

# AN ETHICAL CALL TO HONOUR THE INTEGRITY OF YOGA NIDRA PRACTICE AND SHARING.

## Offering *Yoga nidrā* within a more ethical and equitable framework

### A STATEMENT BY THE YOGA NIDRA NETWORK

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### For and on behalf of The Yoga Nidra Network

This statement is the ethical foundation of our practice and the basis of our work.

It is also the statement of principles to which we require all of our graduates to agree.

We also present this statement on our Facebook groups and community pages as a clarification of our principles, and from henceforth require anyone wishing to post information about their own courses in our Social Media circles to adhere also to these principles.

We invite all Yoga Nidra practitioners and teachers from all lineages, every school and none, to affirm your support for this statement.

## Pre-amble and rationale

Contemporary, transnational yoga culture occupies a unique place in the world. It offers a near-endless diversity of practices for self-realisation and healing, but it has always been marked by the cultures and circumstances in which those practices have been shared. It is our belief that today, yoga can offer unparalleled opportunities for personal healing, interpersonal discernment, community empowerment, and healing justice. It is also clear to us that yoga practices are often shared in ways that are complicit with interpersonal

violence, oppression, and economic exploitation, especially when those that share it are either ignorant or dismissive of the tangled involvement of colonialism, racial violence and patriarchal oppression in the evolution of the institutions that seek to govern yoga today.

Yoga culture remains fiercely resistant to regulation. Yet our practices are of increasing interest in therapeutic and educational arenas. At the same time, social media is increasingly allowing for many silenced voices within our communities to be heard for the first time. As a result, we believe that the various communities of yoga practice must raise our ethical standards, and be clear about what we stand for, and where our boundaries of tolerance lie. We must, in fact, self-regulate before regulation is forced upon us.

We do not wish anyone to become the yoga police. Instead, we offer this document as a statement of our intent alone. If we can be clear about our ethics, our standards, and our scope of practice, we hope that other yoga organisations will follow suit. We invite our sister organisations to read the following, offer feedback, and either co-sign this document, or offer their own in response.

May we come together, finding consensus where possible, and honouring ethical differences where not. May we be held to account for what we stand for, by our students, our clients, our allies and our spiritual siblings.

We are the Yoga Nidra Network, and as a result, this document is specifically focused on that group of practices and philosophies variously described as *yoga nidrā*, *nidrā shakti*, *prana nidrā*, *śavāsana*, deep relaxation and similar. These are practices that promise profound healing and a reconciliation with the world that holds us. At best, they may be instrumental in decolonising sleep itself. And yet, at worst, these are practices that have been offered in heart-breakingly abusive contexts, and often with a total ignorance of their true history, boundless potential, and elegant structures. This document, therefore, is the product of a long, difficult, and ongoing journey to liberate not only students, and not only the practices, but the heart of *yoga nidrā*: the power of *Nidrā shakti* herself.

## In our circles of practice

### To our students, we say...

We believe that access to a high quality of rest, and the opportunity to dream well, in safe, nurturing settings, is everyone's birth right. We are also aware that the barriers to accessing modern yoga that affect marginalised groups such as people of colour, disabled people, and the underpaid, can also be a factor in accessing both high quality rest, and *yoga nidrā* practices. To be clear, if you are working hard, not paid a lot, can't lie in a traditional *śavāsana*, or just don't feel welcome in yoga studios, we will do our best to help you be welcome into our circles of practice.

### To facilitators of *yoga nidrā* we say...

We have formulated the following enquiries for facilitators to ask of ourselves before beginning to share any practice of *yoga nidrā*, and then again at the end, before leaving the practice space. These enquiries form a checklist for the minimal requirements necessary to ensure responsible practice, and to protect the safety and security of the people whom we are inviting to rest in the openness of awareness that is *yoga nidrā*. They are based on based on many years of experimentation, reflection, research and peer discussion.

