines of your body, which can make you feel like you’re having an out-of-body experience. But, no matter how far out you expand, aren’t you always “here” as the witness of your experience? Yoga Nidra helps you inquire as to who this witness is, this “I” that you take yourself to be. When you realize True Nature, pure *Being*, you recover your primal memory that your “real body” is everywhere, infinitely expanded. You realize that the entire universe is your body. Then there’s no such thing as an out-of-body experience because there’s nowhere to go where you aren’t already. You’re always here, which is everywhere. Life is a paradoxical mystery, and Yoga Nidra hands you the key that unlocks the mystery that is your life and this world.

Consult your resources.

You’re never alone. Resources are available to assist and support you at every turn of the road of Yoga Nidra. See the Resources and References sections for books, articles, tapes, people, and places to contact for support and further study. When you’re ready, go on retreat where you can learn Yoga Nidra to its fullest