

## naMEste: The Light in Me Remembers the Light in Me

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“What is the difference between joy and happiness? What is the difference between knowing and believing? What is the difference between love and pleasure? Joy, knowing, and love are what you *feel*. Happiness, believing, and pleasure are ways you think. The former are all *internal* experiences. The latter are responses to external events. The former are things over which you have control through *the power of your mind*. The latter are experiences through which you can be controlled by events and people!” (Vanzant 2000, p. 13).

As a 30-something Black woman, I have a few clocks ticking simultaneously. The only thing that has the power to pause the expectations of marriage, children, career, and home ownership is yoga. My yoga practice provides me clarity between what I think and what I feel. Whenever I find myself thinking that I'm behind the eight ball in certain areas of my life, mindful movement reminds me that where I am in the present moment is preparing me for and aligning me with who I am, what I love, and what I aspire to. This is the message I strive to bring to and instill in Black women through yoga: recognizing the tug of war between self-talk and self-care, intellect and intuition, what we know to be and what we feel is, and emerging victorious and whole.

### Young Intuition

From Day 1, the thinnest tightrope I've walked was between knowledge and knowing. Before my grandmother taught me how to pray, I already knew who the Creator was. I saw Spirit every time I climbed onto the roof of the apartment building my grandmother lived in and looked at the stars. I felt Spirit when the wind blew, when I dug my hands into the dirt during play, and with every sunbeam that charged my skin in the summer. I smelled Spirit every time the women in my family cooked, and I heard Spirit in every 'I love you', thunderclap, and note coming from Anita Baker's mouth. Since I was a chatterbox growing up, my grandmother Mom-mom teaching me about prayer was like being introduced to a new friend in whom I could confide. I told Spirit ALL of my business! I felt like I was being heard on a level unlike that of simply talking to my family and friends.

It felt good until the dreams came. It wasn't until the dreams started that I became afraid. With every prayer I sent up, asking for my grandmother's health to improve, a dream would show her leaving this earth. The same dream came to me every night, for years, until she transitioned. For a long time I blamed myself for her passing. Housing that kind of guilt at 9 years old was a heavy burden to bear. While I briefly wondered if my prayers fell on deaf ears when I asked for Mom-mom to feel better, my belief in Spirit did not waver. Around this time, I started attending church regularly and became the Christian poster child by attending service morning, noon, and night, quoting scriptures with little memorization, being washed and saved by the blood, and praying with tears falling from my eyes and sweat rolling down my forehead at

times. I continued to have dreams, visions, and strong feelings of ‘knowing’ or ‘this has already happened’ before I even learned the words ‘intuition’ and ‘déjà vu’ in school. Fear wrote it off as being sinful. I begged for the amplification of Spirit’s voice, and the silencing of my own.

That same year, lightning struck. One day, I snuck into my parents’ room, and crawled under the bed where my mom kept all of her books. I ran back into my room, and blew the dust off of *Linda Goodman’s Love Signs* and *The Practical Encyclopedia of Natural Healing*. Although knowledge and doctrine were teaching me the evils of astrology and herbalism, I rationalized that my mother wouldn’t be reading about anything that wasn’t good. The same woman who sent my brother and me to church every Sunday also shook her head whenever we displayed our ram-like traits, cured our sour tummies with peppermint, and always knew the details about something or someone before it happened or appeared. As strong as I was in my faith, my love and respect for my mom was a force of nature. Mom was magic, and whatever she was reading appealed to my young mind a little more than the Bible most times.

Before I dived into who was compatible with my Aries fire, I picked up the heavier book on healing. Unintentionally, I flipped right to the chapter about yoga therapy. Very tomboyish, athletic, and active, I immediately saw the pictures of postures as easy to accomplish. Sure enough, Cat and Cow, Plow Pose, and Cobra Pose were a cinch to get into and out of. When I flipped to the page that illustrated and explained Corpse Pose, or *Savasana*, I paused. The word ‘corpse’ was uncomfortable, and a bit off-putting. I wasn’t trying to think about anything having to do with death – not even the simulation of it. I skipped it, and turned to the pages that took the reader through a Sun Salutation. I wanted more movement, and more poses to achieve. Clumsily, I powered my way through enough Sun Salutations to break a sweat. I felt warm and loose, and couldn’t keep a grin from spreading across my face.