#### 1. Self-practice: Have I practiced *yoga nidrā* myself today?

Firstly, and most importantly, the nature of practitioners' encounters with *yoga nidrā* depends largely upon the facilitator's capacity to share directly and authentically from their own experience. This means that we can only guide others towards what we practice ourselves regularly. If we are committed to the power and importance of the practice, we need always to replenish ourselves before we are able to facilitate other's nourishment.

We are committed to democratic communities of practice, in which we guide our students to a shared intention. We are not prescribing to patients, nor are we qualified to do so. We cannot therefore, in authenticity and honesty recommend a practice that we ourselves have no use for. The authenticity of the statements we offer to practitioners can be felt as a real truth only if we have in fact experienced these truths for ourselves, recently and repeatedly. With years of regular practice, it is likely that the spontaneously arising state of

being in *yoga nidrā* may be at our fingertips, and our own practices may become less formal, but for the vast majority of facilitators, a regular, preferably daily practice, is necessary to ensure that we can facilitate with confidence.

**2. Safety: Have I secured the boundaries of the practice (in space and time), and communicated the genuine security of that space (and time) to the practitioners so that they can trust they are safe?**

In brief, this means that we need to: occupy the place in the practice space that gives the clearest view of all entrances and exits; keep our eyes open; and stay alert to the boundaries of the space, to minimise and manage any disturbances to students. It means delivering practices that finish within the agreed amount of time, and it means informing all present of the ways in which we are holding the boundaries of the space. This also includes explaining specific or unusual aspects of the practices in advance so students can make informed decisions about whether and how to experience them. When we inform students of our role, our intention, and the broad shape of the practice in advance, students can more accurately relate to their inner sense of safety, and they can relax, if they are able and willing to, without overly surrendering to the will of the facilitator.

Most importantly, it is vital that facilitators can guide students into the state of *yoga nidrā* without themselves descending so deeply into trance that they are no longer responsible for group safety. A *yoga nidrā* facilitator is like a designated driver: guiding the journey and part of the experience, so that others may relax and enjoy the ride. In particular, we must keep our eyes open, and our presence steady and grounded in the space, remaining undistracted and fully attentive to the needs of students until the practice is completed, and all students are safe and ready to leave.

### 3. **Comfort: Have I done what I can to ensure that everyone is as comfortable as possible?**

The capacity to be in the openness of awareness that is *yoga nidrā* when we are experiencing pain or discomfort is a valuable skill to practice. But generally speaking, especially for most people who are coming to *yoga nidrā* for relaxation and neural regulation, our priority as facilitators is to ensure the comfort of practitioners. This includes offering props and alternative positions to rest in, as well as encouraging them to move or be still as and when their body calls them to. It is our core responsibility to adapt the space and the practice to the students as far as we can, and to build a space of welcome, nurture and safety together whenever we practice.

Of particular importance is the temperature of the space, and the body temperature of the students. The ideal temperature for the practice of *yoga nidrā* is an important and very personal matter. In so far as we are able, as facilitators, we should: ensure practitioners have the freedom to choose what suits them best; inform them before they start that the body temperature is very likely to drop during practice, and ensure that there are spare layers available should they need them mid-practice.

### 4. **Voice: Have I done what I can to check that all the practitioners can hear and understand me?**

No musician or vocalist would consider embarking on a performance without doing a sound-check for the acoustics of the space to ensure audibility and good quality sound. As facilitators of *yoga nidrā*, our voices are also our primary instruments of delivery. Although there are some helpful strategies to make it possible for deaf students to lip-read a *yoga nidrā* facilitator, generally speaking, everybody needs to be able to hear the words. To this end, a basic sound check is useful before the practice begins, and facilitators should inform students of a simple way to inform us if they can no longer hear us.

