

## **Total Yoga Nidra and Swami Satyananda: where we stand now (2014)**

A statement from Uma Dinsmore-Tuli and Nirlipta Tuli, founders of the Yoga Nidra Network

Dear colleagues, students and yoga friends,

We write from a place of deep shock and sadness. We have been moved to make the following statement because we are disgusted and distressed by the findings of phase one of the Australian Royal Commission of Enquiry into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse in Satyananda Yoga Ashrams.

### **Information and references**

If you are not aware of any of the revelations referred to in our statement then we recommend that you read the transcripts of the current findings of the [Royal Commission](#).

Reports from the Commission and other testimonies are available through the [Satyananda Yoga Reveal The Truth Facebook page](#).

It is also instructive to read reflections from the [Satyananda Survivors Facebook community page](#).

We have found the opinions of our colleagues [Matthew Remski](#), [Richard Miller](#), [Abhijeeta Saraswati](#), [Christopher Gladwell](#) and [Theo Wildcroft](#) to be helpful to consider:

### **Our primary response**

We are sickened by what we have read about the abuse of women and children in Satyananda ashrams (Bihar School of Yoga) in Australia and in India. We send our heartfelt support and love to those whose lives have been so scarred by these hideous experiences. We are appalled at the betrayal of the total trust which the victims, and their parents, placed in their spiritual teachers. We have been in contact with the survivors' groups to offer moral and financial support and we invite you to do the same.

We are profoundly dismayed by the lack of any meaningful official response or support from those in power in the Satyananda hierarchy in India and around the world. With the exception of Swami Pragyamurti in the UK, who has at least, albeit a

little late, indicated she is prepared to respond to those concerned about these findings, there has been neither any official word of apology nor any statement of support for those witnesses who have testified at the Royal Commission.

It is clear to us that young women and children were badly hurt, and that it has taken decades for anything approaching an acknowledgement of the wrongs that were done to begin to be made. We are horrified that the Satyananda yoga organisation and its leaders have behaved as if the victims did not exist, or were inferior, and as if any blame lay with the victims rather than the perpetrators of the abuses.

Those who were in power in the Satyananda yoga organization at the time of the abuses, and those in power now, are culpably negligent. They simply have not owned up to their responsibilities of the duty of care and safety of those who were under their control, and now the air of respectable sanctimony around them is a particularly unpleasant stench.

Beyond the direct hurt caused to the victims of the abuses in Mangrove and Munger ashrams, the hopes and faith of many other goodhearted people have been betrayed. The organization has been powered by thousands of people around the world pouring years of devotion, hard work and commitment into a cause that was believed to be for the betterment of humanity. We feel sad for the innocent devotees and sannyasins, and all the genuinely kind and caring people who have freely given so much and been so betrayed.

Swami Satyananda was ultimately responsible for letting abuse happen and seeming not to do anything to prevent or rectify it. The organisation he left behind has dealt with this scandal very poorly, neither providing any defence, explanation, apology or other signs of remorse or offers of reparation to the victims. And this offence has wide repercussions that reach beyond the world of Satyananda yoga and its practitioners and devotees.

We believe that the response of the Satyananda hierarchy to the experiences of the witnesses testifying to the Australian Royal Commission, and also to those who have shared details of other similar abuse in Satyananda ashrams, dating back to 1967, is of great significance for all yoga practitioners right now. Beyond sadness and disgust, beneath our total support for the victims of these abuses of trust, and beyond our condemnation of the perpetrators of the abuses, we sense that we, as teachers who share the practice of Total Yoga Nidra, and as the founders of the Yoga Nidra Network, have a duty to make a public statement. Our statement is about the future teaching of yoga nidra in the light of the allegations about Swami Satyananda and the abuses that occurred in the ashrams he founded.

