



# Reflections of peace

ONE COOL EVENING in a high-ceilinged dining hall in Novato, California, an unlikely yoga class is getting under way. Fourteen men wearing blue jeans, work boots or running shoes roll out yoga mats and get settled on sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows.

The instructor, Kelly Boys, smiles as she surveys her students, residents at Henry Ohlhoff North, a substance abuse recovery center. She asks if anyone wants to discuss their experiences in the previous week's session. A trim 52-year-old named Charles volunteers that he struggles with feelings of loneliness.

"How does your body feel when it hits you?" Boys asks. "Tense," Charles says. "And where do you feel the tension?" she asks. "In my shoulders," he says.

"Just ask it, 'What do you need? What do you want?'" Boys says. "We're just bringing curiosity to it. When you really meet it, it does drop away." Charles nods, satisfied for now.

As the men settle into relaxed positions, Boys begins to talk them through

A proven antidote to anxiety and restlessness, the ancient practice of yoga nidra has been adopted by veterans, recovering addicts, and run-of-the-mill stressed out people ...



a detailed tour of their own bodies on this day and at this moment—the first step in the practice of *yoga nidra*. Gradually the room quiets, until the only sounds are the hum of the ventilation system and Boys's voice: "Can you feel the inside of your mouth? Now bring your attention to your left ear. Feel the inside of your left ear. Feel your right ear. Can you feel both ears simultaneously?" Around the room, faces relax, jaws soften, and soon snores start to rumble as the men drop deeper into relaxation.

