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The Practice of Yoga Nidra

Recently, I was invited to spend a week studying yoga nidra at Blacktail Ranch, Montana, with Richard Miller, a master teacher and clinical psychologist who has developed an accessible form of yoga nidra called “iRest.” Yoga nidra — which literally means “the sleep of the yogi” — is an ancient meditative practice said to “dissolve the illusion of separation between the self and the divine energy of the cosmos.” A week spent engaged in this restorative inner work and the opportunity to feel at one with the cosmos? It sounded like paradise to me.

Then I saw Blacktail Ranch. The beauty of this 8,000-acre spread at the base of the Continental Divide was captivating. Horses galloped freely through a wildflower-filled meadow, a shimmering stream trickled past the rustic log cabins, and the wind rustled through the thick stands of Ponderosa pine that crested the hilltops, all against a backdrop of the majestic Rockies. It was hard to imagine that soon I’d be entering a hogan, lying down in *shivasana*, and closing my eyes to this natural splendor. But that’s what I did. And several hours later, as I hiked back to the main lodge after my first yoga nidra session, I wasn’t gazing at the natural beauty that surrounded me as much as I was feeling a part of it.

How could a single yoga nidra session prompt such a rapid

shift in my state of consciousness? In each moment, our experiences are recreating us by influencing the construction of the neural networks that give rise to our mind and self. This self-adaptation is usually barely noticeable to us because our experiences tend to be so ordinary, and we move through them with such limited awareness. But meditative

practices are specific, extraordinary experiences in conscious awareness that influence the online construction of these networks in precise ways. In this session, my fellow participants and I had engaged in a series of practices that had resulted in the radiant expansion of our experienced reality — and of our selves.

After assuming a comfortable, supported “corpse pose,” Richard asked us to welcome each sensation, thought, feeling, and emotion that arose in the course of our practice “as a messenger entering our guest house of awareness.” Then he asked that we bring to mind the image of an inner sanctuary — a place to which we could emotionally retreat whenever we felt the need. As he spoke these words, I felt my psychological defenses dropping away.

Becoming vulnerable is a necessary prelude to change. The neural networks that encode our history of experience

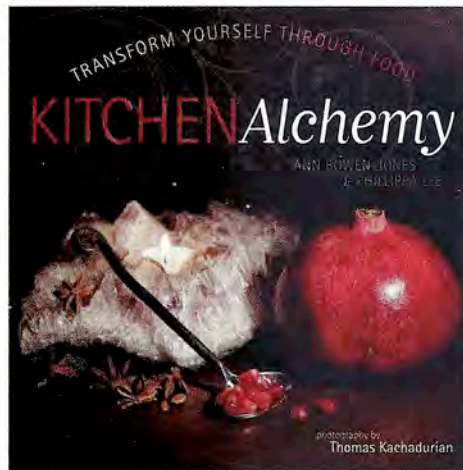
and serve as the building blocks of our reality can only be altered when they’re in a state of activation. Some of these networks are inhibited from becoming activated because they represent painful memories; were they to become activated, they might impede normal functioning. But inhibition also prevents these networks from being updated and our psychic injuries from



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being healed. Within the safe space that Richard helped us to create, these previously off-limits regions of the mind and brain became disinhibited, rendering them available to the influence of the practices that would follow.

The next set of practices served to activate our sensory systems, sensory and associative neocortices, attentional circuitries, and parasympathetic nervous systems, ensuring that we would be deeply relaxed, yet enlivened and aware of the totality of our being. Then, with our intelligence system fully primed for change, we began the “manifestation of opposites” practice.

To begin this critically important practice, Richard asked us once again to welcome into awareness any feeling or emotion, belief or image that might arise for us. We were to experience each “visitor” as fully as possible, and then summon its “opposite” and experience that one as fully as possible. So, a moment of happiness would be followed by a moment of sadness; a moment of tension would be followed by a moment of relaxation; an image of an ocean would be followed by an image of a desert; and so on. This left very little opportunity to identify with a particular state before experiencing it as a minute segment of an entire dimension of experiential reality. At the neural level, we were simply yoking the networks that represented each one of these mental events with their antipodes. But in the realms of our personal spiritual experience, we were beginning to create minds characterized by equanimity, and selves that were expanding to include more and more of “the divine energy of the cosmos.”

To learn more about yoga nidra, iRest, and Richard Miller’s work with the Integrative Restoration Institute, visit irest.us.

Peggy La Cerra, Ph.D., is Director of the Center for Evolutionary Neuroscience and co-author of *The Origin of Minds: Evolution, Uniqueness and the New Science of the Self* (Crown).

We are at an exciting moment in our culture with the fusion of cuisines from around the world. The limitless approaches to cooking combined with the pace of innovation is exhilarating. However, there is also heightened anxiety, guilt and uncertainty around food. Pressures to eat healthy while living impossibly demanding lives lead many to obsess about what to eat or simply give up and give in to unhealthy choices.



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\$21.95 US, £9.95 UK • 160 pages

ISBN: 978-0-9818708-6-1 • Softcover 7.5 x 7.5

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