On the other hand, it is our belief that the benefits of the practice are not only carried in the words that we use. Whilst it is our intention to offer *yoga nidrā* in as many languages as we can, we also know that the practice is of benefit to those who do not understand the words as they are presented. We encourage all

facilitators to research and experiment with tone of voice, rhythm and cadence for a more effective practice, and as a community, we are carefully experimenting with more creative ways of using our ‘instruments’. These include multiple voices, multiple languages, the inclusion of poetry, music and other devotional elements, and practices with minimal spoken content.

5. **Disorientation: Have I offered sufficient buffer time after the *yoga nidrā*, and enough effective grounding practices for the practitioners (and myself) to ensure that everyone has clearly returned to an alert state before leaving the space?**

*Yoga nidrā* is a trance practice. It is both hypnotic and dissociative by its nature. This is key to its power and can offer immense benefits to practitioners. However, it is our responsibility as facilitators to minimise and mitigate any disorientation students may feel following the practice. We can do that if we keep our practices short and light, especially for beginners. There are significant and careful exceptions, but most of our practices are between 15 and 20 minutes in length, with an addition 5 to 10 minutes of settling and return. It is also useful to lead students in post-nidrā practices that help them ground and return to an everyday state of consciousness. Our job as facilitators is not over until we can be certain that all the practitioners (and ourselves) are ready to leave the space. To that end, it is important that facilitators of the practice are themselves well-practiced in holding, and confident in leading, a variety of states of consciousness, from everyday awareness, through lighter and more profound states of trance.

It is also vital for facilitators to be well-aware of possible abreactions to the practice, and appropriate responses, including but not limited to: sensations of rising anxiety; falling asleep; disorientation, and dissociation. Useful grounding practices may include but are not limited to: gentle movement, self-massage, engaging the senses of smell and taste, drinking water, looking around the room, moving out of the room with supervision, interacting with other students, and provoking gentle laughter.

## 6. Diversity: Have I clearly communicated the genuine sense that all that arises is welcome?

It is our obligation as facilitators to communicate clearly that everything that arises during the practice is welcome. We celebrate a diversity of ways to practice, and honour a diversity of possible responses to the practice. To that end, we encourage facilitators to offer simple choices and above all, to use invitational language wherever possible so that students can adapt the practice to their individual needs. We discourage universal statements and commands such as telling students not to fall asleep, and we believe there is no space in a fully liberatory practice of *yoga nidrā* for shaming students for responses to the practice that are beyond their control.

The development of invitational language in particular has not played a major part in the transnational dissemination of these practices. We are very aware of how difficult it can be for facilitators to make this linguistic shift. However, we believe it to be vital for a number of reasons. Authoritarian instruction in practices of self-realisation, particularly when students are in a vulnerable state, is in our view a primary supporting mechanism in the cases of spiritual abuse that have so blighted our institutions. Offering simple, informed choices up to and including the choice to leave, encourages students to take agency over their experience, and is thus the easiest, most profound way that we can support their self-realisation. It also enables participation by the widest range of students, making the practice more accessible than ever before. In particular, we urge all facilitators of *yoga nidrā* to avoid telling students what they are or should be experiencing while in such a vulnerable and precious, self-intimate state.

## 7. Responsiveness: Have I facilitated a practice that is responsive to the practitioners, and attended to their present needs, in this place, at this time?

At best, *yoga nidrā* is an intuitive practice, guided by the facilitator in a way that is structured and pre-planned, but also responsive to the needs of the students, in a particular place, at a particular moment. It is our belief that pre-written practices create a wholly unnecessary disconnect between students, facilitator, and the power of the practice. We discourage the use of scripts unless for training and self-development

purposes. It is, in our experience, entirely possible to empower facilitators to create strong and safe, structured practices without such scripts, and all graduates of our training programmes are confident doing so. When *yoga nidrā* facilitators read standard scripts, all of our attention and energy can end up directed towards the page we are reading, rather than the people whom we are serving.