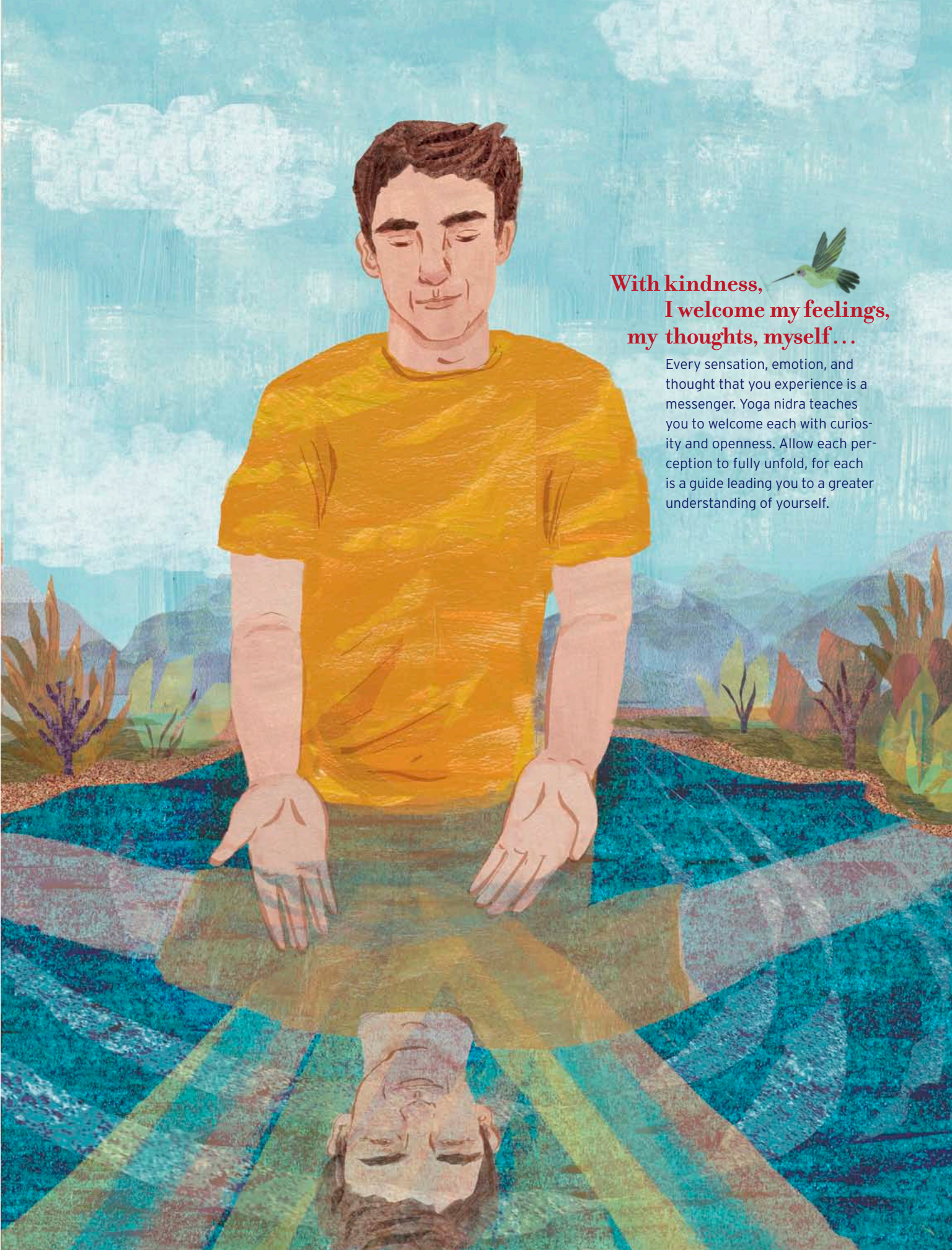
## profound rest

Yoga nidra is an ancient but little-known yogic practice that's becoming increasingly popular as both a form of meditation and a mind-body therapy. It is a systematic form of guided relaxation that typically is done for 35 to 40 minutes at a time. Practitioners say that it often brings immediate physical benefits, such as reduced stress and better sleep, and that it has the potential to

by Katherine Griffin

illustrations by Aimee Sicuro





**With kindness,  
I welcome my feelings,  
my thoughts, myself...**

Every sensation, emotion, and thought that you experience is a messenger. Yoga nidra teaches you to welcome each with curiosity and openness. Allow each perception to fully unfold, for each is a guide leading you to a greater understanding of yourself.



# Explore the 10 steps of yoga nidra

by Richard Miller

## getting started

➤ Set up your practice space by placing a bolster lengthwise on your mat and slipping a block under the top end, so that the bolster slants gently. Lie down with your sitting bones on the mat and with the bolster supporting you from the low back to the head. Place a folded blanket under your head for a pillow. Notice and welcome sounds, smells, and taste as well as color and light. Release excess tension throughout your body and feel a sense of relaxation spreading throughout your entire body and mind.

heal psychological wounds. As a meditation practice, it can engender a profound sense of joy and well-being.

“In yoga nidra, we restore our body, senses, and mind to their natural function and awaken a seventh sense that allows us to feel no separation, that only sees wholeness, tranquility, and well-being,” says Richard Miller, a San Francisco Bay Area yoga teacher and clinical psychologist who is at the forefront of the movement to teach yoga nidra and to bring it to a wider audience.

While many prominent teachers offer classes, CDs, and books on yoga nidra, Miller is responsible for bringing the practice to a remarkable variety of nontraditional settings. He’s helped introduce it on military bases and in veterans’ clinics, homeless shelters, Montessori schools, Head Start programs, hospitals, hospices, chemical dependency centers, and jails. What’s more, thanks to Miller, it’s beginning to get serious scientific attention. Researchers are examining the practice’s potential to help soldiers suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder; addicts struggling to get clean; people with depression, cancer, and MS; health care workers; and married couples coping with stress and insomnia.

More than 40 years ago, in 1970, Miller attended his first yoga class at the Integral Yoga Institute in San Francisco. “At the end of that class, they taught a modified yoga nidra—deep Savasana,” he says. “I had the most profound experience; there was this sense of my inter-relatedness with the entire universe. And a vow arose in me to really investigate this practice.”

