

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health's Essential Conversations

TRACEE STANLEY

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is Essential Conversations. Our guest today, Tracee Stanley, is a lineage holder in the yoga nidra tradition and co-founder of the Empowered Wisdom Yoga Nidra School. Her new book is *Radiant Rest: Yoga Nidra for Deep Relaxation and Awakened Clarity*. Her essay, Embrace the Transition, appears in the May-June issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*.

Tracee Stanley, welcome to Essential Conversations.

Tracee Stanley: Thank you so much, Rabbi Rami, I am so happy to be here.

Rabbi Rami: I am very happy that you're here because I'm very interested in yoga nidra. I'd heard about it at a retreat that I was on and then your book came into my lap via the US Postal Service. It's absolutely fascinating. I'm sure, for many of our listeners, it will be something brand new and I want to get into that. Before we do, there is a really beautiful hymn, you call it, *Hymn to the Mother* in the first chapter of *Radiant Rest*, and I'd like to open with that. If you can read the hymn for us.

Tracee: Yes. The goddess, she is the great mother; the one who holds, nurtures, and supports unconditionally.

Her body is the fertile soil of the earth, her spine a flowing river.

Her heart filled with the sea of liquid diamonds, her eyes deep pulse into an endless void.

Her breath is rose-colored light feeling you would love, her face, radiant like the full moon.

She is waiting for you to surrender into her arms,

so you might sleep while awake like the divine child whose birthright is deep breath, peace, and true.

Rabbi Rami: I think it's such a powerful statement. Listeners to this show know that I'm very interested in the divine feminine, so this is right up my alley. A little later in the book, just a few pages after the hymn, you write, "Yoga nidra connects us to the universal energy of the mother, which includes the feminine qualities of nurturing, support, rejuvenation, receptivity, and surrender." Why do you think that the connection to the mother is so vital for us at this time?

Tracee: Well, you know, we have been out of balance for quite some time. I think that the pandemics, the multiple pandemics that we find ourselves in right now, whether it be COVID, whether it be racism, whether it be climate crisis, they all, to

me, have a thread of not honoring the divine feminine. I think that it's really important for us to understand that the divine feminine has really nothing to do with gender. It really has to do more with this idea of receptivity, nurturing, abundance.

If we want to think about it in a way where we move away from the personification of divine feminine as a deity or as a personality of our own mother, we really can just tune in to the earth as our oldest ancestor. Most of the time when we're in relationship with the earth, it's in this extractive relationship. It's, "I'm going to go take a hike," or, "I'm going to go enjoy nature," if we're lucky.

There's never a moment, for most of us, where we're consciously thinking about how we can give back to the earth who gives us so much so unconditionally. I think that, for me, a connection to nature has been lost and when we lose that connection to nature, we actually lose the connection to our own inner nature which allows us to have an understanding of everything in the world including our relationships with other people and animals and all sentient beings. When we lose that, that I think the world can start to move out a balance. It's been out of balance for a while. [chuckles]

Rabbi Rami: Yes, I would say for thousands of years. I wonder if lose is the right word as opposed to robbed. For example, because in Western cultures-- I hate the word Judeo-Christian, but that's [unintelligible 00:05:00] use that. The Bible is so important. In the first book of the Bible, in Genesis, in the beginning, in the first chapter, we get this understanding of humanity that is really completely disconnected from let alone the mother, that's a given, but disconnected from nature, from the earth.

The animals are created, and the garden is created, and the entire planet is flourishing. Then for no reason, whatsoever- it's a story, don't take it as literal, but for no reason whatsoever, God suddenly creates humanity. Obviously, that's a character. God doesn't create humanity from the earth in chapter one as he's done in chapter two. He just says, "Let's create humanity." and then [unintelligible 00:05:52] there is humanity.

Because humanity is disconnected, alien too, and really irrelevant to the planet, the only thing the Bible can think for them to do is to dominate and to subdue. Then in chapter two, you get a totally different story where the human comes from the earth. The earthling is taken from the earth like a rose grows on a rose bush. There, we are organic to the planet. The job that's written in Chapter 2, verse 15, I think, is we're here on the planet to nurture and protect nature.

Chapter two is not the chapter that people focus on, the way the culture goes. It's chapter one; we're alien, we're here to dominate. That domination is at the heart of all our- I would say all these pandemics you mentioned, but all of our problems.

How do you think-- Well, first of all, do you think there's a return to the mother? Then how do you think this return might give us a new story?

Tracee: That's such a great question and powerful contemplation. What it makes me think of is how, even in the story, Eve was created from Adam's rib, right?

