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Anthropologist
Felicitas Goodman
discovered postures
depicted in the art of
ancient cultures that
can open the door
to the spirit world.

Sing the Body Ecstatic!

By Kristin Barendsen

Photographs by Michael Sexton

ON THE AIRPLANE above New Mexico, I look down on a vast expanse of desert land—canyons cutting the red earth, jagged mesas rising like stairs for the spirits. Somewhere below is the Cuyamungue (kwee-ah-mun-gay) Institute, a remote retreat center in the Pojoaque Valley north of Santa Fe, where I am going for a three-day workshop on ecstatic trance. An altered state of consciousness, ecstatic trance is the doorway shamans have used for millennia to gain access to another dimension of human experience. This is a world in which people can turn into crows and fly over the desert, or follow a snake through an underground tunnel, or ask for the spirits' help in healing themselves.

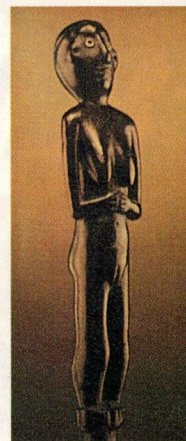
While writers like Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner have brought shamanic journeying to a 20th-century audience, this workshop will approach it from a unique angle: the effect that body postures have on the content of the visions. Noted anthropologist Felicitas Goodman,


Ph.D., workshop leader and Institute founder, discovered that certain postures depicted in the art of ancient cultures appear to be "ritual instructions." When these postures are

held statically, and a trance state is induced with a drum or rattle, spirit realms specific to the posture can be accessed. One posture might take you to what shamans call the lower world; another might be a gateway to the sky world; a third might provide guidance to a question.

As the airplane begins its descent, I look back at my journal on the tray table in front of me. "I'm not afraid," I write, "of losing my ego in the lower world, or refusing to come back from the sky world. My only fear is that nothing will happen."

At that moment, my pen squirts a stream of ink down the page, covering my hands in black. Intending to wash my hands with the water from my Evian bottle, I loosen the cap and it shoots

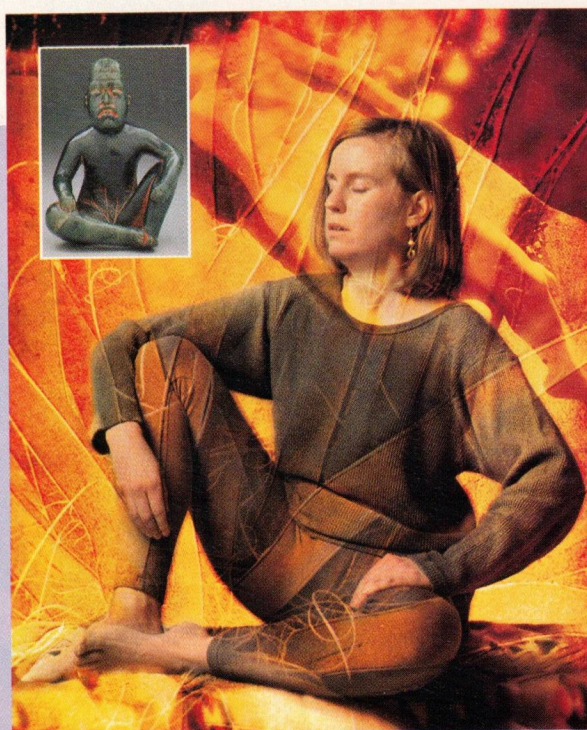
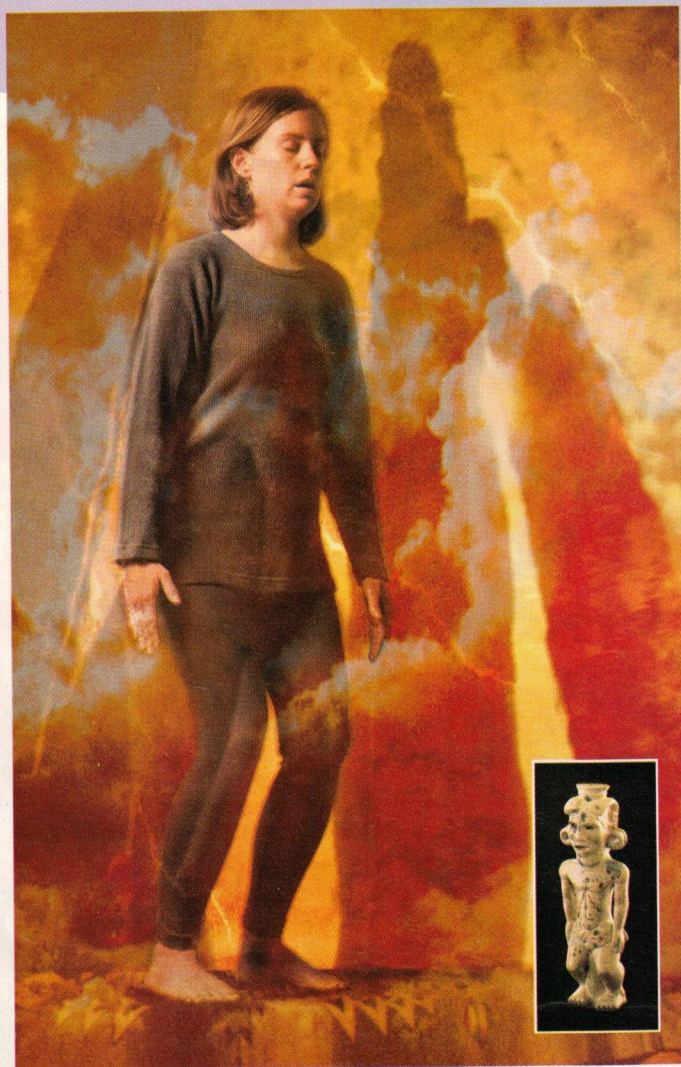