### **Our intentions in this statement**

We intend here by our statement to address five inter-related issues:

1. In the first place we wish to express our unequivocal support for the victims and their bravery in testifying.
2. Secondly we condemn the perpetrators of these abuses, and all those responsible for them, including those who knew what was occurring and did nothing to protect the victims. We pray for healing daily.
3. Thirdly, we articulate our own personal and family relationships with Swami Satyananda, with the intention of providing some heartfelt support for fellow devotees, those guru-bhai and guru-bhen whose extreme bewilderment and shock is the result of the betrayal of trust following the current revelations.
4. Fourthly, we set out what practical responses we can make to ensure that similar abuses do not happen again. These practical responses include the total withdrawal of any financial support or endorsement of any organisation or establishment that is affiliated in any way with the Satyananda hierarchy in India until meaningful reparation, apology and acceptance of culpability is made.
5. Finally, we wish to reassure our own students and practitioners of Total Yoga Nidra, as shared through the Yoga Nidra Network, that the practices of Total Yoga Nidra that we teach, and that we train others to facilitate, are both self-empowering and safe, and quite distinct from the process of Satyananda Yoga Nidra TM. We wish to confirm publicly that we have long since severed professional relations with the official hierarchy of Satyananda trainers and Bihar School of Yoga teaching establishments, and to set out some of our plans in the future to encourage broad understanding of the nature and application of Total Yoga Nidra beyond the limitations of Satyananda Yoga Nidra TM.

So, having addressed the first two of these intentions in the opening paragraphs, we now turn to outline

### **Our family's relationship with Swami Satyananda**

It has been fourteen years since we had any formal professional association with the official Satyananda Yoga / Bihar School of Yoga organisations. Uma was expelled from a Satyananda teacher training course in 1999 for 'acts of defiance' (asking too many difficult questions...), and since then we have received official opprobrium: a written 'ban' on training facilitators in yoga nidra, issued by key Satyananda teacher trainers who seek to obstruct and prevent our Total Yoga Nidra trainings because they liberate yoga nidra from the confines of its relationship with Satyananda yoga nidra (TM).

But whilst we have maintained our distance from the official Satyananda yoga hierarchy and institutions, we have for twenty-four years experienced a close familial relationship with Swamis Satyananda, Satyasangananda (Satsangi) and Nirnanjananda Saraswati. This familial relationship was partially seeded by Nirlipta's mother Swami Suryabindu, who was swami at Rikhia with Satyananda for over eight

years (from 1993 – 2001), working closely with Swami Satsangi and seeing Swami Satyananda on a daily basis. Nirlipta visited Rikhia many times during this period.

Beyond this connection, Swami Satyananda is also directly responsible for our marriage and family life. In 1997, at his direct request, we got married in Rikhia as human representations of the Sita and Rama murtis at the Sita Kalyanam puja. Our wedding was organised by Swami Satyananda, and took place with him in front of several thousand people. It was a very big deal. He was really, really nice to us and, as far as we could see at that time, behaved with perfect propriety. It was as if he was a part of our family, a thing more common with Indian devotees than with western ones. Swami Satyananda identified Uma, publicly, as his 'daughter-in-law'. He said, did and organised things that were entirely appropriate in terms of Indian family life for the two of us.

So when the revelations began to emerge recently from the Royal Commission, we needed to reflect not just on our professional relationship with Satyananda yoga (which had already been over for many years) but also on our personal relationship with Swami Satyananda, that had been a central part of our family life, as for many other devotees.

This has been a painful process because our relationship with Swami Satyananda was close. Swami Satyananda and his successor Swami Niranjananada named two out of our three children. Swami Satyananda organized our wedding. We brought our young family to stay with Swami Satyananda in the Rikhia ashram, which we regarded as our spiritual home. We attended many public and private darshans with Swami Satyananda, and we believed him to be a high and holy spiritual guide for us and for our family.

Initially Nirlipta wrote a long anguished, confused piece about our feelings of betrayal and confusion, but now as a the result of more sustained reflections we can be a little more measured about how this personal and familial relationship can be reviewed in the light of what has now been revealed.

We can also reflect over a couple of decades of involvement with the Satyananda ashrams in India and share what we know about them as guest 'insiders'. Here is what Nirlipta knows that is relevant to the backstory of the current revelations: back in the 1990s when Nirlipta started doing Satyananda yoga in London, he learnt a little about the Mangrove scandal from a number of different sources associated with the Bihar School of Yoga in India and Australia. He believes that a version of this story was known as an open secret amongst some devotees. What was known was that Swami Akhandananda had embezzled a huge amount of devotees' life savings that had been donated to the ashram, and also that he had been having sex in the ashram with young women.