Figure 1 - Me on the Mat (Photo Credit: Teneele M. Bailey).

Over the weeks that followed, my very simple *asana* practice was a joyful elixir I sipped with every grunt, stretch, and bit of space my body created. Even though I avoided it, I read the pages on Corpse Pose often. One cloudy day, my curiosity overpowered fear. I closed the door to my room, and laid on the floor. With my palms facing upward, and feet splayed, I focused on my breathing. Slowly, I clenched and tightened my brow and then relaxed. I did this with every part

of my body from top to bottom. I tightened and released until all was quiet. I was breathing, but it was no longer my point of focus. I felt lightheaded, as though I spun around in a revolving chair for too long. Not a single thought occupied my mind as I slowly started to sink into the floor. The darkness wasn't intimidating or scary, but rather inviting, familiar, and comforting. I couldn't feel the floor underneath me anymore, but I still felt supported. I stayed in Corpse Pose for what I thought were mere minutes, but as I slowly came to and opened my eyes, my window revealed that afternoon had quickly turned to dusk. My parents thought I was napping that whole time, but I never slept during the experience. Though withdrawn, I was still very aware and had reached a depth no amount of sleep could ever provide. To this day, I have not achieved a *Savasana* of the same magnitude I experienced when I was 9 years old. I've carried many heavy loads in my life, but none compared to the weight of guilt I felt about my grandmother's passing. I later realized that I had finally let it go on that cloudy day, and I was able to move forward.

### **Inquiring Mind, Seeking to Find**

Sadly, I left yoga and all of its transformative power alone after that experience. Like many children my age, I quickly became interested in other things and activities, and yoga became the toy you forget about as new, shiny ones enter the picture. However, the residual effect was that I questioned EVERYTHING. I even started to question (respectfully, of course) some of the things being taught in church. How could astrology be evil if the book of Genesis clearly states that God made the sun, moon, and stars “for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years...”? Why were people with the gift of sight written off as evil, but the Bible's prophets were heeded and celebrated? Why did slave masters use the Bible to justify their acts? Why did Black people pray to and worship a white Jesus, despite being described as having “hair like wool”, “feet like fine brass” and with a voice “the sound of many waters”? As I got older, the questions became more personal. Why did the Bible and Sunday sermons fill me with such fear of hell and shame towards my sinful nature, but astrology, herbalism, root work, yoga, and belief systems across the globe revealed so much of my goodness, light, and divinity? I was a straight “A” student in school, and I studied the Word like any other subject. I acquired so much knowledge, but without realizing it, I acquired a lot of baggage as well.

Eventually, the questions in my mind and the desire to be a free thinker accompanied me as I stopped attending church services in my early 20s. I felt the same disillusionment that many new college graduates feel – all of the knowledge you can stand, but what was I going to do with it? Where's my place in the world? Who am I? I carried a lot of this uncertainty with me until January 1, 2013. Fresh from an emotional and painful break-up, three changes to my lifestyle seemed vital: a more plant-based way of eating, moving out and living on my own, and attending weekly yoga classes at a local studio. 2013 add up to be a 6, in numerology, and the key word was ‘responsibility’ for that year. I decided to take care of home and do things that were deeply satisfying to my soul. I put some of the bags down.

### **Allow Me to Re-Introduce Myself...**

My first yoga class turned into one of my fondest memories. Committed to the promise I made on New Year's Day, I decided to take a Wednesday evening yoga class after work. At the time, I was working as an adjunct professor at Rowan University and as a research assistant at the University of Pennsylvania. My days were long and exhausting, so I was all too happy to

leave work and make my way to Still Point Yoga Center in Laurel Springs, NJ. I was warmly welcomed by the studio owner, Cathy, and brought into a dimly lit room with hardwood floors, blankets stacked against the far wall, and jade plants and small trinkets artfully placed. I smelled lavender in the air, and a few women in the room were quietly chatting while others were stretching, sitting silently with their eyes closed, or fumbling with their yoga mat and blocks.

