

**Yoga Brings You Back to Who You Are:  
A Conversation Featuring Haley Laughter**

Tria Blu Wakpa with Haley Laughter  
*University of California, Riverside*

**Abstract**

Haley Laughter is a Diné (Navajo) yoga instructor and the founder of Hózhó Total Wellness and the Indigenous Yoga Instructors Association. In this interview, she and Dr. Tria Blu Wakpa, *Race and Yoga* journal co-founder and co-editor-in-chief, discuss how Laughter's perspective as a Diné woman informs her yoga practice and teaching.

**Keywords:** Embodiment; Indigenous; Native American; Navajo; Yoga

**Tria Blu Wakpa: What was your entryway into practicing yoga?**

Haley Laughter: My sister-in-law introduced me to the Bikram method when I was about 27 or 28. She was like, "you gotta try this." I went to a studio that offered Bikram, and I've been hooked ever since. I was going through a divorce at that time, and yoga was really like my savior in helping me to endure, keep my energy, and let go and direct some of the excess emotions that I was feeling. Yoga has helped me to learn more about who I am and provided a safe place for me. I've been practicing now for 10 years.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: What was your entryway into teaching yoga?**

Haley Laughter: I earned my certification in the Bikram method and then moved to Gallup, New Mexico. In Gallup, my sister-in-law and I started the first hot yoga studio called Four Corners Yoga. Our whole purpose was to bring yoga to this area for more Indigenous people to practice. The students actually became a mix of everyone, which was great. My sister-in-law and I ran the studio together for probably about a good three years, and then I decided to go venture out on my own.

Today, I am the founder of Hózhó Total Wellness. I got the inspiration after I started posting on the Facebook group page, HEALTHY ACTIVE NATIVES!!! At that time, there weren't other Natives in the group posting about yoga. I started educating people about the practice, including different asana and the benefits of asana. From there, I gained a following of Indigenous people who were interested in yoga.

Often, there's no yoga studios on the rez (Indian reservation), and our people don't have access to it. I started Hózhó Total Wellness so that our people can experience yoga. We contract with

different places, such as Navajo Technical University and College, and offer yoga for them, including Indigenous workshops. It's so fun, because I work with college kids that have never heard of yoga, never really experienced their body. Actually, I find that a lot of people have never experienced their body in a yoga asana. Afterwards, they feel so good. They love it. Hózhó Total Wellness organized an event for the first International Yoga Day at Monument Valley in June 2017. We had about 80 participants, 15 who were yoga teachers, and it was just a beautiful experience.



Figure 1 – Portrait of Haley Laughter on her Diné Homelands (Photo Credit: Ron G. Slim, Aesthetic NVC).

**Tria Blu Wakpa: What does the name of your program mean?**

Haley Laughter: Hózhó is a word in the Navajo language, which means, basically, to walk in beauty or to be in beauty or peace, equilibrium, and balance. Mind, body, spirit type of thing.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: It seems that in naming your program Hózhó , you're thinking about the interconnections between yoga philosophy and Navajo ways of life. Could you speak to that?**

Haley Laughter: Sure. It's really interesting because yoga philosophy is about mind, body, and spirit. That's the same we, as Indigenous people, think. We think about the mind, body, spirit, and also the emotions. The four elements are all interconnected with that. We are made mainly of

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water. You have the mind, which would be water. The brain is dependent on water to get all the chemicals, the protons, and the electrons moving. The mind would be more like our thinking, our planning, our creation. Creating things, education, exercising our minds, and really learning all that we can while we're here. We are dependent on water to create that circuit.

We believe the body is Mother Earth. Taking care of the physical body, Mother Earth, exercising, drinking good water, food, nutrients, cleaning ourselves, taking care of ourselves.

Then the fire is the emotions. We have all these emotions. Especially as indigenous people, because of colonization, we come from a lot of historical trauma. We come from a lot of ways of abuse. With that emotion, we can either choose to be a fire that's contained and promotes new life, or we can be a fire that hurts people and is destructive. And so, we can choose how we want to convey and use that energy.