Bear Spirit Posture. In this healing posture, people often experience an interaction with Grandfather Bear, a powerful but gentle spirit. A female figurine (left) demonstrates the posture. Stand with your feet six inches apart and parallel, knees softly bent. Gently roll both hands as if you were holding a small egg in each palm. Place your hands on your belly so your folded fingers form a tall triangle over your navel. The first joint of the index fingers should touch to form the apex of the triangle. Rest your arms easily at your sides. With your eyes closed, tilt your head slightly back.

Olmec Diviner Posture (right). Demonstrated by an Olmec jade carving (inset), this divination posture can take you "to the edge of [your] known world, to the stratosphere, or deep into the innards of animals," says Belinda Gore. Sit with your left leg resting on the floor and your right knee drawn up toward your torso. Place your right foot flat on the floor, with the sole of your left foot perpendicular to it and resting against your right instep. Cup your left hand and rest it on the inner thigh, at the knee. Hold your left arm rigid, slightly away from your body. Extend your right arm so the elbow rests on your right knee and the forearm hangs down the shin. Relax your hand, with the fingers slightly curled. Stare straight ahead with your eyes closed and your mouth slightly open.

Adena Pipe Posture (below). This divination posture, derived from a 2,000-year-old Adena Indian effigy (inset), often provides guidance about health and healing. Stand with your feet parallel, about eight inches apart. Bend your knees and bend forward from the hips, then straighten your torso without moving your hips. Square your shoulders, your arms held stiffly away from your body, your fingers pointing toward the ground. Face straight ahead with your mouth slightly open and your eyes closed.



up, hits the ceiling, and lands in the lap of the good-natured woman in front of me.

I take this as confirmation that something will happen.

Visions and Voices

The next day, Felicitas Goodman welcomes me to the Cuyamungue Institute. Over 30 years ago, at age 51, she pitched her tent on this land among scorpions and six-inch orange centipedes and cut the foundation for the Institute's first building with a pick axe. Now 82, she looks much younger, with hair tied in a single gray braid that reaches her waist. Small but strong, she takes obvious delight in her work and in meeting new students, and her enthusiasm is as contagious as a child's.

Goodman bought this land in 1963, after a vision in which three Native American men beckoned her to come live in New Mexico. Its nearly 300 acres of mountain desert are bordered on the east by the Sangre de Cristo ("blood of Christ") mountains, and on the west by the Jemez mountain range. Near the southern border of the land are the unexcavated ruins of a Pueblo Indian settlement, deserted when the Spanish forced the natives off the land in the late 17th century. Somehow the land itself seems to tell of this bloodshed, in the hot wind blowing dust through skies that are impossibly vast.

After a few of the other workshop participants arrive, we tour the Institute's compound: the original adobe house that Goodman and a neighbor built in 1965, now

Inset left: courtesy Ohio Historical Society; inset above: courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

the home of the Institute's two year-round caretakers; the student building, with a kitchen and bathrooms; Goodman's house, a cozy, one-room structure; the kiva, a round ceremonial building sunk partially underground; the doorless latrine, which affords a spectacular view of the Sangre de Cristos; and the library, where we store our belongings and can take shelter if it rains—if skies are clear, we will sleep under the stars.

Skies will certainly be clear tonight, Goodman tells us. With two dry years and no rainfall for three months, the area is experiencing its worst drought in centuries. Goodman's vegetable garden and her mulberry tree have withered. More alarming, her well has dropped six feet this year alone. She instructs us to take sponge baths, not showers, and to flush toilets only when absolutely necessary. In the kitchen a newspaper clipping hangs framed on the wall: "Forecast: drought to last until winter."

Goodman prepares Hungarian lentil soup and calls us to dinner with a cow bell. Before we bless the food, Goodman says that her only rule is that we eat all the

food we take. She almost starved twice in her life, and she can't bear to see food wasted. Fortunately, the soup is delicious, and it's an easy rule to follow.

Those times of famine happened during World War II, when Goodman, who grew up in the Hungarian part of Rumania, fled her homeland for the United States. She arrived in this country with her three small children, "starving, beggarly, all my belongings in a cardboard box." Multilingual and well-educated, she found work as a scientific translator. At age 51 she decided to go back to school.

As a graduate student in linguistics and anthropology at Ohio State University, Goodman became involved in a project on religious trance. As she recounts in *Where the Spirits Ride the Wind: Trance Journeys and Other Ecstatic Experiences*, the study found that seeing visions, hearing voices, and communicating with the dead—behaviors that modern psychiatry labels psychotic—are important aspects of the religions of 96 percent of the small hunting and horticultural societies

Our Need for Ecstasy

Belinda Gore, a longtime student and colleague of Dr. Goodman, is the author of *Ecstatic Body Postures*, a practical guide for experimentation with trance postures. Gore recommends doing the postures with others whenever possible. "The presence of other people makes such a difference," she says. "What one person experiences might be useful for the whole group." Gore's own rattling group meets weekly, a frequency that for her is optimal; she does not recommend a daily practice of ecstatic trance, as it gets to be "routine." However, daily practices like meditation and yoga can help one "stay in shape" for trance, she says.