In the 1990s, Nirlipta had no concept of the abusiveness of what was happening or of the ages of the women and children involved. The story was that the women were young enough that the Australian government wanted the whole thing hushed up. Nirlipta was told back then that the government investigated, took over the finances

of Mangrove Mountain, and hushed up the scandal about the women because of it being pretty much the closest that Australia had to a national school of yoga (Nirlipta sees now that his belief in this version of events shows how naive he was). There was at that time in the telling of the story, no inkling of the child abuse that is coming out now.

Also, Nirlipta was told that Swami Satyananda had been informed about what was happening in Australia, but that he didn't believe that his trusted disciple would do such things. The unofficial story in the Bihar School of Yoga in the 1990s was that Swami Satyananda was naive and innocent, and the corruption in Australia was not of his doing or knowledge. He was too good-hearted to be expected to deal with it. That was the gist of what Nirlipta was told by people associated with the lineage. Nirlipta took this version of the story at face value because at that time he had no reason not to believe it.

In case you're wondering why Nirlipta didn't do anything about it, it was because he was told this story was something that was in the past, a bit of history that was all over and done with. He was assured that it had been dealt with sensitively by the Australian government (whom Nirlipta had been told had taken over control of the finances of Mangrove Mountain). Clearly our understanding of this sanitized version of events has changed. This is now, and there is a lot more knowledge available than there was then.

Knowing that a version of the Mangrove scandal was circulating in India, Australia and the UK, and probably other places also twenty years ago puts an interesting perspective on the current refusal of the Satyananda yoga authorities in India to issue any acceptable apology or to propose any reparations. If over twenty years ago, Nirlipta had heard gossip about this scandal (albeit in a sanitised form), then how is it possible for the Satyananda yoga authorities in India not to have not known?

For the Indian leaders of the Satyananda yoga organisations to plead ignorance is disingenuous. Their refusal to accept responsibility is an extended expression of denial and contempt for those concerned and affected by this, whether as first degree victims or as naive, trusting devotees. It is insulting: to the women and children who were abused, to the many devotees who are, at the very least, confused, shocked, betrayed and dismayed, and to the many thousands of devotees who have not even been informed about this scandal.

Because of what the Royal Commission testimonies reveal, many other things that we noticed from our visits to the ashrams, which seemed awkward but excusable at the time, now seem more disturbing. We have seen enough psychological abuse and recreational drug use by some of those in authority within Satyananda yoga organisations to be able to vouch that the 'simple life of the renunciate' that was being preached was clearly not the life that all the leaders of the organisation were living themselves: they were not all walking their talk. These kinds of inconsistencies and misdemeanours are insignificant in comparison to what has been revealed in Australia. We sense that what has been exposed so far is merely the tip of an iceberg. The official response from the Satyananda hierarchy in India is an indication

to us that worse is going to be revealed in the future. For us it is most definitely a question of when, not if, this will happen.

The crux of the matter is what was done in Australia and how it has been dealt with by the Satyananda yoga leadership in India. It's just wrong. We cannot believe that there is any justification for any guru abusing young devotees and the children of devotees. There is no way that we can continue to have any association with this organization. There is no ambiguity.

We both feel it is time to move on and leave this behind. We don't mean the story of the abuse and betrayal of trust: on the contrary, these experiences should be kept in the memory as a warning for the future, to clear our vision so that we are able to spot any similar abuses in the future and stop them. We believe that these revelations clearly signal the death of the organised Satyananda yoga movement in all of its forms and institutions. There are a lot of good people involved with them and this is a time to reflect and to make up their minds as to what the right thing to do is, and follow their consciences.

It is sad to know how much we have all been betrayed; but our betrayal is as nothing in comparison to the experiences of those young people who were so appallingly abused: remember again those young women and children. No one in the ashrams did anything to help them.

The Indian Satyananda authorities have not stepped up to the mark. Their refusal to issue apologies or to voice regrets simply isn't good enough.

### **Practical responses...**

Our first practical response is to sever completely our remaining familial connections to the to the institutions of the Satyananda yoga movement. We formally and publicly now distance ourselves from these institutions and encourage others to consider doing the same.