We are aware that other schools do use scripts, and we honour their rationales for doing so. We would ask in return that such schools respect our choices and above all, understand that working without a script does not mean ‘anything goes’. In fact, in order to offer *yoga nidrā* in this way, our graduates are trained in many elegant and intricate elements of practice structure as well as multiple rationales for choosing them. Facilitating the practice ‘off script’ is an art, at the heart of which is a profound spiritual and relational awareness. It is this capacity, resting on the foundation of intellectual understanding, yet residing in the mystic heart of each facilitator, that permits every word of the practice to be offered clearly in service to the spirit of *Nidrā shakti* herself: in this moment, for these people. In our experience, every facilitator of *yoga nidrā* can develop this, their own unique contribution to the practice as a whole.

## In our relationships together...

A healthy yoga teaching practice rests on the integrity and honesty of its community of practice – its sangha. How we relate to each other is just as important in ensuring the integrity, safety and authenticity of our teaching spaces, as how we relate to the students who come to us for care. In our relationships together, we commit to the following principles. They are rooted in Patanjali’s yamas and niyamas, but also in the principles of restorative and healing justice, and the applied ethics of numerous therapeutic professions. Whilst we recognise the profound contribution to interpersonal ethics that has been made by diverse translations and progressive re-interpretations of Patanjali’s sutras, we prefer to use accessible language to ensure a consensus that is often lost when assumptions are made about which translation from the Sanskrit each facilitator might be used to. Just as with the yamas and niyamas, however, we are aware that some of these principles may, in certain circumstances, be in conflict with each other.

### 1. The law

We commit to following the laws of all relevant jurisdictions as far as possible, and notwithstanding a

significant conflict with our other ethical commitments. Where we do take action in contravention of local legislature, it will be in full consideration, and honest communication of the impacts of such actions on our communities, and never in our teaching spaces.

## 2. Non-harming

We commit to doing the least harm possible in our dealings with others, inside and outside of teaching spaces. We will refrain from, and hold our peers to account where possible for, any actions that knowingly cause physical, emotional, sexual or spiritual suffering to others. Where such suffering is unwittingly caused, we commit to making amends and apologies, both collectively and individually, and to learning from our mistakes.

## 3. Discrimination

We commit to avoiding discrimination against others, inside and outside of teaching spaces, on the basis of all protected characteristics, including but not limited to age, gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion, disability, body type, class, and socioeconomic status. We seek to actively include and honour the contributions of those who have been marginalised and excluded within modern yoga communities.

## 4. Accessibility

We commit to making our spaces, classes and communities as safe and welcoming as we can to all those who live with long-term and lifelong conditions, including but not limited to diabetes, chronic pain, trauma survivors, autistic people, and other physically diverse and neurodiverse populations. We believe that doing so is equitable, whilst also ensuring a higher standard of care and access to all. We avoid the language of cure and intervention for those individuals and populations that consider themselves to be different but equal, rather than different and sick. We share spaces and practices in which symptoms may be managed, and assert the right of all those in our communities to self-determine, self-regulate, and decide which changes they wish to see in their lives.

## 5. Scope of practice

We commit to transparency and clarity regarding our individual scopes of practice. Where our knowledge and authority comes from outside of the communities that trained us, we commit to clarity and honesty about the sources of that authority. This may include such complimentary qualifications as academic scholarship, scientific training, massage and various therapeutic modalities. As facilitators alone, we are not

empowered to diagnose or treat. We believe that the space to rest and heal that *yoga nidrā* offers is a valuable gift to offer on its own merits.

We also commit to transparency and clarity regarding the scope of our trainings, and to making our trainees aware of the important differences between learning a practice for self-care, learning how to facilitate practice to others, learning how to train others to facilitate practice, and working within a therapeutic framework.

## 6. Bullying

We will not tolerate the bullying or abuse of those inside or beyond our communities. We hold each other to the highest standards of personal conduct, both online and off. We commit to fair, non-coercive, and preferably independent practices of conflict resolution wherever necessary.