A psychotherapist, Gore uses trance work with interested clients, both individually and in support groups. In a group she led for women healing from cancer, members used divining postures to clarify their next steps in recovery; metamorphosis postures helped mem-

bers experience the body changing into a state of wellness. She has seen people receive guidance in trance that helped them heal, and has even witnessed healing as a direct result of trance.

Another kind of healing takes place regardless of posture, Gore maintains—that of reclaiming our physiological need for ecstasy. She says that modern-day humans are "ecstasy deprived," often filling the gap with drugs, alcohol, or food. Trance work not only is a healthy path to ecstasy, it is a path filled with meaning, reconnecting us to the spirit world.

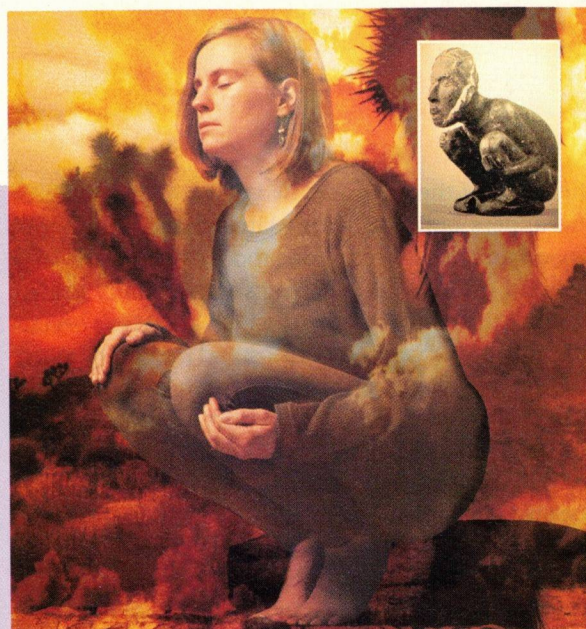
Like Goodman, Gore believes that we access more than our inner worlds in trance. She offers that "the idea of a separation between our inner worlds and an alternate reality is in some ways a false concept. If we get deep enough and high enough into our inner worlds, we are connected multidimensionally with other worlds as well."

Gore says it is normal for the depth of one's trance state to vary. Sometimes she is in a mild altered state on the edges of trance; other times, she very clearly has "direct contact" with the spirit world. She emphasizes that we haven't had the practice, or the preparation, that traditional shamans had. "We're not going off to be alone for a day or two, fasting: Of course we will not consistently go deep every time."

Gore believes, however, that our modern nervous systems are in some ways quite well suited to trance. Because we are used to integrating many different kinds of stimulation, we are more "highly sensitized," she says. While the hunter and horticulturalist societies appear to have worked with only one to three postures, we have access to over 50 postures, each separated by continents and huge spans of time. Gore suggests that the spirits have made these postures available to us for a reason. "We are in a time of expansion," she says, "the edge of an evolutionary leap." Ecstatic trance is one of many tools that will help us transition into this new phase.

The Emergence Posture (right). People see chaos, darkness, and a world in turmoil in this posture, derived from a figure on a 12th century Alabama redstone pipe (inset). With your feet apart, lower your body into a squat, bringing your torso forward over your knees. (If you cannot squat with your buttocks on the ground like the man in the figurine, you may place a pillow underneath the heels or buttocks to help with balance.) Place your left hand on your lower left leg, with the ball of the hand just below your left knee and the fingers pointing up toward your kneecap. Rest your right hand palm-down on the outer edge of your right knee, with your arm held close to your outer thigh. Face forward with your eyes closed.

The Feathered Serpent (below). This 6,000-year-old figure (inset) found in central Yugoslavia depicts the Feathered Serpent, a symbol of the mighty feminine source of life and fertility. Stand with feet parallel and six inches apart, toes pointing straight ahead, knees softly bent. Cup each hand and place it on the side of your body at the waist. Curve each arm like the handles of a teapot. Square your shoulders. Face straight ahead with your eyes closed.



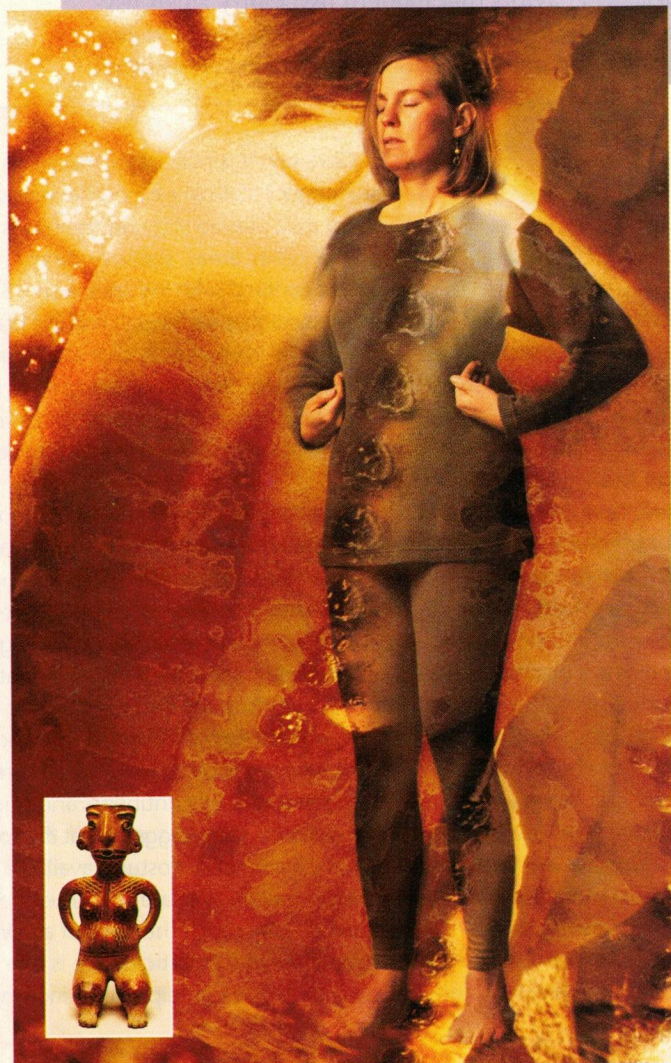
that were studied. In these societies, people who cannot achieve religious altered states of consciousness are considered abnormal.