Then we have the air. Air is our breath, the breath of life. It is also the way that we conduct ourselves, communicate, and speak to others. The words we choose, or our prayers. I've been taking these four elements and putting them in conversation with yoga philosophy, and really yoga philosophy's deep, but Indigenous philosophy – especially Navajo philosophy – is much deeper as far as offering insights about life, the elements, purpose, and creation. Yoga brings all of the four elements together within us to create hózhó.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Are the connections between yoga philosophy and Navajo worldviews, ideas, or teachings that you came up with yourself or were you inspired by others?**

Haley Laughter: The way that I came up with this is I went to a conference in Pueblo, New Mexico that brought together Indigenous people and leaders. One of the elders spoke about how we are all connected by the four elements. It doesn't matter what Indigenous tribe, we all belong to these four elements. I took those four elements and delved a little bit deeper into them, and applied this knowledge to yoga philosophy.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: I also became familiar with your work through the stunning images that you post on HEALTHY ACTIVE NATIVES!!! In many of these photos, you're doing yoga poses dressed in Navajo regalia on what appears to be Navajo land. I was wondering, what message do you want to convey with your pictures? Or, relatedly, are there ways that your identity as a Diné woman informs your yoga practice and teaching?**



Figure 2 – Haley Laughter in Exalted Warrior Pose (Photo Credit: Ron G. Slim, Aesthetic NVC).

*My yoga pictures depict my identity as an Indigenous woman. Yoga is an expression of who I am, connected to the elements and the earth, in a place that I come from – in my case, Shiprock – or being a part of the land.*

Haley Laughter: My yoga pictures depict my identity as an Indigenous woman. Yoga is an expression of who I am, connected to the elements and the earth, in a place that I come from – in my case, Shiprock – or being a part of the land. So, yes. When I first started practicing yoga and posting about it, a lot of Indigenous people had misperceptions about the practice. For instance, that it's only for the White upper class. When they saw me practicing yoga, they were like, "Wow. Native people practice yoga?" So, my photos help other people to realize, "I'm Native. I'm brown. I can do yoga too."

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Do you think as a Native yoga teacher you're able to offer something that non-Native teachers are not?**

Haley Laughter: As far as can I offer something that no other person can offer? I will say that I think every teacher has a strength, and they have their own perspective on yoga and a lot of it stems from the yoga teachings, which is wonderful.

The teachings that I have from Navajo culture, yes, I do. I feel like there is something different that I can offer. I offer people another insight into why they're sacred. Why their practice is sacred. Why seeing things differently rather than, 'your body's just your body,' is important. I also think that being a Native yoga teacher helps me to attract other Indigenous people to yoga. Right now, we're working on a yoga teacher training for Indigenous people.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Would you tell me something about the yoga teacher training that you're creating?**

*Connecting yoga and Navajo philosophy, again, it really reinforces the teachings that you're sacred, that life is important, and you should take care of your body. Ideally, yoga changes people's lives. They become more conscious, and they become aware of where they put themselves, what they're doing. They take more accountability for their life, and they take more accountability for who they are. They also hopefully take more accountability for being earth-friendly, including the foods they eat and the water they drink.*

Haley Laughter: I'm working with Kate Herrera. She is another Indigenous yoga teacher and an amazing person. She started a non-profit called Native Fitness. I met her about three years ago, and then we spent some time together this past summer. She has a yoga studio out in Alabama and a 200 RYT [registered yoga teacher] with Yoga Alliance so we are currently collaborating to get a teacher training together specifically for Indigenous people. We're still deciding which area to do it, probably Albuquerque or Gallup.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: You spoke a lot about the connections that you see between yoga and Navajo philosophies, and I was wondering if you have thoughts about yoga in regard to Indigenous cultural revitalization projects? For example, do you think that for Native people yoga is a way to access Indigenous modes of movement or strength training that colonization has tried to annihilate?**

Haley Laughter: Yes. My father went to boarding school and my mom is part of the placement program. They moved to Salt Lake City, where I grew up. My mom died when I was young. I dealt with a lot of historical trauma in my own home – alcoholism, addiction, abuse, domestic violence, all those types of things are what I went through. Connecting yoga and Navajo philosophy, again, it really reinforces the teachings

that you're sacred, that life is important, and you should take care of your body. Ideally, yoga changes people's lives. They become more conscious, and they become aware of where they put themselves, what they're doing. They take more accountability for their life, and they take more accountability for who they are. They also hopefully take more accountability for being earth-friendly, including the foods they eat and the water they drink. As far as Indigenous people, it's the same way. It's creating that awareness of who we are. The consciousness, the awareness of the mind, body, spirit, and also the cultural aspect on top of that.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: I think you have addressed this, in part, too, but in your experience, what are the ways that Native people respond to doing yoga and/or to your yoga practice?**