We shall in future neither endorse, nor visit Rikhia, Munger, or any of the other ashrams and centres which ally themselves with those who have condoned the abuses revealed by the Royal Commission. We shall be writing to inform the current leadership of the reason for our decision and request that reparations be offered to the victims, and a full and transparent enquiry be made by the Satyananda hierarchy into the abuses revealed to the Royal Commission.

In terms of the practices shared and labelled as 'Satyananda yoga', in particular, our own beloved practice of Total Yoga Nidra, we feel now that it is part of our professional obligation to ensure that practitioners know that Satyananda yoga does not 'own' these teachings. The Satyananda hierarchy has done a fairly efficient global job of 'owning' yoga nidra in particular, of presenting it as a practice which is

'devised' by Swami Satyananda. Satyananda Yoga Nidra (TM) is a registered trademark, and for many people, Satyananda's writings about yoga nidra are all there is to know about this practice.

From our own research and practice which we describe at the end of this statement, we know for certain that yoga nidra did not originate with Swami Satyananda, and we do not regard members of his organization as particularly good disseminators or guardians of this practice. We know that yoga nidra and most of the other practices promoted as Satyananda yoga can be traced to much earlier sources in other texts that predate Swami Satyananda, for example the *Vigynana Bhairava Tantra*. We also acknowledge that practices 'owned' by Satyananda yoga have been developed and refined by those working outside of the Satyananda hierarchy, for example, in the case of yoga nidra, by Richard Miller and the teachers of the Himalayan institute and by the many therapists and facilitators who have been utilising the practices therapeutically for decades.

And so we intend to continue sharing our self-empowering and expanded approaches to Total Yoga Nidra as we have been for many years, and we will work together with others to reveal its history, and to continue to develop it as a field of practice entirely separate and distinct from the trademarked Satyananda Yoga Nidra method. We do not wish to be associated with the limited and authoritarian 'Satyananda' version of this valuable and therapeutic tool.

It is difficult to know what other kinds of practical response are needed or helpful, but we would urge yoga practitioners to consider withdrawing all financial support from any organization or individual that directly feeds money into the institutions which protect the perpetrators of such abuses and their colleagues. For example, if you are making donations or paying fees to attend retreats in the Satyananda ashrams in India or elsewhere, we would advocate withdrawing your financial support from these institutions until reparations are made to the survivors of the abuse in Satyananda ashrams. Continuing to provide financial support to these institutions serves to protect and support the culture in which these abuses were perpetrated.

We have made contact with the survivors' groups to offer moral and financial support, and we encourage others to do the same.

### **Reassurance for our students and teachers, and plans for the future of Total Yoga Nidra...**

What the findings of the Royal Commission reveal about abuses within residential yoga community environments prompts us to consider the deeply imbalanced power relationships in yoga lineages. We agree with Richard Miller when he writes: 'To the degree we depend upon outside authorities is the degree to which situations like this

will occur and disorient us.' The degree to which we invest power in others is the degree to which that power will be abused.

As the Royal Commission has begun to uncover, in the Satyananda ashrams power has been utterly abused, and children and young women have been deeply harmed. Other lineages have also sexually exploited women, and Uma has already written about this in ['Learning to be Fearless,' the final chapter of \*Yoni Shakti: a woman's guide to power and freedom through yoga and tantra\*](#). In response to the current findings, she has arranged with the publishers Yogawords to make this chapter freely available as a download to encourage open and informed discussion about the sexual exploitation of women in yoga communities.

We shall be continuing to heighten awareness of this important issue in all of our trainings, workshops and retreats, and through discussions and lectures related to *Yoni Shakti* and Total Yoga Nidra. We feel it is a crucial feminist project to raise consciousness of the colonial and capitalist structures that support the patriarchal hierarchies of the ashrams and yoga communities within which abuse has occurred. These structures are implicitly exploitative. Exposing their power structures helps us to prevent future abuses. Uma intends for the second edition of the book to include updates and corrections relating to the abuses revealed by the Royal Commission.