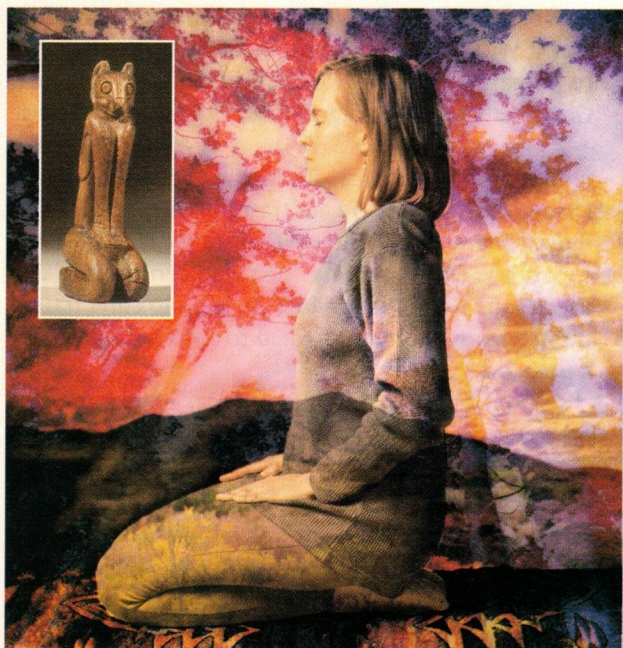
Continuing her research in the Yucatan, Goodman observed members of Pentecostal churches enter trance and exhibit a rhythmic utterance called glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," which they consider a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. When she compared tapes from these churches to tapes of glossolalia from other cultures, religions, and native languages, Goodman found that the patterns of rhythm and intonation were identical. This led her to posit that glossolalia is a physiological response that is part of the trance state.

Years later, Goodman and her colleagues measured other physiological changes that occur during trance. Blood levels of stress hormones initially rise, then drop dramatically, while the brain synthesizes beta-endorphins, the chemicals responsible for the joy and well-being felt after trance. The blood pressure drops, but simultaneously the heart races, a rare combination usually associated with being close to death.

Discovering Postures

When Goodman began teaching linguistics and anthropology at Denison University in Ohio, her students were intrigued by her work with trance. "You mean we can get a high without crashing?" they asked. Goodman began experimenting with student test subjects, using what she had identified as the key elements of trance: private space; subjects' belief that trance states are accessible to them (this was the early '70s); and rhythmic stimulation, for which she used a gourd rat-





In further experimentation with this posture, many students grew very hot, saw shades of blue, and felt their bodies open to receive a substance or flow of energy. With a posture Goodman found among the Lascaux cave paintings in southern France, sub-

jects felt as if they left their bodies, flying through the sky world. Each posture seemed to mediate a different sort of journey. Most significantly, the subjects were often moved to tears or profound joy. "They had passed from the secular to the sacred," Goodman writes.

After Goodman was forced to retire at 65, she founded the Cuyamungue Institute as a nonprofit educational corporation and began holding workshops in ecstatic trance. Through these workshops, a community of students developed; together they explored the meaning of the postures and searched for

The Corn Goddess Posture (left).

This wooden carving (inset), made by the Colusa people in Florida between 700 and 1450 A.D., demonstrates a kneeling pose often linked to the Aztec corn goddess, Cinteotl. Kneel with your legs close together and your buttocks resting on your heels. (If you have a knee problem, you can place a pillow between your heels

and buttocks.) Place your hands palms-down on your upper thighs, so that the heel of the hand meets the crease where the thigh joins the torso. Hold your fingers close together, pointing toward your knees. Your shoulders should be stiff and slightly raised, your arms close to your body. Face directly ahead with your eyes closed.

tle. Trial and error showed 15 minutes to be the optimal rattling time. Initial results were encouraging: Students reported physiological and perceptual changes such as increased

heart rate, twitching, feelings of floating, seeing shadowy figures. However, their experiences varied widely—some felt hot while others felt cold, some saw light while others saw darkness. Also, their trances seemed to Goodman to be spiritually vacuous, not the ecstatic religious trance she hoped to reproduce.

Soon, however, Goodman read a study suggesting that in meditative disciplines, differences in body posture correlate with differences in belief. While Goodman had always instructed her students to assume whatever position felt natural in trance, she realized that controlling for posture might "give shape" to the experience.