Haley Laughter: My experience, especially here on Navajo [land], is that Native people are excited to do yoga. I've had many people message me to ask what recommendations I have or say, "thank you for sharing your yoga, because now I'm practicing yoga," or "now I'm thinking about trying a class," or they say, "oh my gosh, I'm doing some yoga poses with my kids at school, or on the track team," or what have you. Or, "I want to be a yoga teacher." It's amazing, the impact that posting on social media has had. But when I get messages like that, it also really humbles me. It reminds me that people are watching. Even though I don't realize it, people are watching. Or sometimes they'll send me pictures of their kids in the yoga poses that I did. It's special to have those. I've had a lot of positive feedback.

One thing I do say is that because of colonization and historical trauma, Native people have high rates of diabetes. We also have high rates of alcoholism, addiction, high blood pressure, and obesity. Things are against us health wise, so when I go out to teach these different yoga classes, it's wonderful because every body type comes out. I have every body type trying and wanting to practice yoga. I've had nothing but positive feedback, which has been pretty nice.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: I think you raised something else, which I was hoping you could talk more about. It seems like you've found social media to be a powerful tool to bring yoga to all sorts of people, but especially Native people?**

Haley Laughter: Yes, it's been a very powerful tool. When HEALTHY ACTIVE NATIVES!!! came out, it was big. We have so many Indigenous people everywhere, all over the world, and social media is a way for us to connect. Anita Lara-Beckler and I are the first ones working to bring Indigenous yoga teachers together. Anita's actually the Executive Director of Hózhó Total Wellness, and she's the one who helps plan and get things going. She's been wonderful. We probably are on the forefront of creating a whole yoga hub for Indigenous people. You have the individuals who do things, but you don't have someone bringing everyone together. Our goal is to bring everyone together.

That's also why I started Indigenous Yoga Instructors Association (IYIA), another project that I'm working on. When I started IYIA, all these yoga teachers from everywhere just started messaging me. We are planning a conference for 2019. IYIA is about bringing Indigenous yoga teachers together, and really discussing how we can incorporate our teachings into yoga, and also incorporate yoga into our communities for healing.

It's going to be wonderful. It's definitely something that we've been working on – basically, creating a network of Indigenous teachers.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: There are many critiques that discuss yoga as a form of cultural appropriation. I was wondering if you have had any of those critiques, and if so, how you may have addressed them?**



Figure 3 – Anita Lara-Beckler and Haley Laughter (Photo Credit: Ron G. Slim, Aesthetic NVC).

Haley Laughter: No, I actually haven't. I have to say, everything's been very positive. Everything has been great. People are curious about yoga. As far as appropriation, no. However, I will say this, I don't believe that yoga should be . . . yoga isn't fun. It is a meditative process, but it's work, and we shouldn't add different things in it in order to make it appealing and appealing.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: How do you think Native people today can enhance, or are enhancing existing yoga practices, programs, and representations in the media? And how do you think the current yoga industry could be more inclusive of Native people?**

Haley Laughter: I think there could be more of a cultural conversation about yoga and the different cultures that practice yoga, and really highlighting that in a creative way. I feel like that's key in getting some bigger companies to recognize that there are many different religions, cultures, and tribes that practice yoga, and who are trying to create change with yoga.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Speaking of which, I saw recently that Jade Yoga Mats featured you in their 2018 calendar. Congratulations!**

Haley Laughter: Thank you. I was really excited about that one. That was a really good opportunity. It's fun being able to be part of that.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Yes, and such a great opportunity to represent Native people – counter to dominant depictions – in the contemporary day practicing yoga. I was wondering do you use the term “decolonization” at all in relation to yoga?**

Haley Laughter: I do at times, yes. With other Indigenous people, yes. Only when it's culturally appropriate because I do feel like we have been colonized in a lot of different ways, and coming back to the basics begins with us inside, and being proud of who we are and knowing our culture, and knowing these different aspects that make us who we are.

