

On Post-Lineage Yoga

By Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, as told to Laurie Hyland Robertson

Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, C-IAYT, holds a PhD in communications and a diploma in yoga therapy from the Yoga Biomedical Trust. She draws on years of experience in journalism and education, and as a wife and mother, to create positive learning experiences and high standards in yoga teaching. Since 1999, she has shared yoga nidra with thousands of people in environments ranging from nursery schools, hospitals, and airports to yoga festivals and IAYT's own Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research. Dinsmore-Tuli is the author of several books, including *Yoni Shakti*, which examines the evolution of feminine spiritual authority through yoga and tantra, and is currently at work on a new book, *Nidra Shakti*.

The yoga world continues to grapple with the long-term damages—to both individuals and to institutions—caused by abuses of power, and to consider organizational structures that will enable us to offer transformative teachings with sensitivity and integrity. Here, Dinsmore-Tuli shares her thoughts about moving beyond the constraints of the past that in part enabled exploitative behavior and kept us separate rather than building a strong community of diverse practitioners.

Intuiting the Way

One of the problems with signing up to a particular guru, lineage, or tradition is that they will tell you what to do with the rhythms of your practice and the rhythms of your day. That might suit you for a bit, like when you're 22 and living in India or something—when you've got to get up at 4:00 in the morning—but if you continue to adhere solely to what you're told to do, you can actually cut off your intuitive guidance.

It's subtle, because some people say they will be intuitively drawn to a certain guru or teacher or tradition, but then what I observe is that when people totally sign away all personal responsibility for choosing their practice or they're being told what to do, at that point you can abdicate any responsibility for personal growth, you sign away your intuitive power. That's the deal, isn't it? The guru says, "I know best. I'm the truth, the way, and the light. You sign up with me, and you'll get good stuff." And you *do* get good stuff—you get access to amazing traditions and lineages, but when you sign up like that and you say, "Now I'm your disciple," the role of the disciple is to follow, not to ask what our own intuitive guidance is. In the end, I think a sign of a really positive *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) relationship would be that the disciple is encouraged to find the truth within. How often does that happen?

Giving explicit permission to explore and intuit and experiment can be incredibly threatening, though, for two reasons. One is that it's out of most people's comfort zone. Our whole education system and our whole way of work depend upon people not doing what they feel, but doing what they're told. We train children from a very young age about that—"Have a wee now before you get in the car." "I don't need a wee." "Do it now!"—even down to people's defecation and urination rhythms. We're actually taught that we can't trust ourselves. Everything about how we live is teaching us not to trust and that other people know best.

If you turn this around, that's pretty much like turning everything everybody's ever been told upside down. It's quite unsettling,

which makes people a bit fearful—they don't know where to look, because they're always told to look to the teacher or the boss or to ask what's next, to be told what to do. Sometimes when I ask a client how something feels, they say, "I don't know what feels good anymore. I'm so disconnected, I don't know. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't defecate."

The second reason I think people can find this idea of permission to travel a more intuitive path to be scary is that they might feel very alone and isolated. It's unfamiliar, because following your intuition is not what you've been taught, and it might make you feel like you're going to be very alone. In fact, I found the opposite. You discover there's lots of people out there who are following their own light.

Empower the Student

I feel fortunate that I've had teachers who have taught that. *Satguru maharaja ki jai* was the chant I learned when I did a structural therapy training with Mukunda Stiles, and we would always chant that. "Satguru" means "like the true teacher." "Maharaja ki jai"—you'd honor that. The idea was that the true teacher was the wisdom in the heart. He'd teach you *OM namah shivaya* and translate that to mean, "With great respect and love, I honor my heart, my inner teacher." It was the best yoga therapy. I'd say, "I don't know about that, Mukunda." He'd say, "You relate the dose to the uncertainty. If you experience uncertainty or confusion, then you repeat, 'With great respect and love, I honor my heart, my inner teacher.' And the less you believe it, the more you have to say it."

I thought it was very powerful. He and other teachers are in the business of empowering people, but it does make people quite uncomfortable. He certainly wasn't the most popular teacher or the most famous celebrity, because he was doing something fairly unusual by empowering people to listen to that teacher in the heart.



I think people sometimes worry that it will isolate them, because if you've been part of a lineage, it's very comforting. It's like family. You all wear the same color clothes, you all sign up to the same guru, you chant the same mantras, and you sing together. All that stuff boosts oxytocin, and everybody feels great. If you're out of it, and everybody ridicules you or tells students not to go to you, then you might feel a bit alone for a while.