As I got myself settled in, the yoga instructor, Maria, sat at the front of the room smiling contently with a look of pure bliss on her face. She had wispy, silver hair down to her shoulders, a small frame, and smile lines decorating the corners of her mouth. As she welcomed everyone, and went through some introductions, the sound of her voice lulled me into a deep sense of security. We began with some light stretching, which eased right into a standing practice. The flow instantly brought back memories of early morning yoga practices from my childhood, but there was more focus, control, and grace in my movements. There was more maturity, and less of an urge to “stick” the pose as competition was replaced with compassion. Instead of powering through the practice, I gave my body permission to breathe through minor discomforts, and soften my mind into holding the poses longer. Before I knew it, we were being guided into *Savasana*. Maria walked quietly around the room, covering students with blankets if they wanted warmth. Once she arrived at my mat, Maria knelt down and placed her hands on the sides of my head providing an assist that changed my alignment and deepened the relaxation I was already feeling. Before walking away, she swiped her thumbs across my brow and the smell of the lavender oil she rubbed on her hands filled my mindscape. Tears flowed from my closed eyes, as my body released pain, memories, doubt, and negative self-talk.

By the time we closed out the yoga class with a heartfelt “*Namaste*”, I was crystal clear on a few things: I needed yoga in my life like I needed oxygen, no matter what previous church sermons advised against, Spirit had brought me here, and I wanted my mom to start coming to classes with me. That last point was important because mom needed movement and release in her life and it would give us the perfect opportunity to share some bonding time outside of home. Although recovering from major surgery, mom was eager to join me, and I was delighted!

Watching my mom flow through *asana* was like watching the fluid movements of Misty Copeland. Yoga stretched my mom beyond her petite 5’4” frame and it was a beautiful thing to witness. I watched my mom like a hawk during classes because I didn’t want her to overdo it but I also couldn’t take my eyes off of her! Watching my mom made me smile, and I was proud to know I came from such a vessel. Every class brought brightness to her large eyes, and a slight bounce to her step. We were each other’s companions until her work schedule changed, and she could no longer attend classes. Instead, mom maintained a home practice and I continued to go to the studio. I was consumed by the progress I was making, and other areas of my life soon began to follow suit. I moved into my first apartment in March, and it felt good to be on my own and alone with my thoughts.

### **Every Journey Begins with One Step**

A flyer advertising fall yoga teacher training (YTT) made me dream about the possibility of it all. I was completely content with simply attending classes, but I couldn’t deny the one thing that gnawed at my insides every time I took a moment to look around me – I was the only Black student in the room. At first, I didn’t pay it any mind, but after seeing how yoga smoothed the edges that my mom’s work schedule often left ragged, I started to think about all of the sisters that wake up with a cape secured to their backs, capes that don’t seem to come off until

the end of the day after everyone has been rescued and restored except for the women wearing them. I hopped on my laptop, and began doing Google searches for ‘Black yoga teachers.’ Although I saw some beautiful and strong sources of inspiration and longevity, like Faith Hunter, Maya Breuer, Gail Parker, Dana Smith and Jana Long, I was not satisfied with the number of results Google gave me. Knowing full and well the many health disparities that plague African American women, and that most of the conditions are triggered or fed by stress, I decided to take a serious leap of faith and register for the yoga teacher training in hopes of being of service to everyday healers who need healing themselves.



Figure 2 - Connecting with Breath and the Light in Me (Photo Credit: Tenele M. Bailey).

In the beginning, I was timid and cautious. So many things about the YTT made me feel like I was betraying my Christian foundation. I would feel small, uncomfortable twinges whenever our group would chant. The thought of meditating, and completely withdrawing from the senses, frightened me and made me think of all the strange energy and spirits I could possibly open my body to. Many sessions would bring tears of release and revelation from each member of our training group, except me. I was on guard, and kept a vice grip on my thoughts and emotions for the first few months of the program. I wasn't attending church services anymore, but a large part of me was still being controlled by the teachings I received as a child, teen, and young adult. I felt like I had made a grave mistake and was flirting with the edge that separated my morals from the sinful ways of the world.

