

Yog Nidra and its Physical and Psychological applications

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INTRODUCTION

Yoga nidra, which is derived from the tantras, is a powerful technique in which you learn to relax consciously. In yoga nidra, sleep is not regarded as relaxation. People feel that they are relaxing when they collapse in an easy chair with a cup of coffee, a drink or a cigarette, and read a newspaper or switch on the television. But this will never suffice as a scientific definition of relaxation. These are only sensory diversions. True relaxation is actually an experience far beyond all this. For absolute relaxation you must remain aware. This is yoga nidra, the state of dynamic sleep.

Yoga nidra is a systematic method of inducing complete physical, mental and emotional relaxation. The term yoga nidra is derived from two Sanskrit words, yoga meaning union or one-pointed awareness, and nidra which means sleep. During the practice of yoga nidra, one appears to be asleep, but the consciousness is functioning at a deeper level of awareness. For this reason, yoga nidra is often referred to as psychic sleep or deep relaxation with inner awareness. In this threshold state between sleep and wakefulness, contact with the subconscious and unconscious dimensions occurs spontaneously.

History of Yog Nidra: Sleep was thought to be a passive state that was initiated through withdrawal of sensory input. Currently, withdrawal of sensory awareness is believed to be a factor in sleep, but an active initiation mechanism facilitates brain withdrawal also is recognized.

*//Yatra Supto Na Kanchan Kamam Kamayate Na Antietam Swapnam Pashtati Tatsushuptam /
SushuptaNthan Eheehhutih Pragyangan Evandmato Hananda Ethuvachetomukhah
Pragyastrikeyah Padah //*

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In Mandukya Upanishad sleep is defined as prajna, where the knowledge, awareness or consciousness withdrawn in to the state of unconsciousness, where the consciousness doesn't extend beyond its boundaries or interact with any of the external series whether physical or mental theist state of prajna is awareness of the one without a second; "The state of non duality". Mandukya Upanishad Further states that this state of nidra is similar to the state of Samadhi for the same region. The only difference is that, in nidra there is total introversion with sensory and mental blockage, whereas in Samadhi there is not total introversion, the mind is alert and ware. Yet it is contained within itself. "Yoga sutra" gives a precise definition of nidra as-"*Abhawa Pratyaya valambana Vratti Nidra*" the state of mind in which its (extrovert) tendency to experience the gross material existence disappears. In the state of nidra the perception of the out side world is introverted and there is sensory, external blockage.

Benefits of Yoga Nidra

The practice of yoga nidra has a number of benefits. Important among them are as follows.

➤ Minimizes tension

In the modern world the international problem is not poverty, drugs or fear of war; it is tension and only tension. A high percentage of people remain in a state of tension and frustration. This continuous level of tension in the body, mind and emotions predisposes the individual towards psychological and psychosomatic disorders. Modern psychology as well as yogic philosophy believes in three kinds of tension - muscular tensions, emotional tensions and mental tensions - which can be progressively released through the systematic and regular practice of Yoga Nidra. Muscular tension results from nervous and endocrinal imbalances. It manifests in the form of stiffness and rigidity in the physical body. In the practice of Yoga Nidra the body is progressively relaxed, which in turn releases the accumulated muscular tensions. In day to day life individuals fail to express their emotions freely and openly. result, the emotions are repressed and manifest in the form of emotional n. In the practice of yoga nidra, the practitioner slowly moves towards deeper realms of the mind where he or she confronts the deep-rooted emotional tensions. When the practitioner recognizes these emotional ions with full awareness and a witnessing attitude, then repressed ions are released and the practitioner becomes calm and tranquil.

Due to excessive activity on the mental plane, the mind always remains in a state of arousal, which results in mental tension. Throughout life the mind is with negative data. In the practice of

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yoga nidra, especially in rotation of consciousness and breath awareness, the mind is relaxed, thereby releasing the mental tensions. In this way, through the regular and sincere practice of yoga nidra, tensions at the physical, emotional and mental level can be minimized. According to Swami Satyananda (1998), "a single hour of yoga nidra is as restful as four hours of conventional sleep".

➤ Trains the mind :

The Sankalpa taken in each session of yoga nidra is perhaps the most effective technique for training the mind. Swami Satyananda (1998) says, "Anything in life can fail you, but not the Sankalpa made during yoga nidra". The Sankalpa is taken and sowed in the subconscious mind when it is relaxed and receptive. The subconscious mind is very obedient and hence carries out the orders immediately. In yoga nidra, the Sankalpa trains the subconscious mind. and then the ordinary mind follows the path automatically. The Sankalpa helps in training the mind because it is planted when the mind is relaxed and ready to absorb and accept it. The essential thing is that resolve should be planted with strong willpower and feeling. Many people make conscious resolves guided by intellect, which rarely bring results. Swami Satyananda (1998) says, "The Sankalpa taken at the beginning of yoga nidra is like sowing a seed, and the Sankalpa at the end is like irrigating it. So, the resolve taken in yoga nidra always brings result, if it is taken sincerely".