New Paradigms

I've been running a yoga camp in Avalon, in Glastonbury, for 13 years. This year the theme of the yoga camp is "New Paradigms for Sharing Ancient Wisdoms." I think that there's an intimate relationship between new paradigms and ancient wisdom. It's not like we even have to create anything new. Rediscovery of the nature—the true nature—of the ancient wisdoms is an agency. It just got confused and packaged. There's a whole "new age" movement with "new this" and "new that" and neotantra and neovedanta and new, new, new. We don't really need anything new at all.

"With great respect and love, I honor my heart, my inner teacher." The less you believe it, the more you have to say it. —Mukunda Stiles

Everybody who practices yoga knows it's old. What I think is important is that in this reclaiming of agency, we've got a new perspective on perhaps the essential origins. Yoga was never invented by anyone. The wisdoms of the practices that we do, they're all about rediscovery. They're all about coming home to yourself. That's always an instruction I give with yoga nidra: "Welcome. Welcome home. Welcome home to yourself." In reclaiming your agency to listen to your own rhythms, you're using maybe slightly different ways than we've done before, just different perspectives, to return to these ancient wisdoms.

I feel I'm sharing fairly old things: breathing practices and asana and pranayama and yoga nidra. We're looking at them in a different way and just asking questions. I don't think it is new; it's just a rediscovery of what was already there. Sometimes, it takes a certain kind of research or a new finding to show that.

I think the new paradigms are actually ways of sharing ancient wisdoms in perhaps the way that they were originally said. I can't imagine the yogis out in the forests with some certification process that depended upon a large institutional hierarchy. No, they were individuals who just said goodbye to all the structures of society, didn't they? They went to live in their caves and in the woods. Then all these hierarchies developed, and the traditions and lineages. That's good—the traditions preserve things. But they're a bit like the packaging, like something that you get something in. Are you going to keep it in the box? No. You're going to take the box apart, recycle the box, and deal with the thing that's in the box. That's what I think about the power of yoga nidra. The active ingredient of all the yoga nidra is in the box. The box just happens to have Such-and-Such's Method™ on the outside. Boxes are very nice to deliver the practice to you, but once you get it, you don't put the box on your altar, do you? No, you do the thing with the practice that's inside the box.

Post-Lineage Is Not Anti-Lineage

I come out and say I'm proudly post-lineage, but I'm able to do that because the term is actually in the title of a recent PhD thesis by Dr. Theodora Wildcroft (wildyoga.co.uk). For the last 3 or 4 years, she's been working on research into post-lineage yoga. She really coined this term.

Theo's research was rooted in grassroots yoga camps. The camp that I run was one of her topics for study. What she was looking at was a dichotomy: There was "commercial" yoga on one side, and then there was "traditional" yoga on the other side, and the two things were separate.

What she did was explore how what she saw in these yoga camps didn't fit into either of those. What we're doing is not for profit. When I talk about yoga festivals, a lot of people in North America go, "I know what you mean. We've got Wanderlust." It's not like any of that. This is grassroots. This is 250 people, some of them living in vans, in a field. If you want hot water, you light a fire. We have saunas, a big bhakti temple, and all that kind of stuff, but what we're doing and have been doing for a long time is sharing every kind of yoga under the sun. We invite everybody. We would have classes with the Ashtangis, Iyengar classes, Restorative classes, Kashmir Yoga, things people have never heard of, Yin Yoga, Feminine Unfolding from Angela Farmer, Scaravelli work, then there'd be traditional people coming from Sivananda.

This particular camp—and she explored others—was a place where it wasn't commercial, and it wasn't really traditional either, because in the morning, you'd have the Ammaji people doing their *aarti* (worship ceremony) that they'd learned in Kerala with the hugging saint, with Ammaji. Then after that would be the people from the Babaji lineage doing some *shiva lingam puja* (ritual for honoring the light of consciousness). In the evening, it would be a community thing and everybody would be singing *kirtan* in all kinds of ways. There would be Celtic yoga, contemplative Druidry. It was the whole thing, and therapeutic yoga fits right into that. It's not commercial and it's not traditional, because to be a yoga therapist, you need to respond to what's there.