Rabbi Rami: Well, technically, no. That's the English. In Hebrew, Eve is taken from Adam's side. Then the commentary say they were male and female in one, like conjoined twins.

Tracee: Conjoined twins, yes.

Rabbi Rami: Then they were separated at the side. In the Jewish interpretation, it's two equal beings. In the notion of rib, yes, then she's subservient.

Tracee: Right. It's interesting because there's two and many, many more translations I'm sure of that teaching. I think to answer your question, it is essential for us to come back to the divine feminine, not only outside of us but first inside of us because when we connect with the divine feminine inside of us, it allows us not to be fearful about resting, about surrendering, about nurturing, about loving, about forgiving, about having compassion, instead of having this idea that we have to, as you said, dominate because of scarcity and fear, and needing to be at the top of the food chain somehow.

I think that once we touch into that place within ourselves, we get to learn a little bit more about being human.

Rabbi Rami: Now, I'm going to come back to yoga nidra. You have to define it for us, but then, the question I have is, how does yoga nidra bring us to that point?

Tracee: Yoga nidra, first of all, let's, like you said, define it. The word nidra has been translated as the yoga of sleep and it's been popularized as sleep with a slight trace of awareness. You might hear people talk about this idea of divine sleep, or conscious sleep, or enlightened sleep. All of those are really beautiful descriptions.

The word nidra also has another etymology which is Ni meaning void and Dra to be revealed or to draw forth from. If we think about this idea of yoga, yoga nidra is really said to be a state of consciousness that is similar, if not the same as samadhi, which is the final goal of yoga. We could say that yoga nidra the state is peace beyond words. It's bliss.

We're talking about, first of all, a technique of yoga nidra, that is a technique of deep relaxation that allows us to completely surrender the body, allow the body to fall asleep, the physical body to fall asleep, allow the mind to fall asleep. Consciousness stays awake and aware during this process, where we become aware that the body itself feels almost as though it is dissolving. We become aware of our own prana, and prana, meaning life force, and then we are so surrendered, that we allow ourselves to follow prana back to its source. yoga nidra is really this process of dissolution, a dissolution of everything that is not real, and it's a journey towards the eternal.

There is this other definition of yoga nidra as a goddess, a goddess who has the shakti or the power of repose, or the power of sleep. We can think about yoga nidra as a full system of yoga, where the goddess is the one who is presiding over the technique that leads you to the state of consciousness, that is peace beyond words, and all of those things are yoga nidra.

Rabbi Rami: All right, let's see if you can expand a little bit on this notion of yoga nidra as a yoga of dissolution. I know a lot of people, especially women, especially women of color, like yourself, who argue that the last thing they need is dissolution. In a culture that renders them invisible, and in which they're always struggling to be seen and heard, this is not the universal, I would know universal, but lots of people I talked to when they hear the word dissolution, they go, "Wait, I'm struggling to assert my sense of self, I don't want to dissolve it." How do you respond to that?

Tracee: I think that there's two things, or a couple of things, to say about that, is that, first of all, the black experience is not one that is universal, that's one. Two is that, when I say that yoga nidra is the practice of dissolution, it is a practice we would call pratyahara, that is known as withdrawal of the senses. When you withdraw the senses, it allows you to dissolve everything that is not real, which we can say, is our mental constructs, our ego, all of the things that the world tells us. As we dissolve that we actually re-emerge and remember, our true nature, which is one of supreme joy, bliss, power, radiance, and effulgence.

To me, as a woman of color, it is absolutely necessary for me to practice yoga nidra so I can remember who I really am in the face of the world, trying to tell me that I am less than, in fact, yoga nidra allows me to expand myself, as opposed to contract myself. When I am in those spaces, where there is oppression happening, I remember my practice, and I remember the state of being that is yoga nidra, that allows me to expand into that space as opposed to shrink, and allow my voice to be heard when it needs to be heard, and allow myself to be seen when I needed to be seen.

Rabbi Rami: You put that so succinctly, so beautifully, and so powerfully. I'm hoping if people had this issue, what they're hearing is that the dissolution is the dissolution of the false, the beliefs, the ideologies, the isms, however, you want to look at these things, that make, and it's not just women or people of color, that make all of us smaller than we really are, and in order to, as you said, connect to the void that connect to the infinite, of which each of us is a part.

When someone is doing- because you raised this, I guess, at the end of what you're saying, I thought it was really important. When you're engaged in, let's say, social justice work, when you are engaged in making your voice heard, I don't mean you specifically but people in general, when we're engaged in this kind of thing, how important do you think it is that we come from a place of spiritual practice like yoga nidra, it could be something else, but a place of spiritual practice, a place of, like you said, joy, a place of the capital S Self, as opposed to the lowercase egoic self, in order to engage with the other in such a way as to bring about transformation.