Amidst all of this conflict swirling around within me, I could hear a small voice reassuring me that not only was I in a safe space with my instructors and fellow trainees, I was doing what was right for me. From that moment, I approached my training sessions with a different attitude. I started to use our opening meditation time for prayer, and asking Spirit to guide me, protect me, and open and soften my heart. Soon, the 8 limbs of yoga and Patanjali's yoga sutras became as comforting, affirming, and eye-opening as the Psalms and Proverbs of the Bible. Learning to regulate the breath through *pranayama* (breathing practice) not only opened my lungs, but invigorated my sense of connection to my body and increased my level of respect for the breath that gave me life in the first place. Physically holding my *chi* (energy) flicked a light switch that illuminated the power I housed inside of me. My first guided meditation resulted

in me sitting in silence for two hours, and time traveling (some would call it astral projecting) to the turbulent time of the 1960s! I still can't fully explain that one, or tell you if I was dreaming or not, but I was very aware of both my seated state in the room and the active state of my travel and vision. These experiences were coaxing me out of my cocoon, and giving me permission to explore philosophies, beliefs, and Spirit in ways I never imagined. Remember that scene from the movie *What's Love Got to do With It?* when Tina Turner was reciting the Buddhist chant Nam Myoho Renge Kyo? I had a similar awakening. Over the course of 8 months, the voice I begged to be silenced so many years ago was making itself heard again. I found my voice during my YTT journey, and it was strong, clear, inquisitive, unwavering, and unapologetic.

Upon graduating from my YTT program, and obtaining my 200-hour teaching certification, I felt I was equipped with the tools necessary to incite change in people and communities of color. In many ways, I hit the ground running – I teamed up with non-profit and community organizations to offer free yoga classes at parks, and other open spaces, within urban areas. I taught community classes in local yoga studios. I even took a job working in a chiropractor's office, and proposed offering yoga as a service to his clients. I favored community teaching over studio teaching because I had more freedom to infuse my personal teaching style in the classes I taught. I could also have more one-on-one interaction with my students and get to know them better. However, my experiences weren't matching my vision. Aside from deepening my own practice, I became a yoga teacher to increase the visibility and accessibility of people of color in the field. I also wanted to be of service to women, and give them a safe haven to reflect, recharge, be heard, and heal. I wanted to be an agent of self-care. I thought sisters would be happy to see someone they could approach and relate to, and in some instances a few were. But, the majority of women I tried to share the joys of yoga with retaliated with:

“I'm not interested in your religion.”

“I'm not Buddhist.”

“I'm a Christian, and yoga goes against the Word of God.”

Never the pushy type, I'd smile and tell them I understood their reasoning, but deep down I felt sadness about yoga being such a hard sell with Black folks. Thanks to the ancient hieroglyphics on the pyramid walls of Egypt (Kemet), the work of Dr. Muata Ashby, and the practice of Yirser Ra Hotep, I knew yoga had African roots. Was I up for the challenge of convincing African Americans (women, in particular) to fully understand and embrace something that's theirs, especially after enduring earlier struggles of reconciling yoga with religion?

Evidently, if I wanted to reach the population I desired (and make yoga more palatable), I had to examine my own on-and-off struggles with religion. It was one thing to tell sisters that yoga was not a religion, but rather a science, practice, and lifestyle. It was another thing to reassure them that practicing yoga didn't drive a wedge between you and Spirit. If anything, it brought you closer. The deeper and more consistent my yoga practice became, the more intimate, profound, and simplistic my relationship with Spirit became. I started to see truth, light, and beauty in all faiths, belief systems, practices, and rituals. In particular, I began studying ancient African and Native American spirituality, which snowballed into crystal healing, astrology, chakras, herbalism, root work, and other aspects of metaphysics. The more I studied, the less it felt like studying (if that makes any sense). A lot of the information I came across didn't feel new to me. Rather, it felt very familiar and innate. My mother used to wear beautiful cowrie shell and tiger's eye jewelry that I was attracted to from the moment I laid my young eyes on it. The sound of the drum has always stirred my soul, and drove me to move and dance feverishly. I identified with the transformative energy of Oya before I knew her name, and I don't think it was

a coincidence that the principles of Ma'at sounded A LOT like the Ten Commandments. Common threads I observed were awareness and union. Spirituality provided a holistic connection between mind, body, and spirit that mere doctrine failed to. Religion may have offered a measure of knowledge, but spirituality was a feeling – and yoga was an extension of that feeling for me. Initiated and driven by the spirit (breath, life force), yoga was the body showing the mind what was already known.