## 7. Dual relationships

We recognise the reality of dual relationships within our communities, defined as students who are also business partners, employees who are also in a romantic relationship, and so on. Nonetheless, we commit to careful consideration and transparency whenever a dual relationship is entered into. We commit to mitigating for any risk of favouritism, coercion, or conflict of interest thus incurred. We are specifically cautious of any new romantic or sexual relationship that occurs in relationships of unequal power, such as those between teacher and student, or employer and trainee. Given the troubled history of modern yoga institutions, we commit to avoiding any such intimate relationships before they are established, either by refusing the intimate relationship, or by dissolving the existing relationship of power. Yoga teachers should not, in short, ever need to enter into new, intimate relationships with students, nor trainers with trainees.

## 8. Honouring our sources

We commit to our individual and collective continuing education on the history, research, effects and socio-political context of our practices. We commit to active transparency about the sources and contexts in which our practices developed, and to appropriately honouring the contributions of those that developed them. We are particularly aware that transnational yoga culture often disseminates offensive and hostile, as well as apparently benign but oppressive, perspectives on South Asian history and culture, its nations and its diasporas. We are committed to the work of decolonising the practice and honouring the full complexity of its development.

## 9. Citational practices

We commit to non-predatory and ethical transactions in all our exchanges of knowledge, power and money. This includes honouring the copyright and authorship of others, whilst allowing for reasonable fair use. In cases of conflict arising here and elsewhere, we commit to a reasonable and equitable process of conflict resolution. We further commit to proper referencing, citation, and accuracy in reporting the research, writing, and statements of others.

## 10. Confidentiality and honesty

We commit to confidentiality regarding any private and personal information shared within our communities. At the same time, we commit to honesty with each other regarding significant and serious breaches of this ethical code. The stories of our friends, clients, students and teachers may inspire us, but their identifying information and intimate details in particular have no place in our public conversations.

## 11. Accountability

We are committed to the health and integrity of the practice of *yoga nidrā*, and the communities that practice it. We are committed to raising ourselves to the highest standards of care and justice. We commit to holding each other accountable in open, honest, and non-inflammatory ways. We commit to an attitude of curiosity, humility and open learning, and encourage anyone joining our communities of practice to do the same.

# Taking our place in the world...

Whilst the practices of modern yoga, including *yoga nidrā* have been of immense benefit to the world, we cannot ignore the reality that they have far too often been shared in ways that collude with harmful socio-political dynamics, or in forms manipulated to coercive and abusive ends. In far too many places, these practices have been offered with naïvely positive intentions, leading to well-meaning disempowerment. Whilst many of us have come to the practice as an escape from the pressures of our lives, it is an unavoidable fact that sharing the practice of yoga has always had a wider impact, and always been a politically charged act. For this time, and this context, there are specific socio-political alignments that we wish to make, and thus we include the following commitments to wider justice.

## Post-lineage yoga

We are profoundly dismayed by the ongoing institutionalisation of abuse within almost all prominent major lineages of yoga. Compounding the betrayal of trust involved is the silencing, minimisation, and total abandonment of the victims involved. We are also profoundly uncomfortable with the enormous amounts of money and power accrued by many of these same organisations. We believe the time is right for a collective response to hold them to account.

Firstly, we call on all those institutions who continue to profit from the silencing of victim testimonies, and the false valorisation of their abusers, to make significant and transparent amends. This would include but is not limited to: public and honest statements outlining in a non-harmful way, the abuses and the historical mistakes made in dealing with them; amends and reparations to the victims and those of good faith whose generous contributions to the community of practice was the real value offered to students; and the investigation and reform of all practices and protocols that might have contributed to the institutional enablement of abuse. We strongly encourage such institutions to look beyond their boundaries to relevant peers and professionals within the wider yoga and healing justice communities to support that process.