She searched the ethnographic literature for representations of people in trance. One Native American wood carving from the late-19th-century Pacific Northwest depicts a shaman being embraced from behind by a huge bear spirit. His closed eyes and ecstatic smile are clearly those of religious trance. His fists touch at his navel; his head tilts backward.

Goodman asked one of her students to assume this posture and hold it while she rattled for 15 minutes. Afterward, she asked if he had felt anything unusual in the pose. "I didn't just feel," the student said. "I had a vision."

new ones. To date, Goodman and her colleagues have identified over 50 postures, found in art books, museum displays, even on a U.S. postage stamp. All are gleaned from the art and artifacts of hunter-gatherer or horticulturalist (small gardening) societies, who used trance for direct contact with the divine. With the advent of agriculture, ritual postures disappear. According to Goodman, agriculture removes humans from direct contact with the natural world, and their contact with the divine is usually mediated by a third party, such as a priest.

Today, a network of Goodman's students teach workshops across the U.S. and abroad. Last fall Belinda Gore, Ph.D., author of the workbook *Ecstatic Body Postures*, led a group to Belize, where they visited Mayan ruins, studied local myths, and practiced the postures that came out of that area. This year she will lead a trip to Greece. Gore and Goodman each hold an annual masked trance dance, a week-long session culminating in an elaborate costumed ritual.

Each sunset and sunrise at Cuyamungue, Goodman performs a ritual, and after we finish our dinner she asks us to join her. We climb the road away from the

compound up to a ridge that, at 7,000 feet, is the highest point on her land. The sun is low over the Jemez mountains, turning the valley below shades of rose dotted with the occasional green of junipers. Goodman, wearing a white Pueblo shawl, holds a leather pouch filled with blue cornmeal; she instructs us each to take a pinch, blow on it, and scatter it as food for our spirit friends. I scatter mine for my friends-to-be, whom I hope to meet in our first trance session tomorrow.

As we will get up at 5:20 a.m. for the sunrise, Goodman suggests we turn in early. We set up canvas cots out in the open, one level above the other inhabitants of the area—bull snakes and mice. I stay up for a while, watching the sky darken and reveal stars. I discover that desert mice are cute, with big ears like mice have in cartoons. (For the record, I will never see any bull snakes, scorpions, or six-inch centipedes.)

The Singing Shaman

By the next morning the workshop participants have all arrived. We are seven women and two men, from as

near as Santa Fe and as far as both U.S. coasts and Germany. We talk excitedly, and the time passes as we fast to prepare our bodies for the trance. When we hear Goodman beating the signal drum, we file into the kiva.

As we sit on cushions on the stone floor, Goodman reminds us that our first session "might not be a Walt Disney experience. We are training our nervous systems." She calls it a miracle that trance is our genetic capability, and that it has survived centuries of disuse. It took her "quite a while" to learn to enter trance; trained as an observer, she had to switch modes to be a participant.

Goodman emphasizes that when we enter trance, we are not merely exploring aspects of our psyche. Rather, she insists, we are "opening a door into another world," into an alternate reality. Here, spirits appear to us in the forms of animals, humans, and countless other manifestations; we interact directly with them, make friends with them.

She demonstrates our first posture, but does not tell us its name or offer any interpretation. Still the anthropologist, she doesn't want to influence our expe-

Steps Toward Ecstasy

- ★ While a group experience of ecstatic trance is optimal, it is possible to practice alone. The following instructions can be used for both individuals and groups. Enlist a friend to rattle or drum for you, maintaining a steady and unvarying beat of 200–210 beats per minute for 15 minutes. Alternatively, you can use a cassette tape, either homemade or purchased from the Cuyamungue Institute (see Resources).
- ★ Choose a quiet space not subject to intrusion, a space that can be made sacred for the duration of the trance.
- ★ Avoid eating during the hour or two before the trance.
- ★ Select a posture and take a few minutes to practice it so your body feels comfortable in the position—or as comfortable as possible, since a few of the postures are physically challenging. If you are using a tape of drumming or rattling,

make sure the player is ready to go at the appropriate volume.

- ★ Burn the leaves of an aromatic herb such as sage to purify the space; wave the smoke over your face, throat, and heart.
- ★ Make an offering, such as of blue cornmeal, to the spirits you are inviting to be part of your ritual. Breathe softly on the cornmeal, and offer it to the six directions—counterclockwise east, north, west, south, then above and below—then to the rattle or drum. (You can also move clockwise, depending on the tradition.)
- ★ Next, sit in meditation for five minutes, counting natural breaths. Each full breath is one; count from 1 to 10 five times.
- ★ Now assume the posture and start the rattling or drumming. If you are us-

ing a tape, turn it on first and then assume the posture. Focus your attention on the sound. For the next 15 minutes, your only tasks are to remain in the correct position and stay aware of what you are experiencing. If thoughts arise, encourage yourself to just relax and focus on the sound.

- ★ Once the rattling or drumming has stopped, move out of the posture and sit quietly for a few moments. Most people like to make notes about the experience to capture its richness of detail; others prefer to sit with the blissful effects of the trance.
- ★ At the conclusion of the trance, you may wish to make a thin path of cornmeal from yourself to the nearest door or window. Traditionally this is the path the spirits follow away from the gathering, back to the freedom of their existence. At the door or window, thank the spirits and toss the remaining cornmeal into the air.