*continued on page 93*

## 1 Connect to your heartfelt desire

Bring to mind your heart’s deepest desire—something that you want more than anything else in life. Perhaps it is a desire for health, well-being, or awakening. Feel this heartfelt desire with your entire body while imagining and experiencing it in this moment as if it were true.



## 2 Set an intention

Reflect on your intention for your practice today. It might be to relax and rest, or to inquire into a particular sensation, emotion, or belief. Whatever your intention, welcome and affirm it with your entire body and mind.

## 3 Find your Inner Resource

Bring attention to your Inner Resource, a safe haven within your body where you experience feelings of security, well-being, and calm. You may imagine a place, person, or experience that helps you feel secure and at ease and that helps you feel within your body the sense of well-being. Reexperience your Inner Resource at any time during your practice or in daily life when you feel overwhelmed by an emotion, thought, or life circumstance and wish to feel secure and at ease.



listen

Be guided into yoga nidra by Richard Miller. Find the audio at [yogajournal.com/livemag](http://yogajournal.com/livemag).

## 10 Reflect on your practice

As you complete your practice, reflect on the journey you've just taken. Affirm how the feeling of pure Being, or pure Awareness, is always present as a deep, unchanging peace that underlies every changing circumstance. Imagine integrating that feeling into your everyday life, in both pleasant and difficult moments, and always reconnecting to that sense of equanimity.

*to finish*

At your own pace, transition back to your waking life, reorienting to your surroundings. Come back slowly, and pause for a moment to feel grateful for taking this time for yourself.

## 9 Observe your self

Be aware of your sense of "I-ness," or personality. Notice this sense of identity when you say "I'm hungry," "I'm angry," or "I'm happy." Then, experience yourself as an observing witness or Awareness that is cognizant of these feelings. Set aside thinking and dissolve into Awareness, awake and conscious of the self.

## 4 Scan your body

Gradually move your awareness through your body. Sense your jaw, mouth, ears, nose, and eyes. Sense your forehead, scalp, neck, and the inside of your throat. Scan your attention through your left arm and left palm, your right arm and right palm, and then both arms and hands simultaneously. Sense your torso, pelvis, and sacrum. Experience sensation in your left hip, leg, and foot, and then in your right hip, leg, and foot. Sense your entire body as a field of radiant sensation.

## 5 Become aware of your breath

Sense the body breathing by itself. Observe the natural flow of air in the nostrils, throat, and rib cage as well as the rise and fall of the abdomen with each breath. Feel each breath as flowing energy coursing throughout your entire body.

## 8 Experience joy

Welcome sensations of joy, well-being, or bliss emanating from your heart or belly and spreading throughout your body and into the space around you. With every exhalation, experience sensations of warmth, joy, and well-being radiating throughout your body.

## 7 Witness your thoughts

Notice and welcome the thoughts, memories, and images that are present in your mind. Observe your thoughts without judging them or trying to change them. As you come upon beliefs that you hold about yourself, also bring to mind and experience their opposites, welcoming your experience just as it is.

## 6 Welcome your feelings

Without judging or trying to change anything, welcome the sensations (such as heaviness, tension, or warmth) and emotions (such as sadness, anger, or worry) that are present in your body and mind. Also notice opposite sensations and emotions: If you feel worry, call up feelings of serenity; if you feel tense, experience ease. Sense each feeling and its opposite within your body.

## reflections of peace

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Over years of studying and teaching yoga nidra, Miller has developed his own approach, finding ways to make the practice accessible to a broad range of people, even those with little or no education in yoga. In 2005, he published a book, *Yoga Nidra: A Meditative Practice for Deep Relaxation and Healing*, and he's released several audio guides as well. He currently leads the nonprofit Integrative Restoration Institute, an organization dedicated to the research, teaching, and practice of yoga nidra and yoga philosophy.

"Most people are trying to change themselves," Miller says. "Yoga nidra asks them to welcome themselves. That moment of true welcoming is where the profound transformation takes place."

