



INTERVIEW WITH

Richard Miller

iRest Yoga Nidra®:
Taking yoga nidra
to the next level

AYL Editor Sue Jackson caught up with American Richard Miller, founder of iRest Yoga Nidra®, during a recent Australian training program to learn about how iRest was developed, and what the practice entails.



Developing iRest

Sue Jackson: Richard, can you tell us about how you developed what many yoga practitioners have experienced as a yoga nidra practice into your iRest® program?

Richard Miller: My introduction to yoga nidra was actually in 1970 with Swami Satchidananda's teachings through the Integral Yoga Institute; then subsequently in the mid 70s with Satyananda's teachings. Also, I had several teachers who helped me pull it together as my own understanding. My root spiritual teacher, Jean Klein, had studied with some of the same teachers I ended up studying with 35 years later.

Sue: So can you explain how you came to iRest, and how it may be the same or different to what many of us in yoga may be familiar with when we hear the words, 'yoga nidra'?

Richard: In 1970, during my first yoga class, I was introduced to what I now know as the rudiments of yoga nidra at the end of the yoga class. I had a very profound experience – a realisation of my non-separate harmonious place in the universe. As I walked out that night feeling a sense of non-division with the universe, a spontaneous vow arose in me to really understand this mystery that I was just brought home to. I started enquiring into the practice of yoga in general and yoga nidra specifically. From the very beginning, I was attracted to the non-dual teachings, and when in bookstores books on nondualism seemed to fall off the shelf into my hands.

As I began to grow into the practice, one of the teachers that I was studying with asked me to begin to teach. In the beginning, I was teaching a more traditional form of yoga nidra – similar to Satyananda's teachings from the Bihar School. Over several years, it occurred to me that I was using many cultural symbols from India in my teachings that I'd inherited from my teachers – various symbols, colours, images, and formulations. I began to wonder, did these symbols belong to me as a Westerner, or did these feel like impositions from another culture, which I was imposing on my students? As I pondered this, I started to remove them and instead of saying, 'See this image, hear this sound, visualise this symbol', I asked, 'When you bring your attention to your body, where do you feel most drawn and what do you discover here? What image, sound, or symbol do you experience?'

I found that the practice became much more potent and so I started removing the cultural trappings of India and began making the practice a more secular form of self-inquiry. I took the five koshas as entry ways, or portals, through which a person could inquire as to who and what they were taking themselves to be. This led them to experience a spontaneous dis-identification from those aspects (body, senses, mind, emotions, thoughts, images) and brought them to a clarity of understanding, perceiving themselves as an ineffable presence, essence, or mystery.

In my own practice of yoga nidra, I would lie down for two or three hours, going very systematically through my body, taking one kosha at a time

until each opened spontaneously and successively into the next one. I experienced how sensing the body gradually released me into sensing the breath. The breath released me into sensing emotions; emotions released me into sensing thoughts and beliefs, which released me into the experience of tremendous joy and bliss, which then opened into pure awareness. I came to deeply appreciate the wisdom of the ancients who had so beautifully developed this exquisite practice of yoga nidra that allowed me to directly experience the nondual teachings of awakening to our true nature.

Sankalpa

As I continued to practice in this manner, I began to understand various aspects of the practice that I felt needed further elucidation than how I'd received the teachings early on. For instance, I realised that the Sankalpa was a much richer aspect of the practice than I'd initially thought. Rather than viewing it as simply a resolve or intention, I came to view it as consisting of three aspects. First, I ask you to enquire as to what is your deepest, most cherished Heartfelt Desire, which gives purpose, meaning, and value to your life. Second, I ask you to enquire as to your Intentions, vows, or agreements that you enter into with yourself that help you realise and nourish your Heartfelt Desire.

Then, I saw that many people who were practicing yoga nidra, because of prior trauma felt disconnected from themselves. They didn't feel safe or secure within. I realised they needed to develop what I've come to refer to as an Inner Resource, an inner felt-sense

of refuge within, where we feel deeply connected to ourselves, which gives us a sense of safety, security, and well-being. Our Inner Resource enables us to feel safe with ourself, and allows us to navigate the deeper aspects of yoga nidra. I saw that the three aspects of Heartfelt Desire, Intention, and Inner Resource provided a firm foundation from which we could dive into the practice of yoga nidra.