Adapted from Ecstatic Body Postures by Belinda Gore.

rience. We are to stand with our feet parallel at hip width, our knees softly bent. Our fingers are gently rolled as if we are holding a robin's egg in each hand, and we place our hands midway along the sternum with the first knuckle of the little fingers touching each other. She instructs us to let our heads drop slightly back, mouths open, and make the sound "aaahhh" when the rattling starts, allowing any sounds to occur but not forcing them. Goodman comes around to each of us, making sure our position is absolutely correct. "The postures must be done exactly as ordered," she says. "Otherwise, the spirits will not react." She adds that if we feel the urge to move, we should try to resist it and channel that energy into having a vision.

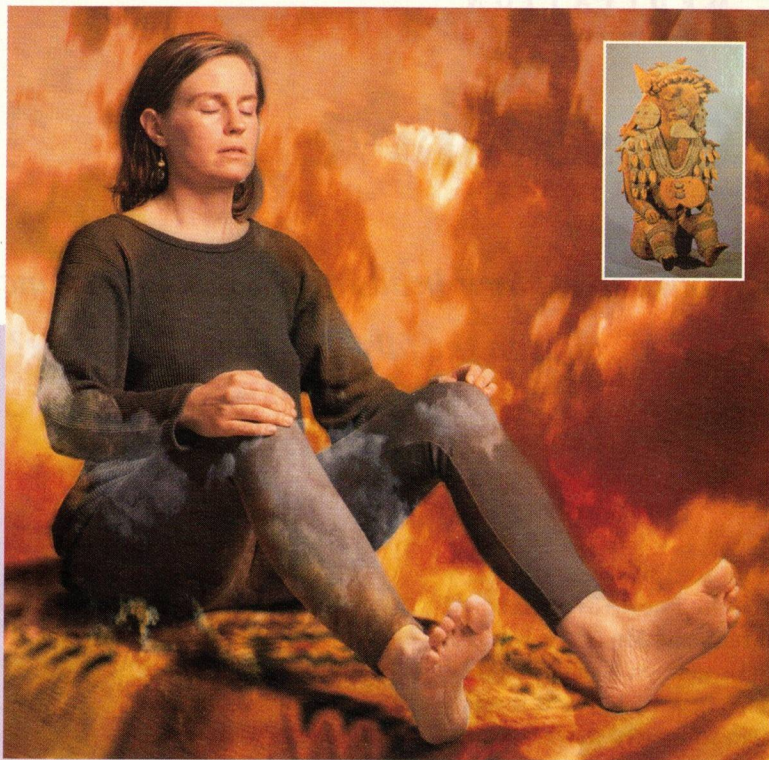
We return to our cushions and Goodman lights sage in a clam shell, holding it for each of us to purify ourselves with the smoke. On the end of the half-circle, I hold the sage for Goodman, and she waves it over each shoulder with the knowing dignity of a shaman. She steps into the center of the circle and scatters blue cornmeal to the six directions and as food for the spirit of the rattle, to whom she whispers, "Sound good, little sister. Sound true." We then sit in meditation for five minutes, counting our natural breaths 10 times five. When she gives the signal with the rattle, we stand and assume the posture.

With the first loud, cacophonous shakes of the rattle I feel an incredible surge of energy that seems to propel me through the top of my head, making my body grow taller. My eyelids flutter, and bright colors pulse to the beat of the rattle—yellow, orange, magenta—like solar flares. A great emotion wants to break from my chest and I sing it, the sound a clear, wide channel from my chest to my mouth. My voice rises higher, along with the others. I feel we're all ascending together, trying to take flight.

When the rattling stops, my consciousness plummets

The Jama-Coaque Posture (right).

In the metamorphosis posture show by this Ecuadoran figure (inset), trancers experience swirling in a vortex, their awareness expanding. Sit on the floor with your legs stretched out in front of you, about 12 inches apart. Bend your knees and draw your feet closer to your body, so that only the heels touch the floor and your feet are at right angles to your lower legs. Place your right hand palm-down over your right knee. Cup your left hand with the fingers together and touch only the fingertips to your left knee. Relax your arms and hold them close to your body. With your spine straight, face forward, your tongue protruding slightly from between your lips.



back into my head. Tears spring to my eyes. Goodman sprinkles a trail of blue cornmeal from the center of the circle to the door, to guide the spirits out.

We record our experiences in our journals and then take turns reading them aloud. Other participants report heat, upward motion, tears, and the feeling of a hollow tube opening through the body. Judy describes her throat as a "chute . . . and out of my mouth were flowers opening to the sky." Carol saw light emanating from the hands and mouths of each of us, and "when the toning was higher, the light became water." Most of us report seeing colors and shapes; only Ingeborg recounts an extended vision, in which soldiers formed parallel lines, then turned into flames that she had to walk through toward white light.

Goodman confirms that our experiences are in line with previous journeys in this posture. Growing taller, heat, intense emotion, and the perception of a hollow tube are common responses, she says. Called the Singing Shaman, this posture is one of only a few that use sound; the sound helps to focus our concentration, making this a good posture for beginners.

"Now comes the hunger of the trance," Goodman says. She's right—my appetite is suddenly voracious; I feel a great energy and, at the same time, deliciously relaxed. We share an abundant brunch, including some of the best tortillas I've ever had, prepared just down

continued on page 155

the road. The food and desert heat makes us sleepy, and we all stretch out on our cots. I close my eyes, trying to reproduce the visual and sensory qualities of the trance without the sound of the rattle. I can see concentric circles of bright color, and when I make my eyelids flutter the colors become patterns, like mandalas. But I can't focus for long, and soon dream images intrude—definitely not visions. I shake myself awake when the drum calls us for the afternoon session.