When you take it to the broader aspect of people speaking to decolonizing yoga, what I've read a lot about is taking it back to the true form of yoga, and to decolonize the aspect, once again, of a lot of dancing and music and making it appealing, but just going back to the basics of the original practice, which would be meditation while moving. Hatha yoga. Or the different aspects of the yamas, the way of life, basically.

As far as decolonizing yoga, for me as an Indigenous woman, as a Diné woman, I would say that it would be being able to offer and being able to give our students, our teachers, an authentic yoga practice with the basics while incorporating the basics of indigenous philosophy. The basics like reconnecting with breath and the cultural teachings that our grandparents carried with them. It is important to know where we come from, where yoga comes from, and even though yoga is

*It is important to know where we come from, where yoga comes from, and even though yoga is not a practice indigenous to the U.S., our ancestors also had holistic practices that colonization has targeted, and so yoga is like coming home, a way of reconnecting with our ancestors and our original ways of life.*

not a practice indigenous to the U.S., our ancestors also had holistic practices that colonization has targeted, and so yoga is like coming home, a way of reconnecting with our ancestors and our original ways of life. Again, the basics. I think we get so wound up in the details of things. Making it simple is better than complicating it. Did that answer your question?

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Yes, because I think what you've identified are the ways that colonization and capitalism have detrimentally affected Indigenous peoples and non-Eurocentric practices. You're recognizing how colonialism has been integral in shaping yoga, but also offering yoga as a way to alleviate the violence of colonization.**

Haley Laughter: Yes. And to use that energy to practice yoga. Whether that be meditation, service to others, the physical practice of asana, or going back to your breath. Taking that anger and utilizing that energy. In fact, recycling it to better yourself. That's one of the things that I tell my students, too. You can choose. It's up to you how you utilize this energy. You are powerful; you are sacred. How do you want to utilize this?

**Tria Blu Wakpa: How do you think yoga could serve social justice or serve Indigenous people for social purposes?**

Haley Laughter: You see in Indian country right now this revolution, people standing up and wanting justice, which is wonderful. I'm 100% behind it. But again, I feel like incorporating yoga into these types of things is a way to deescalate and not be so angry. If we didn't have the Long Walk, if we didn't have the Trail of Tears, if we didn't have these camps that we were put in, we wouldn't be who we are today. Unfortunately, our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents had to make that sacrifice for us. We need to be respectful of the sacrifice that they went through for us to better our lives, to be educated. To go out there and do things and have the life that we have.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Relatedly, I was wondering if you think that having you as a yoga teacher might positively influence your non-Native students, particularly those who have had limited interactions with Indigenous people?**

Haley Laughter: Yes, I totally believe that. I really, really do believe that. How that is done is through, again, utilizing the elements. I'll give you a good example. A lot of southwest tribes depend on corn. Corn is very sacred to us. We use the corn pollen to pray as Diné people, as Navajo people. We've heard it from the Pueblo how to harvest corn, and they also see corn as sacred.

One of the concepts that an elder taught me one time, when he saw me doing backbends, relates to corn. The elder said, "you know what? Let me tell you something. This is how you should see your spine. Everything grows from the ground up." And in Navajo, he said, "the spine represents a cornstalk. It grows from the base, comes all the way up, and you have all these cornhusks that come out. These cornhusks represent the ribcage, the tissues, the muscles, everything around the main cornstalk. The main cornstalk would be the vertebrae, where your central nervous system is. It comes all the way up to the top, and as it comes up, it gets smaller. That would be like our neck." And then he said, "the very top would be the corn tassels. And in those corn tassels is the tadidiin, the corn pollen that we pray with. The tassels would represent the mind."

So, one time I did a workshop for a conference, and there were women elders that were weavers, and I did yoga asanas for them, and afterwards I did a meditation around corn, and imagining your spine being a cornstalk and coming up. They loved it. Oh my gosh, afterward they thanked me, because they're like, "it just brings me back to home. Brings you back to the memory of having corn, and how we came from the corn, and how sacred it is, and how our body's sacred and how it connects."