## simple steps

It's a deceptively simple practice. Because yoga nidra is most often taught lying down—initially guided by a teacher—it's appealing to people who might feel intimidated by yoga postures or traditional seated meditation. A short version of yoga nidra can be introduced and practiced in less than 10 minutes. Yet its various elements, taken together and practiced regularly, make up a sophisticated set of mind-body tools that can help practitioners navigate some of life's harshest moments. Yoga nidra can also be practiced as an accessible form of meditation for those seeking everyday well-being.

In a typical yoga nidra session, a teacher guides practitioners through several stages. You start by developing an intention for your life and for the practice. Then you learn to focus your awareness on your breath, bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts. Throughout, you are encouraged to tap into an underlying sense of peace that is always present and to cultivate "witness consciousness," observing and welcoming whatever is present without getting caught up in it.

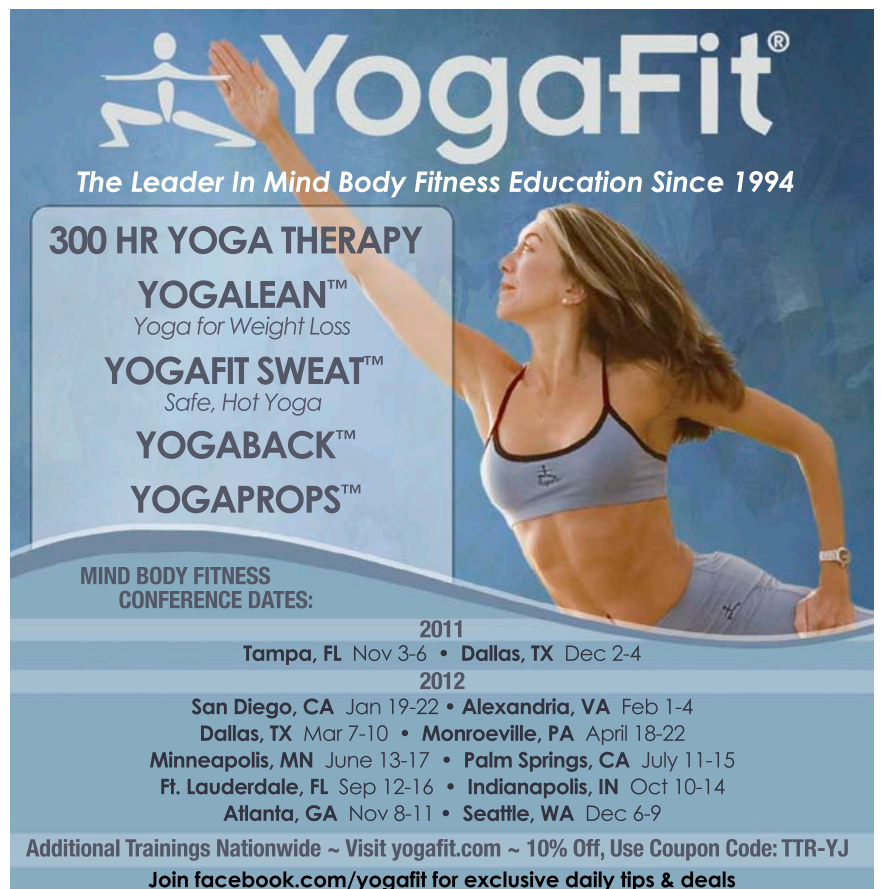
"Yoga nidra allows us to reach the most profound level of relaxation possible," says Rod Stryker, the founder of Para-Yoga, who has been teaching yoga nidra since the mid-1990s and who writes about it in his latest book, *The Four Desires*. "It



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## reflections of peace

opens a doorway to a place where we can see ourselves and our lives in the most positive light.”

Unlike other forms of meditation, in which you focus on a mantra or on your breath, yoga nidra asks you simply to let go. “The practice forces us to engage the muscle of surrender,” Stryker says.