Non-dual teachings

Sue: You refer to non-dual teachings having influenced your approach. Can you explain non-dual for us?

Richard: For me, the practice of yoga nidra helps us break free of all beliefs and identifications that otherwise prevent us from realising our true nature. With the help of my teachers and the practice of yoga nidra, I realised that I am, and each of us is, a unique yet nondual expression of the universe. By this, I mean that I no longer see 'other'. While my five senses and mind still project a sense of separation, a seventh sense, so to speak, awoke, or came back on line, that doesn't perceive separation.

From my perspective, the teachings of yoga help restore the body, mind, and senses to their natural functioning. It enables us to be fully functional human beings, with all cylinders operating correctly, where we have a great relationship with our emotions and thoughts, and are responsive, rather than reactive, in our relationship with the world.

I came to realise through yoga nidra that the mind, in concert with our five senses and ego-I thought, create a sense of separation, which enables us to function and survive as human beings. Yoga nidra reawakens our seventh sense – which we knew when as children, but that our early conditioning covered over – which knows no sense of separation. Practices like yoga nidra help us somatically awaken our felt sense of non-division, and live life as a paradox. We see separate objects, but we feel no sense of separation.

I now understand everything as non-dual. Everything feels interconnected to everything else. Everything feels to me to be a unique but undivided aspect of the whole. From this perspective, I feel that everything has a right to be here because everything is a part of the whole. My thoughts have a right to be here. My emotions have a right to be here. Every human being, rock, plant has a place here. This awakened within me a tremendous ground of love. I don't see the need to change or fix anything. When I feel an emotion, I have no urge to change or get rid of it. Rather, I see it as a messenger that is providing us with information as to how to respond. When a thought arises, I'm curious as to what it has to tell me. I'm interested in welcoming and being with everything, as I see it as an expression of my underlying wholeness.

iRest as a practice and as a path of meditation

Sue: Do you see iRest as being more of a psychological practice, a yoga practice, a spiritual practice, or something else?

Richard: I see iRest, which is a specific application of yoga nidra, as a practice that helps us to become fully functional and fully integrated human beings. From this perspective, I don't view it as either psychological or spiritual. I view it as a practice that simply helps us to become a fully functional and good human being. That said, I've done a lot of work using yoga nidra with people who are having psychological problems – post-traumatic stress, chronic pain, depression, psychosis – and I see the various components of yoga nidra as wonderful tools that can help a person integrate and fully heal through various psychological and physical issues.

Many people who come to yoga nidra simply want to experience psychological healing, well-being, and deep peace. When they do I often hear them say, "Thank you, I'll see you in the marketplace." But a few stay and ask, "There's more to this practice, isn't there?" To them I

respond, "Indeed, yes there is!" I let them know that if they're interested we can keep going more deeply into the practice and dive into what ultimately opens into a non-dual realisation of their essential nature as not separate from the entire universe.

Sue: Do you view the practice, if you had to categorise it, as a meditation practice?

Richard: Yes! Yoga nidra is a path of meditation; a complete practice of yoga. All the integral pieces of yoga are present in yoga nidra: knowing your body, senses, and mind; expressing right speech and relationship; realising yourself as love and compassion in action; discovering how to be authentic and spontaneous; and recognising yourself as an undivided aspect of life, where life is living you into a life of service. So yes, I see yoga nidra as a perfect practice of meditation.

The place of relaxation and change in iRest

Sue: Experiencing deep relaxation is often thought of as synonymous with yoga nidra. Is iRest also a practice of relaxation?

Richard: I actually take a slightly different view. Although it does, I don't think of yoga nidra as designed to teach relaxation. I see that's the by-product. I see yoga nidra is designed to help us meet, greet, and welcome our self and realise our perfect response to each moment life brings to our table. During yoga nidra, I don't tell people to relax. Instead, I invite them to sense the tension or sensations that are present. I ask them to enquire as to what happens when they really meet, greet, and welcome sensation without trying to get rid of it; instead, to be with tension, just as it is. As surface tensions are truly met, they spontaneously dissolve, revealing deeper layers of tension. I continue to invite people to meet these deeper tensions and see what happens. These then dissolve. Now what's there: new levels of tension. Ultimately, yoga nidra helps us dive so deeply into the body that we meet that level of

tension that is actually holding the cellular walls and molecules together – tension that we’re never going to get rid of. As my teacher said, “The only truly relaxed body is a dead body.” I’m trying to help people get to the basic aliveness that is life itself, living us. Paradoxically, as they sense their way through tension into this basic aliveness, they’ve discovered what true relaxation is, which comes from not trying to change, but from welcoming what is.