Even one last thing about it I would say, and even because of that connection to the greater reality, you're empowered, and you don't get burned out, is that-- What do you think about that?

Tracee: Yes, I know that, very recently, my dear friend and anti-racism advocate and teacher, her name is Michelle Cassandra Johnson, she had Micky ScottBey Jones on her podcast. I caught a snippet of it, where Micky ScottBey Jones, who's very well known for the poem, *Brave Space*, was talking about the fact that people who are doing this work actually need to stay alive. They need tools to be able to stay alive.

This is a tool to be able to continue to do the work that needs to be done. This is a tool that not only as a technique, now I'm speaking about it as a tool, to allow you to stay rested in a world that wants to exhaust you, that allows you to stay connected to source so that you can remember who you are, that allows you to be more clear, and more dharmic in your actions so that you don't waste time distracting yourself and focusing on things that are not important.

At the same time, I think that any yoga practice, and probably any spiritual practice, asks you to look within, these practices ask you to look within, to inquire within. Once you start to become still, and you start to enquire, you start to see the mental constructs that you're holding, whatever they may be, and you actually start to understand that some of them are not true. Some of them might not even be yours, they're passed down through generations.

Spiritual practice as I have experienced it, specifically yoga, gives us these tools to be able to dismantle those thought patterns, those belief systems, the untruths about who we are and who the world is, and how we're all connected or disconnected. Once you do that work within yourself, and you heal, I feel like you are more empowered to go out into the world to heal others and to help others dismantle the structures that actually hold us in place, or are trying to hold us in place. It's very hard to do that if you haven't done it for yourself.

Rabbi Rami: Right. You're talking about these mental constructs, these narratives that we operate under, maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously. Can you give us-- Well, let me say one other thing, because they are mental constructs but we embody them, so they also have a place in our physicality. Can you give us an example, and just from your personal life, where you've noticed narratives that are unhealthy, and that through yoga nidra you've managed to dissolve those or to dismantle those?

Tracee: This is actually the work of Sankalpa. There's a teacher who I studied with for a long time, his name is Yogarupa Rod Stryker, he wrote a book called *The Four Desires*. The work of the four desires really helps to illuminate what he calls a Vikalpa, which is basically a negative thought construct. That's something that is running in your life.

The idea is that you will create a Sankalpa or a heartfelt vow or resolve. We're talking something beyond intention, but it's not as easy as saying, "I want to be powerful," it needs to be something that really is an antidote for the negative thought construct, which means that you actually have to do the work to figure out what the thought construct is. That is not easy work to do.

That work is based on some of the work of Ramana Maharshi around Vichara, which is really asking-- Ramana Maharshi basically became enlightened as a child by asking the question, "Who am I?" Over and over and over again until he got to the essence of who he was. Most of us can't do that so we have other questions that we have to ask.

For me personally, one of the big mental constructs that I was holding was that it's not safe for me to be successful. In order to be safe, I need to remain small and invisible. I need to dim my light. Through the practice of yoga nidra, and I would really say more of a deep relaxation practice, because yoga nidra is this process of

completely non-doing, and releasing of thought, it's a place of no thought. When we still have this idea of a thought, which I would say that a Sankalpa is a thought, I'm not sure that we're quite in that void of yoga nidra.

Having said that, we can use the practice of Sankalpa to reprogram our subconscious while we were in this transitional liminal state between the waking and the sleeping, and sleeping and the waking, and moving through the other layers of consciousness. That would be a way in which someone could, for lack of a better way to put it, reprogram themselves because they've done the work to figure out what is this negative thought construct that is actually leading me away from my dharma and what new construct, what new, let's say, vasana or coloring can I introduce into my not only mental- all the **[unintelligible 00:21:44]** essentially.

We're going through the energetic body, the mental body, the wisdom body, the bliss body, how can I bring this wisdom in when I'm in this position of surrender, release relaxation, and allow this new thought and this new way of being to come in as a frequency that then starts to basically pervade my entire body, so that I now start to magnetize things towards me that are in alignment with the Sankalpa that is dharmic? At the same time, I begin to awaken to all of the things that I am doing, that are in line with a negative thought construct that is keeping me stuck in patterns, and the same lessons having to be learned over and over again.