## relief for the restless

The path to bringing yoga nidra to the attention of a wider audience led, oddly enough, through the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, a military treatment facility based, at the time, in Washington, DC. In 2004, Christine Goertz, an academic researcher at the Samueli Institute, a nonprofit research institute, teamed up with Robin Carnes, a yoga teacher who had taught yoga nidra as part of a cardiac care program at Walter Reed. Carnes had learned yoga nidra from Stryker and from Miller's book. She and Goertz used Miller's approach as the basis for a pilot study investigating whether the practice could help soldiers suffering from

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The results of that initial small study, conducted with active-duty servicemembers, suggested that yoga nidra may be helpful for managing PTSD in veterans. (Along the way, someone at Walter Reed suggested renaming the practice to something more accessible, and Miller coined “iRest,” short for “Integrative Restoration.”) As a follow-up, a randomized, controlled trial involving 150 participants was conducted over 18 months at the Veterans Affairs (VA) facility in Miami from 2009 to 2010. And another study is beginning this winter at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center in Chicago.

On the basis of the pilot study results, the military is now offering Miller's iRest yoga nidra practice to wounded warriors at Walter Reed; Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas; Camp Lejeune, a large Marine Corps base in North Carolina; and VA facilities in Miami, Chicago, and Washington, DC. In these ongoing classes, soldiers have reported that some of their most troubling PTSD symptoms,

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including hyperalertness, anxiety, and sleep disturbances, have diminished.

Tools like yoga nidra can be crucial resources for soldiers adjusting to life after war, says Mona Bingham, a retired colonel who's researching the practice at Brooke Army Medical Center. "A lot of soldiers are coming back [from combat] with physical, psychological, and moral wounds," she says. "It's not something we can just give them a medication for." She's studying iRest's effect on military couples coping with the stress that often arises after a deployment ends.

Cheryl LeClair teaches the iRest practice to marines with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries at Camp Lejeune. "Most of the guys don't sleep," she says. "Some have told me they take two Ambien a night, and they still can't sleep. But many of them fall sleep in the very first iRest session. To see them relax and let go is just amazing."

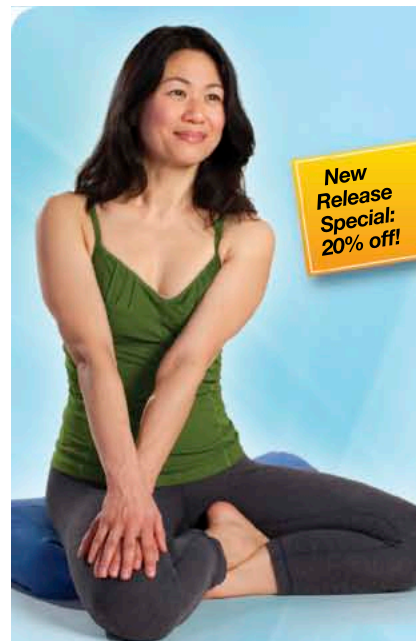
Like the marines in LeClair's classes, new practitioners often go to sleep during

their first few yoga nidra sessions. That's not surprising, says Stryker, since these days many people are sleep deprived. Yoga nidra literally means "yogic sleep," but that is a bit of a misnomer. It's not a special kind of sleep, but a state between sleeping and waking. With more experience, Stryker says, practitioners can experience deep rest while maintaining what he calls "just a trace of awareness."

**In yoga nidra, we restore  
our body, senses, and mind  
to their natural function.**

-- RICHARD MILLER --

For LeClair, whose husband returned from Iraq in 2003 with a brain injury, PTSD, and a crushed vertebra in his neck, yoga nidra has become an essential part of getting through what are often very trying days. (She handles the family finances and much of the responsibility for raising a nine-year-old grandson.) She