The Lower World

In the kiva, we once again purify and do the breathing exercise. My mind is foggy and wandering; I forget to count my breaths. When the signal is given, we lie on our stomachs with both arms extended, the right arm stretched farther than the left, right ankle crossed over left ankle, head turned to the right. The rattling starts and I try to focus on the sound, try to let it overtake me. I see darkness and sense a great depth below, as if I am at the entrance to the lower world. Then suddenly I am back on the floor of the kiva, aware that I am lying in this posture, very much a part of ordinary reality. I do what I would do if this were a yoga pose—I send my consciousness to all parts of my body. For an instant I see

a figurine of a bear, and then my arms feel warm and large and furry; my fingers are claws. I try to stay with this perception, but when I hear someone snoring I give up and wait for the rattle to stop.

Other participants report turning into animals—a snake, a bird, a mountain lion, a panther. Most seem to actually make it to the lower world, dropping through tunnels; there, three see ritual dancing and are invited to join the dance. Ingeborg relates an epic tale in which she drops to the lower world and returns via the same tube, then stands on a plateau calling, "Free! Free!" Goodman calls this posture The Sami Shaman's Trip to the Lower World. "The lower world spirits have lots of fun," she comments.

I can't help comparing my trance to the others'. Sure, I did feel like a bear, but now I even begin to doubt that perception. "How do I know it wasn't just imagination?" I ask Goodman.

"Oh, no," she smiles ruefully. "Why would you imagine that? The bear is an inhabitant of the lower world."

True, I hadn't known that. But then, shopping in Santa Fe just the previous day, I had seen hundreds of bear figurines. Power of suggestion? I fear that my more intense first trance was beginner's mind, the beginning and the end.

"How do you know when you're in trance?" I ask.

"You know," Goodman replies. "Just try, and try again."

Over dinner, we discuss the differences between dreams, hypnosis, and ecstatic trance. Goodman says that physiologically the states are very different: When a direct-current EEG measures brain wave signals, a normal reading is 250 microvolts (mv), the reading during hypnosis approaches zero mv, and readings during religious trance can exceed 2,000 mv. In another type of brain wave test, dreaming and religious trance fall at opposite ends of the spectrum. The phrase "hypnotic trance" is like saying "apple orange," Goodman says, explaining that hypnosis is not a trance at all, but a state of heightened awareness. In hypnosis and Zen meditation, we tell the nervous system to be aware but quiet, whereas in trance the nervous system must be high-

ly aroused. For trance, "take the word 'meditation' and throw it into the arroyo," Goodman advises, referring to gullies in the desert surrounding us.

I mention to Goodman that Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner, two of the most famous modern-day students of shamanism, initially used hallucinogenic drugs to open the door to the alternate reality. Surely some of Goodman's students in the '70s experimented in this way?

Goodman says one of her European friends experimented by taking hallucinogenic mushrooms before doing a trance posture. The friend said it was "like being on two train tracks that were going to different places," and that neither state seemed to enhance the other. For her part, Goodman says, "I've always been more interested in what the brain can do on its own."

When asked whether rhythmic stimulation is crucial to inducing trance, Goodman replies that music alone is generally too slow and too varied to induce ecstatic trance. She keeps her rattle at a steady 210 beats per minute; tests have shown her to be accurate within 1/2,000th of a variation, a precision she attributes to her early training as a violinist. While a tape of rattling or drumming may be used, the resonance of the live rattle makes it more effective. Goodman says there is no appreciable difference in the trance states induced by the rattle and the drum, although when a certain friend of hers beats the drum, "I always go on a special journey to the lower world."

People often suggest to Goodman that she try rattling with yoga poses, to which she objects. "Yoga is the child of agriculture and the city," and the postures were not intended for trance, she says. She calls yoga "basically a meditation, which dictates an alpha state to the brain." Rhythmic stimulation is "the opposite command. I will not play with people's nervous systems by subjecting them to two different systems simultaneously," she says.

Goodman says that although inventing a posture is theoretically possible, she has never encouraged this practice. "This is a very powerful system, and we're kindergarten kids," she says. "I'm as ig-

norant as you; I've just been doing it for longer."

I remark that in yoga, different postures have different emotional content: In Child's Pose we draw inward, while in Warrior pose we feel our power. Similarly, we might predict that a standing trance posture could make us feel taller, while lying face down would mediate a journey to the lower world, as was the case with today's postures. Goodman replies that I am referring to the iconic content of a posture—the imagery the body suggests. She says the system is "much more complex." For example, of three standing postures with slightly different hand positions, one is celebration, another is healing, and another takes us to the realm of the dead.

White Bears, Golden Butterflies

The next morning's posture, the Chilton Spirits posture, illustrates her point. If we reverse the position of the arms, she warns, we will take a trip to the realm of the dead—something we might want to try eventually, but perhaps not today. We place our left palm and arm along the waistline, and right palm and arm on the chest. This posture has a male and a female version: Artifacts portray men standing and women sitting cross-legged. Goodman's experimentation has shown that people feel slightly discombobulated when trying the posture of the opposite gender.