In response to the current findings of abuses within Satyananda ashrams, some have argued that this calls for a boycott of the yoga teachings of Swami Satyananda, in particular of yoga nidra, the technique for which he is perhaps best known. We can fully understand the concerns that lead people to draw such conclusions. We also know that there is a great deal more to yoga nidra than simply the technique devised by Swami Satyananda. Our perspective, as proponents of *Total Yoga Nidra*, gives us a professional and personal obligation to expand and liberate the potential of yoga nidra as widely as we can beyond the limitations of the practice devised by Swami Satyananda.

Our own daily practice of yoga nidra extends over twenty five years and across many different approaches, including the naturally arising phenomenon of 'nidra shakti' which requires neither outer voice nor prescriptive guidance of any kind from an external authority. We set up the Yoga Nidra Network to make the full range of yoga nidra experiences accessible to as many people as possible, and now that there is so much discussion about Swami Satyananda and his version of the practice, we feel more keenly than ever the need to present the practice of yoga nidra in its totality.

In particular we have a commitment to the exploration of the meditative, creative and therapeutic aspects of yoga nidra, and to tracking the narrative of the development of the practice. To honour this commitment, we've been working for the past four years on a book provisionally entitled *Nidra Shakti: ...the completely independent traveller's guide to everything you ever wanted to know about Total Yoga Nidra...* which we intend to make available in 2015 through the Yoga Nidra Network site.

We are aware that many people still believe yoga nidra to be entirely the creation or discovery of Swami Satyananda. Indeed, as we can testify from the repeated attempts of Satyananda yoga trainers to discredit us and to prevent our own trainings and workshops in Total Yoga Nidra, there is a very keenly felt sense of ownership of yoga nidra by Satyananda yoga teachers and trainers. This sense of ownership is founded on a carefully cultivated fear that is widely promulgated by Satyananda trainers: the fear that it is somehow dangerous to practice yoga nidra outside of the particular form and method set out by Swami Satyananda.

We dispute the truth of this claim, and we see our work with Total Yoga Nidra as an antidote to fear-based attempts to 'own' states of yoga nidra consciousness that were recognised long before Swami Satyananda devised his approach to this practice. We find the Satyananda approach to yoga nidra to be authoritarian in essence, prescriptive in practice and ultimately a basic preliminary technique, an entry to a far vaster territory of experience than can be accessed through the Satyananda approach to yoga nidra alone.

This broader view of the context of yoga nidra is also shared by those who have experienced and developed other means of practising yoga nidra, for example [Swami Jnaneshwara Bharati](#), [Richard Miller](#), and others who have produced many [useful resources on the topic of yoga nidra](#), and also many other [teachers and facilitators of yoga nidra](#) whose intense personal practices of yoga nidra have revealed a myriad of healing and meditative experiences. These experiences develop from responsive, sensitive and self-empowered approaches to yoga nidra.

From this wider perspective of the totality of yoga nidra experiences and approaches, we regard the tightly held 'ownership' of the Satyananda yoga nidra protocol to be a serious limitation to the wider development and application of yoga nidra in its totality.

As part of our commitment to expanding and deepening understanding of the full range of yoga nidra practice and potential, we shall be welcoming Matthew Remski to our studio in Stroud in May for a colloquium exploring the past and futures of Total Yoga Nidra.

It has always been our intention, with our work with Total Yoga Nidra, to do our very best to share as wide an understanding as we can of the nature and practice of yoga nidra. We reassure all of our students and colleagues in yoga nidra that we remain every more deeply committed to this intention in the light of recent discussions about Satyananda yoga in general and yoga nidra in particular.

Our obligation to honour the totality of yoga nidra brings with it also a duty of care to our students and student teachers that we take very seriously indeed. The practices we share are responsive, safely held and self-empowering, and we conclude our statement here with a heartfelt reassurance that all those who practice Total Yoga Nidra with us and with the teachers that we have trained can know they are fully

respected and safe to engage with the practice at what ever level is appropriate for them.

We are glad to be able to bring fearless independence, clarity, and critical and creative thinking to a practice that has often been hedged about with fears and dogma.

With great respect and love, we remain at the service of our students and teachers, and re-iterate our intention to support the expansion and liberation of Total Yoga Nidra.

Uma Dinsmore-Tuli and Nirlipta Tuli

Hari Om Tat Sat

[www.yoganidranetwork.org](http://www.yoganidranetwork.org)