### **The Light in Me + The Light in You = A New Day**

Want to know the amazing thing about ‘knowing’? Your entire life aligns with little to no effort from you. It’s either already written, or has already been lived and you’re simply trying to make a few tweaks here and there, and get it right this time around. Spirit’s thumbprint is embedded in your heart from the start, and it acts as a compass pointing us all to our true north. Your soul mission never goes away. Sometimes, you have to unlearn in order to relearn why you’re here and the work you’ve been assigned to do.

When I moved to Virginia in the fall of 2014, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. A new job was waiting, and I had the support and accompaniment of my partner, but I was leaving my family, friends, and everything my New Jersey-life instilled in me. I was scared, and wondered how my yoga practice would hold up in new surroundings, especially when I gathered up enough courage to share it with others. Not giving myself time to second-guess my decision, we packed everything up in a U-Haul and my Volkswagen Jetta, and made the 5-hour drive south. A speeding ticket upon entering Virginia briefly made me think about turning around, but I pressed onward.



**Figure 3 - Offering an Assist During a Pre-Natal Yoga Session (Photo Credit: Teneele M. Bailey).**

Settling into my new home in Virginia Beach brought about many new changes. Managing a career, relationship, and home life was a balancing act that caused daily mistakes, lessons, triumphs, and revelations. Yoga reminded me to stay in the flow, on and off the mat, but I was reluctant to branch out and share the practice outside of my home. I visited a few yoga studios in the area, but much like the plight of many fairytales and nursery rhymes, they were

either too hot or too cold. Nothing fit or was “just right.” I wasn’t being picky or going into anything with expectations; I was simply listening to Spirit, and asking to be guided into the best situation for me. Ultimately, I decided to operate as a freelance yoga instructor, and see where it took me. As I stopped trying to make things fit, or make sense of my life, I took notice of the people and opportunities coming into my space. I was attracting more creative individuals, light workers, and more chances to unlearn and open up my personal worldview. My vibration was being matched and raised by every like-minded person I crossed paths with. I was also attracting more sisters who were either curious or enthusiastic about practicing yoga. Gone were the questions about religion. Those were quickly replaced with:

“Are you sure I can do this? I’m a little out of shape.”

“Will yoga help me to relax?”

“How much do you charge?”

“When can we start?”

For a long time, I wrestled with how I could best offer yoga to Black women. How could I create a safe space for them to bring their weariness to the mat, and leave with their minds cleared, hearts restored, and spirits rejuvenated? Over the years, my teaching experience has shown me that my value lies in authenticity. When I started teaching, I approached things the same way I did any lecture I gave as an adjunct professor: lesson plans, bullet points, and structure. While the yoga classes would go well, I felt rigid and stifled. On days when I failed to plan a lesson ahead of time, I noticed that my students were more engaged with my language, jokes, and dashes of insight. They felt encouraged to hold poses longer because of my urgings to “send healing to all of the parts that need it right now.” For me, failing to plan my yoga classes was not a plan to fail. Those forgotten and tossed out lesson plans served as reminders as to why I enjoyed teaching yoga more than any other science. There aren’t any quizzes, exams, or evaluations in yoga. As a yoga instructor, I am in a position to welcome my students as they are, help them to soften their self-talk, and guide them to care for and heal themselves. Every class I teach lures my students away from the shores of knowledge and into the tides of knowing. Yoga is a form of light work that allows me to steer Black women away from expectations, standards of beauty, boxes, labels, and all that we should be, and illuminate a path that leads to remembering and knowledge of self.

## References

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**Teneele M. Bailey** is a Jersey girl in a Virginia world, yoga instructor, birth doula, and holistic living enthusiast. She finds comfort, freedom, and awakening through movement and meditation. Teneele recognizes her abilities as both a teacher and healing companion, and commits herself to helping others gain knowledge and achieve wholeness.