Wildcroft did a lot of research about this. She investigated people's practices. She investigated the structures, networks, and communities. She came to the conclusion that all these people—that includes me and a lot of other people—were *post-lineage*. It's not anti-lineage, and it's not no lineage. It's post-lineage. It's characterized quite often by people like me who spent a long time signed up with a particular lineage and learned things, and have come through out the other side. It's often about collaboration. There's a community of knowledge rather than a hierarchy.

Where Does Yoga Therapy Fit?

I really rate Wildcroft's work. It's very intelligent and helpful. In the original formulation, she had yoga therapy on the "commodified" side. I disagreed with that, because I feel that yoga therapy is in its essence post-lineage; most really good yoga therapists have done multiple trainings.

My question to clients is always, "How may I be of service to you today?" I don't care what label is on the box. If I know something from some lineage I learned 20 years ago that's useful, I'll

bring that in. If it looks like what they need is something from some other lineage and those two lineages would actually fight with each other, it doesn't matter. In that moment, you need both of those things present in service of the client. When I got the chance to speak at SYTAR last year, I felt a lot of people would understand this term because it's where many people are with yoga therapy.

I find it fascinating, although not surprising, that when IAYT did its grandparenting of yoga therapists, about 30% of them identified their lineage as either general hatha or "other." There's a real argument for valuing all those different experiences from different places. Although it can be hard to evaluate, and resource-intensive to do so.

Moving Forward...

Avoiding the mistakes of the past involves some hard work. It involves scrutiny. My perspective on it might not be something that everyone shares, but I honestly believe that the structures that held those traditions together are inherently disempowering. Any time you create a top-down structure, pretty much everybody will be enslaved by it. It's the structures that allowed the abuses and scandals and disempowering to continue for so long, because they were endemic to the structure. It's not that the people in it are necessarily bad. They sometimes don't have any choice. That's the structure they've been schooled in, and so if you're schooled in that structure, you're going to disempower people. It's what you've been trained to do.

If we want to change, we have to change the structure from a triangle to a circle. If we work in circle and move toward council leadership and integrity and openness and sharing, then *everybody* is responsible. No one person has all the power, and that is good. I remember when there was a scandal around the tradition that I was involved in, Richard Miller had one of the wisest things to say about it: "To the extent that we give our power away, that is the extent to which we will be disempowered, and it's the extent to which that power will be abused."

Going forward, I see that the way not to make the same mistakes is to hold onto all the precious teachings that we have, but change the nature of the structures that perpetuate them. It involves a lot of people. It's resource- and time-expensive.

You can make change in your own teaching structures. I'm endeavoring with the organization that we run, which is the Nidra Network and a "humble web of empowerment," to establish meth-

ods in the structure of the organization that are all about integrity, accountability. We have trainings allowing people to see the need for this.

That's how we don't make the same mistakes. We just don't work in the same structure any more. Otherwise, if we carry on replicating those hierarchies, we carry on making the same mistakes. It doesn't matter who you put in charge. It'll go bad. Presidents, bishops, heads of yoga organizations, gurus—it doesn't matter who you put up there on that top pinnacle. Even if that person was a saint at the beginning, the structure that's formed underneath them will disempower everybody else.

That's my vision, but it's not easy, because you have to see, *feel*, deal with how we're completely imbricated in those structures. You don't get PhDs, and master's degrees, and all those kinds of things by not working in the system of the hierarchy. We all trained

to do that. To step out of that and say, "This is about council leadership"—it rocks the boat. We're all in it. It's about respecting not just the traditions, but the individuals who are supposed to be becoming empowered by what they're learning. It's about systems, systems of government. The yoga world has replicated all of the abuses and scandals that are everywhere else, but if we yogis can't sort that out, who can? The process of trying to address the problems is every bit as important as getting a solution.

I think the circle is an important feature for IAYT. It slows things down a bit, because if you get a leader who tells everyone what to do, everyone just follows in lines. It's very easy. I see this opposite system as feminine leader-

ship, honestly, because it's often about being with uncertainty. We don't really know how to prevent making some same mistakes again, but we've got a feeling of the things that weren't good, so let's eradicate them and try something new. We don't know how it's going to work.

It *feels* better, so that's another thing. If you're working with yoga practitioners and people who practice awareness, they're going to say, "I'm sorry. That just doesn't feel good."

We need humble webs of empowerment. **YTT**

An upcoming issue of Yoga Therapy Today will feature more on yoga nidra from Dr. Dinsmore-Tuli (umadinsmoretuli.com). Her post-lineage, seasonally attuned practices may be accessed at www.patreon.com/umadinsmoretuli