Secondly, the Yoga Nidra Network honours the profound gifts of modern yoga, whilst also understanding the ways in which its institutions have been altered and corrupted by colonialism, patriarchal oppression and capitalism. We are proudly post-lineage, in that we believe, for our practices to survive, thrive, and be fit for purpose today, such institutions must be supported by peer networks that reach out and connect beyond the boundaries of school and lineage, in the search for a more resilient, robust practice, and a wider, more ethical and equitable consensus for our relationships with others.

It is our belief that the sharing of yoga as a cultural heritage, outside of the most commercially-successful, modernised lineages, is a significant, diverse and little-acknowledged legacy of South Asian culture. We have undertaken our own practices of de-institutionalisation and careful democratisation, reforming our practices with clarity, humility and transparency, whilst recognising the value of precedent and experience. We commit to continuing this work of reform, with particular reference to our previous entanglement with the Satyananda Yoga organisation.

Finally, while we know very well what this work of reform costs, it is essential and it is timely. We therefore

commit to helping any teacher or practitioner who is still reconciling with similar revelations in their own training schools and lineages. We also commit to amplifying the voices of abuse survivors from any yoga school, and to supporting their calls for justice. To that end, and from this moment on, we will no longer knowingly and with forethought, collaborate, share a significant platform with, or amplify the reach of, any yoga organisation with a significant unresolved history of abuse or exploitation. Where we have found ourselves doing so in the past, we can only apologise.

## Decolonisation

We understand that our students do not come to us for political argument, and that there exists a wide range of possible political positions that can be seen as reaching for the greatest good for all. Nonetheless, these continue to be difficult times, and too many of us, with our students, our colleagues, and our allies, continue to live under existential threat from powerful and authoritarian forces. This includes, but is not limited to structural racism, and any form of extremism such as right-wing nationalism, commercial exploitation and cultural imperialism.

We therefore commit to more than just addressing discrimination in our communities. Through our own practice, our training and teaching methods, we seek to empower and to support all peoples moves towards freedom. We are committed to dismantling harmful systems of oppression. We commit to the decolonisation of our cultures, to the valorisation of indigenous knowledge, and to honouring the wisdom held in and shared by local, grassroots communities. We are committed to the ongoing and difficult deprogramming of our hearts and minds, and the reclaiming of our bodies and communities from the pervasive influence of the dominant patriarchal, colonialist, and neoliberal culture. We understand that the intention of others might be less revolutionary, but this is where we stand, and this is what we fight for.

We believe there is a positive and productive interface between our work as post-lineage practitioners and teachers and trainers, and the processes of decolonisation: we value the independence and personal and collective accountability that is part of our experience of the post-lineage processes of dis-investing from transnational yoga organisations and invite an open and productive integration between this post-lineage experience and the processes of decolonising yoga and yoga nidra teaching and practice.

## Where we work

We choose to practice and teach only in those venues and for those groups whose ethics match and support our own. For this reason we prioritise community organisations over corporate-run yoga studios and platforms, and seek always to ensure that the places we teach have in place practical measures to minimise ecological impact, commercial exploitation of staff and students and/or unjust employment practices.

## Planetary consciousness

Similarly, we are committed to the liberation of all beings, seen and unseen, human and more than human. We believe ourselves to be held by a planet that births and nourishes us, and we know ourselves to be kin to every other living thing that shares our only home. We hold between us a diversity of metaphysical outlooks, being atheist and animist, monotheist and polytheist. We do not need to agree on the exact nature of consciousness in order to hold a shared reverence for life, and a smouldering anger for how the earth continues to be exploited. We are committed to doing what we can to mitigate that exploitation in any form we are able, whilst knowing that the work is endless, and we are fallible beings. If *yoga nidrā* is a dream practice, then we dream of a different, more equitable world. But when rested and resourced, we must be ready to build it.

With great respect and love we send warm wishes for your well-being,

And we invite you to affirm support for this statement here:

<https://www.yoganidranetwork.org/ethical-call>

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