

YOGA

in the

BLACK COMMUNITY

HEALING PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES

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Meditation as a Healing Practice

May you know that love is your sacred birthright, that you are loved and held by transcendent and ancestral powers that see you beyond appearances and circumstances, that love you even when you are not loving yourself. (Shelly Harrell, PhD) [AQ]

Recalling the eight limbs of yoga, postures (asana) and breath control (pranayama) prepare the practitioner for experiencing two other limbs. Meditation is a path the practitioner uses to access and experience drawing the senses inward through releasing external distractions (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), and meditation (dhyana).

Meditation has long-term effects with long-term meditators experiencing less heart disease and cancer than non-meditators. Those with insomnia sleep better and some experience reduced chronic pain.¹ The brain is directly affected by meditation, and thus the rest of the body. According to Rebecca Gladding, MD, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which runs things through a “me” lens, activates after the first few minutes.² After starting to focus the lateral prefrontal cortex activates and overrides the “me” thoughts for a more rational and balanced position. In other words, the “me” center of the brain quiets. After 8–12 weeks of daily meditation, the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps develop empathy, is activated.

Gail Parker, PhD, explains in her book *Restorative Yoga for Ethnic and Race-Based Stress and Trauma* that meditation facilitates clarity of thought.³ When meditating, the meditator cultivates awareness of their inner world that leads to clarity, and through self-study cultivates higher

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levels of consciousness. Those who meditate regularly experience less anxiety and stress.

As an only child, Shelly Harrell, PhD, cultivated practices early in life that evolved into contemplative and meditation practices. She has participated in meditation and contemplative practices for most of her life.⁴ Harrell, having taught meditation in various settings, stated that her “sensibilities around meditation are tied closely to [her] own diasporic African and African American cultural influences.” She founded the Soulfulness Center to cultivate meaningful practices for transformative change. A sample of her work can be found in the following two loving-kindness meditations that may resonate in the Black community.

MAY YOU BE FREE

MAY YOU BE SAFE AND PROTECTED

May you be safe from dangers and harm. May you know your soul's refuge, that inner sanctuary untouched by circumstances.

MAY YOU BE WELL

May you have relief from any ailments and be as healthy and strong as possible. May you bring attention and care to the health of your body, mind, heart, and soul.

MAY YOU LOVE AND BE LOVED

May love and compassion warm your heart and soothe your soul. May you see through the eyes of love, listen with the ears of love, and act from a place of love.

MAY YOU BE AT PEACE

May you find your calm center within the storms of life, living with ease and grace. May you find that place of quietude, stillness, and deep serenity within your soul.

MAY YOU BE HAPPY

May you experience awe and beauty and celebrations and laughter. May you feel your joyful, soulful aliveness and may your soul smile with inner contentment.

MAY YOU BE FREE

May you experience the emancipation of your mind, the opening of your heart, and the illumination of your soul. May you be free to express your truth and be your authentic self, free to

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pursue your purpose, share your gifts, and manifest your highest calling for your life, the lives of others, and the world.

May peace and love wash over you—replenishing, refreshing, and nourishing your soul.

May you be safe and protected.

May you be well.

May you love and be loved.

May you be at peace.

May you be happy.

May you be free.

Shelly Harrell, PhD The Soulfulness Center with permission

YOU ARE LOVED

May peace and love wash over you, replenishing, refreshing and nourishing your soul.

May you love and be loved.

May you open yourself to fully receive love, allowing love to pour into your being, to warm your heart and soothe your soul. May you see through the eyes of love, listen with the ears of love, and act from the ground of love.

May you bring love, compassion, patience, and forgiveness to yourself, a loving voice of care to the tender places within. May you treat yourself and others with kindness, honoring the vulnerabilities of our shared human journey.

May you know that love is your sacred birthright, that you are loved and held by transcendent and ancestral powers that see you beyond appearances and circumstances, that love you even when you are not loving yourself.

May you celebrate the eternal, restorative, and transformative power of love to heal, uplift, liberate, connect, and save us all. You are loved.

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Meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative practices move the practitioner from analysis to wisdom and insight. Contemplative and restorative practices are also the bedrock of the Black Yoga Teachers Alliance (BYTA). BYTA's flagship program, Yoga as a Peace Practice (YPP)TM, is a post-lineage program that facilitates the contemplative aspects of yoga to address the trauma of violence experienced in modern society.⁵ The training cultivates "resilience, inner peace, and well-being in individuals, families, and communities." It also prepares yoga teachers to "offer yoga that can be practiced beyond the yoga mat and brought into everyday life."

Both Harrell and BYTA resonate with The Tree of Contemplative Practices created by The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.⁶ The tree has its roots in awareness, communion, and connection. The branches of the tree indicate active, creative, generative, relational, movement, stillness, and ritual/cyclical ways to practice contemplatively.

For those students that think that they cannot meditate, Roger Walsh, MD, PhD, suggests a variety of ways to meditate such as single tasking, focused breathing, or centering.⁷ Single tasking is the act of focusing on a task. It could be walking, drinking a cup of tea, *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing), washing the dishes, observing the ocean, listening to music, or journaling. Focused breathing can include any of the breathing practices discussed in this book, among others. Centering can include contemplative reading, inquiry, and interoceptive awareness (e.g., noticing an itch or an emotion and the sensations associated with it). Another option is *yoga nidra*, yogic sleep.

Yoga nidra

It is the art of non-doing.

Yoga nidra (yoga of sleep) is a practice composed of a series of breath, body, and awareness techniques that leads to a state of non-doing. It is the art of non-doing. It is an ancient regenerative and transformational practice described in the Upanishads, a text that describes the nature of the universe and self-realization. Swami Satyananda Saraswati stated that *yoga nidra* is a technique for learning to consciously relax and to truly relax; the experience surpasses sleep and *doing* something to relax.⁸ *Yoga nidra* is the state of non-doing that allows access to changes in dream states, deep sleep, and the state beyond. Sometimes it is referred to as "deep relaxation with inner awareness." It is an experience of turning inward.

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Yoga nidra is a deep form of meditation that can be practiced for numerous reasons, such as to reduce stress or to address insomnia, anxiety, or fear. In his book *Yoga Nidra: The iRest Meditative Practice for Deep Relaxation and Healing*, Richard Miller, PhD, explains that the practice of *yoga nidra* as brought to us through ancient teachings is beyond expression, yet an experientially heartfelt presence that is interconnected with all life. It is a realization that brings the “*peace that passeth all understanding*.”⁹ Tracee Stanley, author of *Radiant Rest: Yoga Nidra for Deep Relaxation and Awakened Clarity*, describes *yoga nidra* as a powerful practice that “transcends our ability to truly describe.”¹⁰

Yoga nidra is a form of meditation in which the practitioner experiences brainwave states similar to sleep. When in this state, the practitioner can be less engaged with thoughts and becomes more of an observer of thoughts. The practice begins with body, breath, and awareness techniques that guide the practitioner to a state of resting in awareness, not practicing being aware, but in a state of non-doing. According to Kamini Desai, PhD, author of *Yoga Nidra: The Art of Transformational Sleep*, *yoga nidra* has substantial possibility and yet is “one of the...most under-appreciated practices of Yoga.”¹¹ See the Resources section of this book for a list of several sources of additional information about *yoga nidra*.