In this session, I feel like a creature that can swim and fly, and I move from the water to the sky and back to the water, feeling a delight in movement. Two others report experiences almost identical to mine. To the rest of the group, something even more extraordinary occurs. Each of their visions is one part of a larger story: a dance between a Native American man and woman; a Native American woman saying, "Don't leave me behind"; a white bear taking care of a human in a cave. Goodman says these are all pieces of a myth that often surfaces during this posture—the Alaskan story of a hunter who leaves his human wife one day to go hunt-

ing, is caught by a grizzly bear, and then saved by a she-bear who becomes his bear wife. There is something uncanny in feeling that our group has tapped into a myth from another culture and time period.

After lunch I walk up the ridge with some of the other participants, and we descend into the valley below, walking along a dry riverbed. The clouds are heavy, bringing hope of rainfall, but as we walk they seem to dry up and move on. I confide my doubts to the others about whether I'm crossing the brain wave threshold into ecstatic trance. Sue, a social worker whose trance experiences have been consistently similar to mine, also expresses doubts that she's in trance. She, however, seems to have more patience than I do. She points out that trance is totally new to both of us, while those who are reporting novel-length visions have all had previous experience with other trance work. I know it's my expectations getting in the way—trying so hard is making surrender impossible.

In that afternoon's posture, the Jama-Coaque Posture (see page 99), I am once again faced with my fear of failure. Shapes become menacing images—a mask, a tiger face, a wolf face, crow's eyes, human eyes pierced by needles—all pulling me above a hole. I beg the spirits to help me let go. I see only a dark void; the spirits are nowhere. Then I realize I am squeezing my eyes shut hard. I release them, and golden butterflies spring up in a shower, and I feel joy.

Goodman calls this a metamorphosis posture. Thinking I'm finally on the right track, I volunteer that the butterfly is a symbol of metamorphosis. "Not here," Goodman says. "There are no symbols in the alternate reality. A butterfly is just a butterfly."

This emphasis on the literal—even within fantastic experiences—is a key point of Goodman's work. She is adamant that she does not work with symbols, belief systems, or faith. "Faith is the decision that I will accept what somebody else tells me is true. That to me is meaningless." She says that to her mind, "religion is only religion if it's direct experience. Otherwise, it's philosophy, psychology, sociology, speculation—all cerebral." Wi

need to experience the sacred reality, she says, and "99 percent of humanity for 99 percent of history has had the same attitude." In trance we literally enter the ultimate reality, she says, and communicate directly with the spirits.

Carolyn, a workshop participant and anthropologist, appreciates Goodman's approach. "She's not drawing maps of the psyche, or creating a repertoire of symbolic interpretation. Her work is about the essence of religious experience." She calls the postures a tool that we can take home. "It's really yours," she says. "It was always there."

A Question Answered

Our homework for tonight is to come up with a question to ask the spirits during tomorrow's posture, our last trance session of the workshop. We will do a divination posture, followed closely by the Bear posture.

When we assemble the next morning, my question is ready. Goodman says that if we were a community, we would discuss our questions and the insights we receive in trance, and the tribal elder would provide guidance; however, we are not a community, we don't really know each other despite these intense three days together, and so we will not formally share this experience.

This posture, the Nupe Mallam, looks comfortable—sitting with both legs folded to the right and leaning on the left hand in a sort of slouch. But a few rattle shakes into it, my leg starts to fall asleep. The prickling feels like the stones of the rattle, and the rattle fills my leg, then my whole body, embracing me from behind. Then I am the rattle, atoms bouncing, explosions of bright yellow, a bright, bright tunnel, wide and encompassing, the gateway not just to vision but to another way of being. When I pass into it, I can see 360 degrees, feel 360 degrees; the sound is liquid and light. I see a cross, then crosses on a hill, and fire. I think of the crucifixion and forgiveness,

and the crosses on the hill are enveloped by white light breaking over a mountain range, the light pulsing extremely fast. All is pure light. I thank the spirits so profoundly that tears come to my eyes.

The rattle stops. I come back to my ordinary consciousness, to the leg that becomes excruciating with its first supply of blood. We write, and people begin to file out. When I am alone in the kiva, I bow before the spirits in thanks. Goodman was right: When you're there, you know. The answer to my question is clear. I had asked about an important person in my life from whom I've been estranged; the answer is forgiveness.

A few minutes later we assemble for the Bear posture, standing in a circle with our fists on our bellies (see page 93). Riding the wave of the last trance, I easily slip into another. I am surrounded by warmth and darkness, the rattle a heartbeat. I am inside the womb of the bear mother. When the rattling changes, we all put our right hands on the shoulder of the person next to us, and a great energy travels around the circle. We sing, "Mother, make us strong, like a _____," and we each fill in the name of a spirit animal. Goodman closes with a Navajo prayer: "Beautiful above us, beautiful below us, beautiful behind us, beautiful before us. May we walk in beauty . . ."

Yes, it has been beautiful behind us. And as I look over the valley one last time, I whisper an invitation to the spirits to follow me home. With the door now open to another world, I know it will be beautiful before us. ♦

Kristin Barendsen wrote about Caroline Myss in the October issue of Yoga Journal.

RESOURCES

Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook by Belinda Gore (Bear & Co., 1995). Available from YJ's Book & Tape Source on page 122.

Where the Spirits Ride the Wind: Trance Journeys and Other Ecstatic Experiences by Felicitas Goodman (Indiana University Press, 1990).

For information about upcoming workshops and for ordering cassettes, contact the Cuyamungue Institute, Rte. 5, Box 358-C, Santa Fe, NM 87501.