Rabbi Rami: I'm hoping people can follow **[unintelligible 00:22:35]** of the Sanskrit sometimes, "Wait, what is that word?" I think you're laying it out in a way that most people will be able to follow. What I'm curious about is, and this may sound odd, but how difficult is it to do nothing? I think most people think of, well even use the phrase, "This is spiritual work." Even the notion of spiritual practice, "I've got to do this, it's something I'm going to through an act of will or whatever, I'm going to impose this new way of experiencing on my old ways of experiencing."

But if I've followed your book rightly, and if I'm understanding what yoga nidra is correctly, it's an act of, see if I get this right, but I would say an act of continual surrender that effort is, I don't know if the word is enemy, but effort is your enemy. You're trying to be surrendered to this greater reality that empowers us, but you can't make it happen. Is that fair?

Tracee: That would definitely be fair. The practice of yoga nidra is counter-culture, because the culture tells us to keep doing to keep grinding, to keep going, and by whatever you accumulate, and however hard you're working, that's your value. If you're actually somebody who is resting, and relaxing, and not doing anything you're not worthy, that's what culture tells us. We also know that that's killing us.

The beautiful thing that is in yoga nidra is that in the process of being asked to surrender, you actually get to see what the resistance to resting and relaxing and letting go actually are. That can be anything from trauma that surfaces in the form of memories, in the form of pain that have been suppressed, that can be intergenerational trauma, that comes into your awareness, that can be beliefs that come up. One of the things that is really, I think powerful for people is to be able to free-write or journal after these practices so they can remember what it is that actually comes up because part of this friction that happens, where we encounter resistance, because I think that a lot of times most people, when they're doing

practices like deep relaxation, or even practicing Shavasana, they feel like they're resting, it's like, "Oh, I'm resting, I'm relaxing." That's maybe like a five-minute journey.

When you're really guided to relax the body systematically, over a longer period of time, you really get to know yourself at a much deeper level than, I think, you do in practices that are more dynamic, because you're being asked to embody stillness and to invite stillness into the body, and invite relaxation in a way that sometimes people will realize, "Oh, wow, I never actually realized that I don't feel safe in my own body." Or "I never realized that I don't feel like I deserve to rest."

Then when they go back into those thoughts, they realize, "Oh, that's because my mother was a domestic worker and so it was her mother before her and her mother before her. It was something that was ingrained in our lineage that we didn't get to rest. If we didn't work, we would die." That mental construct is the construct that's still running. Even though I didn't have that experience, that was the experience of the people who came before me.

Rabbi Rami: That's part of the inherited narratives you talked about that yoga nidra is dissolving, ideally.

Tracee: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: We are just about out of time, and I want to have you-- Obviously, if this is interesting to the listener, and hopefully, you go out and you buy the book, it's called *Radiant Rest*. I want to have you just tell us a little bit about something I missed when I read the book the first time and that you pointed out to me just before we started this recording. I was concerned I was going to ask you about how important it is to have an actual teacher, not just the book but as you pointed out, included in the book is a series of, you could actually study with you right?

Tracee: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: Tell us how that works.

Tracee: Thank you for asking. It was really important for me to have these six audio recordings available for people because I know that there's some people who just want to rest. They'll read the book later, or they'll listen to the audiobook later, but they want immediately to be able to rest. In the book on page 102, the first paragraph, last sentence, you will have a link there that you can access to be able to download or actually stream these practices.

As a beginner, this is perfect, because really, you are just allowing yourself to lay down in a comfortable position, you can put your headphones in and you can just listen to my voice guiding you through these journeys that last anywhere from I think the shortest one is about 15 minutes, and the longest one might be about 40 minutes. You can just find time to do this before you go to sleep or first thing when you wake up in the morning or afternoon, anytime that you feel like you need or want to be rested.

My suggestion is to try to do these consistently for a period of time so you can really see how they have this ability to create this dissolution and loosening of effort within you over time. It's really quite a beautiful journey when you can do it consistently.

Rabbi Rami: I think that's a great thing to offer people as part of the book. We are out of time. I hope this was something that will intrigue people to go find out more about. I have been working with it from the book because I didn't see that on page 120 but this is very important practice, this yoga nidra. I'm hopeful that people will take a deeper interest in it after they've heard you.

Our guest today, Tracee Stanley, is the author of *Radiant Rest: Yoga Nidra for Deep Relaxation and Awakened Clarity*, her essay, Embrace the transition appears in the May-June issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. You can learn more about Tracee's work on her website, traceestanley.com. Tracee, thank you so much for talking with us on Essential Conversation.

Tracee: I so appreciate you. Thank you so much. Have a great night.

Rabbi: You too.

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