In yoga nidra, we are not trying to change. Instead, we’re learning to welcome ourselves as we are; to be with what is. When we’re trying to change ourselves, when we feel we should be other than we are, this trying to change comes out of a feeling of self-hatred. We don’t like who we are. We want to be somebody else. I say, “Let’s start with who we are, as we are, and see who we become when we accept who we are, as we are, and stop trying to be somebody

or something else. But if you want to keep trying to be somebody else, then okay, do that and see if it really works. Hopefully you’ll see, sooner than later, that it doesn’t.”

Sue: When you witness people take that path of trying to accept and be themselves, do you actually see change?

Richard: Tremendous change. People start saying things like, “I don’t know why, but for the first time I’m sleeping through the night”, or “I don’t know what’s going on, but I find during the day I concentrate better.” One woman said, “I’m a really angry person, but since the last practice I’ve been full of joy and everybody likes being around me. And I like being around me. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I want more of this yoga nidra.” So I do see that changes come automatically and spontaneously when people welcome and accept themselves as they are.

The practice helps us investigate our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs, and realise that these movements are actually allies that are here to help us on the path. When we keep trying to get rid of them, they’re just going to turn up the volume or turn up the dis-ease we’re experiencing, until we finally stop and listen. Yoga nidra is a practice of deep listening to our body, mind, and senses, to what we’re always being invited to realise, but that we’ve been ignoring. One of the deepest things we’re being told over and over is that we’re not separate, we’re not separate, we’re not separate. Ultimately, yoga nidra brings us to this deep realisation, which is the ending of suffering.

Naming the practice iRest

Sue: And finally, how did you come to the name, iRest?

Richard: When I was first invited by the US military to do research

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using yoga nidra for post-traumatic stress with active duty wounded warriors, the military said that they didn't know what to do with this name "yoga nidra". They asked me to come up with a name that would be more appealing to soldiers. So I thought long and hard about changing the name of a 4000-year-old approach, and came up with the name Integrative Restoration. 'Integrative' because the practice helps us heal through our emotional, cognitive, and psychological wounds and come to be a fully integrated and functional human being. And 'Restoration' because it restores us to our essential nondual nature where we feel connected to ourselves and to the entire universe. Back in 2004, everything was iPad and iPhone, so I thought, "Why not iRest", with 'i' for integrative and 'rest' for restoration and 'iRest' because the practice gives the 'T' a rest. So I came to the military and I said, "How about Integrated Restoration, iRest?" They said, "We like that!"

We conducted the research and were so successful that two years later, when the military understood how powerful yoga nidra is, they came to us and said, "We really like what you're doing. We've decided you can call it yoga nidra." So we call it Integrative Restoration iRest yoga nidra. We're keeping the iRest portion because we're doing so much research on iRest as a particular adaptation of yoga nidra. I want people to understand that when they come to a practitioner and enquire as to whether they're teaching iRest, they can understand "yes" or "no", because many people are teaching yoga nidra as relaxation, but not necessarily the deeper healing or awakening aspects that are inherent in the practice.

I view yoga nidra as a tremendous force for both healing and awakening to our true nature. Yoga nidra is a comprehensive movement of meditation; a total path of yoga. To me, it's more than a technique for teaching relaxation, or breathing, or something we do at the end of a hatha yoga class. I certainly can teach it this way and I do. But yoga nidra in general, and iRest, specifically, is so much more. It's a comprehensive path of meditation that can enable us to be a fully awake and actualised human being.

Richard Miller, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, author, researcher, yogic scholar, and spiritual teacher. Richard has devoted his life and work to integrating the nondual wisdom teachings of Yoga, Tantra, Advaita, Taoism, and Buddhism with Western psychology. For information on Richard's work, visit www.irest.us

Sue Jackson, PhD, Editor of AYL, is a psychologist, author, researcher, and yoga teacher. For more information on Sue's work, visit www.bodyandmindflow.com.au