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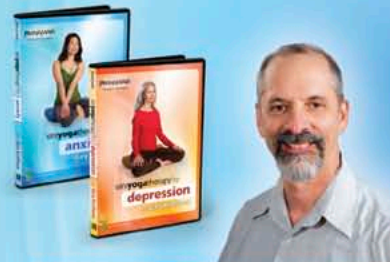
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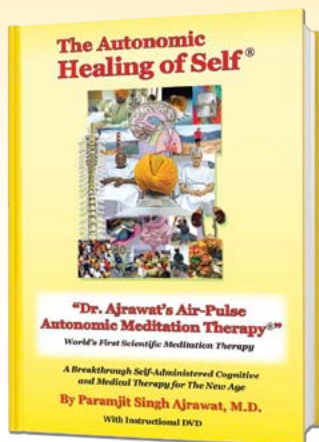
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first experienced the practice at a weekend workshop. “After I woke up, I said, ‘Whatever that is, I want more,’” she says. Now, when she gets overwhelmed, she recalls the lessons of yoga nidra: “If you can step back and witness the thoughts without reaction, it gives you some space. You learn to have equanimity.”

## emotional healing

The roots of yoga nidra are thought to go back thousands of years. When Miller adapted the teachings to make them more accessible to Westerners, he wanted to address emotional wellness. “The Eastern yoga principles took it for granted that you were at a certain state of health and well-being,” he says. “What I saw was that this was not true of most students. So I added the element of the Inner Resource.”

Early on in Miller’s yoga nidra instruction, as you begin to relax, you are asked to conjure up your own personal Inner Resource, a vision of and feeling about a place where you feel safe and secure. If intense emotions surface during yoga nidra—or, for that matter, at any time—you can return to your Inner Resource to take a break.

Charles, one of the men at Henry Ohlhoff North, turns to the practice often. A former executive chef, he retired after a back injury left him in constant pain. He became addicted to alcohol and painkillers and, after three arrests on drug charges, chose rehab instead of jail.

Yoga nidra has helped him find his way back to a part of himself untouched by addiction and chronic pain. His Inner Resource is the bakery his parents ran. “I go back to my childhood,” he says, “doing chores in my parents’ bakery. I think about my dad and how good it felt to have his arms around me.”

Earlier this year, when Charles was granted his first overnight pass two months into his six-month rehabilitation stay, a friend surprised him with a birthday party that included alcohol. Charles started to panic.

“I went out to my car, put my head back on the headrest, and went into [the practice],” he says. “My breathing came down, and I could focus better.” After about half

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an hour, he chose to leave the party and return to the rehab center.

Early research supports the idea that yoga nidra can help people like Charles who are in recovery from addiction. In a study of 93 people at a chemical dependency treatment center, Leslie Temme, a professor in the social work department of Western Carolina University, found that participants who practiced yoga nidra had fewer negative moods and a reduced risk of relapsing into substance abuse. With its emphasis on self-awareness, yoga nidra seems to help recovering addicts feel more comfortable in their own skin, cope better with difficult emotions, and make better choices, Temme says. What's more, she adds, "The clients loved it. They were lining up at the door to get to it."

## inner discoveries

If you've ever tried to sit in meditation for 30 minutes, you know that you don't need to be recovering from trauma to be uncomfortable in your own mind. As a meditation technique, yoga nidra offers a gentle approach, starting with body awareness, then working compassionately with thoughts and emotions as they arise, and gradually leading the meditator to access a greater field of awareness. In fact, in some of the oldest written references to the term *yoga nidra*, it is synonymous with *samadhi*, or union, the ultimate goal of the eightfold path.

This aspect of yoga nidra is perhaps the most difficult to put into words, but, for Miller, it's the core of the practice. Learning to observe and welcome all of the sensations, emotions, and thoughts that arise in deep rest can lead a person to become less identified with the individual self—what Miller calls the "I-thought." Through this experience, he says, it's possible to lose the sense that one is separate from others and to tap into an unshakable sense of interconnectedness to all of life.

And when that happens, Miller says, "There's a deep pool of well-being. It's what I discovered in that first yoga nidra session in 1970. That's what I try to share." ❁

*Katherine Griffin, a former deputy editor at Yoga Journal, is a Bay Area writer and editor.*



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