Same thing with my students. In my non-Indigenous classes, I talk a little bit about these philosophies. In the end, what I do for them is I sing them a song, and I tell them creation stories, how the song was created. And then I talk about how it vibrates from the inside out and goes all the way up into the sky, into the universe and the heavens, and it becomes a prayer or an offering. And the song vibrates all the way, and it creates equilibrium, hózhó, it creates balance. It's so powerful that it works from the inside out and changes things.

At the end of most of my classes, I'll sing a song and give them that story, and they're like, wow. And that's their last meditation right there. So, I'm trying to teach my students the cultural

aspects of who we are, how we believe, how we think, and how something as simple as a song can change things.

And what is the universal sound in yoga? It's om. It's a vibration. Same with song. It's chanting the songs that we sing in ceremony, the songs that we sing for healing.



Figure 4 – Haley Laughter Teaching at the 2017 Inaugural International Yoga Day, held on Monument Valley, and Concluding with a Song (Photo Credit: Ron G. Slim, Aesthetic NVC).

I wanted to say one more thing, as far as when you asked me about social justice and the revolution and all that. I do want to say that I think yoga can also be very helpful because . . .

*But teaching yoga, and also who we are as Indigenous people, creates consciousness and awareness, and I think that's one thing that our young people need to know. They need to be conscious. They need to be aware of what they're doing, how they're doing it, and why they're doing it. And, at the same time, learning the culture. Learning who they are and where they come from. Asking questions.*

what I see is some people do a lot of these things for their social media and don't go any further than that. But teaching yoga, and also who we are as Indigenous people, creates consciousness and awareness, and I think that's one thing that our young people need to know. They need to be conscious. They need to be aware of what they're doing, how they're doing it, and why they're doing it. And, at the same time, learning the culture. Learning who they are and where they come from. Asking questions.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: What do you think the future of yoga is in relationship to Native people, or what would you like to see as the future of yoga in relationship to Native people?**

Haley Laughter: I have a vision, Tria, and vision starts with Navajo of course. But I have this vision of a hogan-shaped yoga studio that is heated by sweat lodge rocks. It's a place where people come for meditation, for yoga, and a place where they come for teacher training, where they come conference, whatever. This is the vision that I have. Somehow, it's going to happen. I'm manifesting it. It will be a place for our people to heal, and it will go not only for this reservation, but all reservations will have their own place of mediation, their own place of healing. Teachers with Indigenous Yoga Instructors Association, with Hózhó Total Wellness, can go and teach.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: The last two questions that I have are: is there anything you'd like to ask me, or is there something I didn't ask that you that you'd like to voice?**

Haley Laughter: I would say, one thing that I feel, what inspires me, is one time I had someone say, "You know, yoga's not that popular amongst Natives. I'm sorry, but they just don't see it as a benefit. In fact, they talk bad about yoga." And I just kept doing yoga. I just kept educating Indigenous people about the benefits of yoga, how it can help them and how it relates to who we are as Indigenous, spiritual beings. Consciousness awareness, working our whole lives for spiritual awakening, these are all concepts that non-Indigenous people talk about, but we, as Indigenous people, are gifted with. We already have that gift. We've been given that, we understand that. We already know and understand that thinking. It inspires me to be able to open up an opportunity for people to feel their bodies, feel who they are, even if it's just for a moment. It's so important to teach the younger generations to take care of the body. The importance of this vessel that we have to experience this life, you only get one, and we have to take care of it.

**Tria Blu Wakpa: Thank you. It's been awesome to speak with you. You have so much knowledge to share, and I really appreciate you taking the time.**

Haley Laughter: I'm really honored, being able to do this, and being able to talk to you and being able to have this interview. I think it's wonderful. Yoga's something that I found to help me heal from my own trauma and understand who I was. My life was not easy. It's not easy, and I was given a rough hand in the beginning. Not as rough as many other people, but still pretty rough. Yoga's where I found my identity, and it's where I found who I was. Yoga brings you back to who you are.

**Haley Laughter** is a Diné (Navajo) yoga instructor and the founder of Hózhó Total Wellness and the Indigenous Yoga Instructors Association. She can be found online at <https://www.facebook.com/hozhototalwellness/>