

# Yoga in My Secret Garden

by Karen Hirsch

I am beginning to hear echoes of yoga teachings in the strangest places. In *The Secret Garden*, for example.

*The Secret Garden* is Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic of children's literature, which I recently read – not to my six-year-old daughter as one might expect – but because I am an insomniac. One or two nights a month, I can't fall asleep until 3 or 4 a.m. (Sometimes I don't sleep at all). On these nights, my heart races, my mind races, my blood pulses hard as if I've received electric shock. I worry about everything and nothing mostly: "When will I fall asleep? When will I fall asleep? WHEN WILL I FALL ASLEEP?!"

I have tried everything – hot baths, warm milk, forward bends, Cary Grant movies, magnesium supplements and sleeping pills. Lately my favorite drug of choice is fiction by dead English ladies. That's how I came upon *The Secret Garden*.

The novel tells the story of Mary Lennox, a "sour" and "disagreeable" girl who is orphaned in India and brought to Misselwaite Manor, the home of a mysterious uncle. There Mary meets two boys who represent the extremes of human psychology. The first is her cousin Colin, bedridden since birth, who lives in a dark room cut off from life and love, dwelling on thoughts of death and illnesses real and imagined.

And there is Dickon, a country boy, who spends his days roaming the moors, observing and caring for its creatures. Dickon is greatly admired for his gentle spirit. He is all smiles and light – a soul at one with nature, with the "Great Good Thing".

Mary discovers a secret walled garden that appears, at first glance, to be completely dead. She soon discovers small green shoots and clears a spot for them. In that moment, she embarks upon a path of transformation. With each visit to the garden, Mary re-fashions herself from a person who is much like Colin to one much more like Dickon. The secret garden is the life force or prana. Once Mary finds it, she fills herself up with more of it on every page.

Ah, if only it were as easy for me as it is for Mary Lennox. After five years of studying Anusara yoga, I have experienced brief moments when my yoga mat is the key to the secret garden. Moments when I am at one with nature and the universe and mortality. But these experiences are rare and unpredictable – mere glimpses.

In recent months, my teacher Denise Benitez has done a remarkable job integrating meditation into our hatha yoga classes. At first, it intimidated me. I will never forget the first time Denise invited us to sit for two minutes. I looked at a friend and we whispered to one another: "I'll never make it!" But the two minutes flew and I became hooked. I now have a fledgling practice of meditation at home. No matter how long I sit, I always feel better - my spirit brighter, my vision sharper. I'll never understand what keeps me from practicing yoga and meditation every day – if only for a handful of minutes.

A few nights ago, the heart-racing-no-sleeping feeling came upon me while reading in bed. I got up, did a few minutes of yoga and sat in meditation for quite a while. Then I curled up in bed and fell soundly asleep.

I think I will always have a bit of Colin in me. After all, I've had forty years to practice being an anxious, neurotic, hypochondriac. It has taken five years just to loosen the grip of that identity. But this has me wondering: what might my secret garden look like if I get to tend it for another thirty or forty years?