➤ Relaxes the mind

The brain is the linking mediator between the mind, body and emotions. In yoga nidra intensifying the awareness of the body stimulates the brain. When the awareness is rotated on the different body parts, it not only induces physical relaxation but also clears the nerve pathways to the brain. Each of the body parts has an existing centre in the cerebral white matter, named by researchers as 'motor homunculus' or 'little man'. The sequence of rotation of awareness in yoga nidra is in accordance with the map in the cerebral white matter of the brain. When the awareness is rotated in the same sequence again and again, it induces a flow of pranic energy within the neuronal circuit of the motor homunculus of the brain. This pranic flow brings in a subjective experience of relaxation in the brain.

In one of the stages of yoga nidra a pair of opposite feelings or sensations is intensified again and again in the practitioner. This continuous invocation of opposite feelings or sensations is in accordance with the electrophysiological operating principles of the brain. When a neuron fires,

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it produces a nerve impulse which is relayed and registered in the brain. But if the same neuron keeps on firing again and again, then its relayed impulse is no longer registered by the brain. Researchers have called this 'phenomenon habituation'. When the brain becomes accustomed to the stimulus, then gradually it becomes relaxed. The state where the brain is completely relaxed results in mental relaxation. Sannyasi Mangalteertham (1998) concluded on the basis of his study that the practice of yoga nidra brings alpha dominance in the brain, which is characterized by mental relaxation.

➤ Clean up the unconscious

From early childhood, we tend to repress many wishes, desires and conflicts. Whenever a situation threatens the ego, the defense mechanisms are called upon and the conflicting situation is repressed or suppressed to the unconscious. All the traumatic experiences, unfulfilled desires and threatening situations are suppressed by the ego to the subconscious and unconscious realms of the mind. In the deeper realms of the mind this conflicting and frustrating matter does not die but remains alive and later manifests in the form of various pathological symptoms. The repressed desires, wishes and situations remain in the form of symbols in the unconscious mind. During the practice of yoga nidra, the instructor asks the practitioner to visualize certain symbols and images with a witnessing attitude. If the symbols and images are selected properly, then they are in accordance with the symbols of the unconscious. An abstract association is created between the guided imagery and the associated repressed experiences of the unconscious. For example, if the teacher instructs the practitioner to visualize a dog, this may bring out a past traumatic childhood experience in which the practitioner was bitten by a dog. The practitioner observes this associated painful experience with a witnessing attitude, which helps in cutting off the personal identification with the experience. When the personal identification ceases to be cut off, the painful experience associated with the dog is repressed again. In this way, the practice of visualization brings the unconscious repressed desires, experiences, conflicts and frustrations to the conscious level and then cuts off the personal identification with those experiences. As a result, the unconscious is cleared up.

➤ Awakens creativity

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Several examples from the past indicate that creativity is a characteristic of a relaxed and calm mind. When the mind is totally relaxed, the awareness slowly enters the deeper realms (subconscious and unconscious) of the mind and the person becomes aware of the creative and intuitive faculties. Whether it be Newton or Einstein or Mozart, all made significant and vital contributions in the field of creativity when they allowed themselves to relax deeply enough for the images and forms of their unconscious mind to manifest as solutions to their particular problems. Regular practice of yoga nidra helps in making a bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind. Slowly one becomes tuned with the unconscious workings and then the power Of creativity automatically awakens.

➤ Enhances memory and learning capacity

The present popular method of teaching is classroom teaching using rewards and punishments. This method may be good for the intelligent students but is not beneficial for the dull students because the conscious brain or intellect of these students is incapable of receiving the information directly. The technique of yoga nidra can be used as an educational tool for such dull children, where the knowledge is transmitted directly into the subconscious mind. The technique of yoga nidra is helpful in increasing learning and memory capacity. When yoga nidra is used in education, both hemispheres of the student's brain are involved in learning the subject. whereas in classroom teaching the left hemisphere functions more. In this way, the practice of yoga nidra involves the total mind in learning.

➤ Counteracting stress

A survey conducted by the Australian Federal Health Department in 1980 revealed that stress is the aspect of modern life that concerned most people. It is clear that life has become so complex, hypnotizing and confusing for many people today that they find it very difficult to slow down, relax and unwind even when they get the opportunity.

Constant concern with 'making ends meet' economically, coupled with the tensions and frustrations of modern social, marital, family and community life, frequently transform life into a pressure cooker without a safety valve. Deprived of more traditional forms of emotional and psychosomatic release such as prayer, religious worship, sport or creative recreation, many sensitive modern men and women confront a situation of spiralling tension without escape. When the cooker explodes, mental breakdown and physical disease commonly result.

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States of anxiety, depression, frustration and anger are accompanied by a variety of physical responses including palpitations, excessive sweating, diarrhoea, indigestion, headache and weakness. These responses are the outcome of the complex process by which the physiological systems of the body adapt to stress. This process has been termed the 'stress response' by pioneering researchers such as Dr Hans Selye & of Canada, and includes states of accelerated heart rate and increases in blood pressure, skeletal muscle tension and cortisone and noradrenalin levels in the blood.

As stressful conditions persist, the body's resistance is sapped away. Imbalances in the autonomic nervous system, endocrine glands, and in the chemical and hormonal composition of the blood become permanent, with increasingly disturbed functioning of all the organs and systems of the body.

As the equilibrium of the body, even at rest, becomes increasingly disturbed, a variety of nervous symptoms usually manifest, including insomnia, anxiety and irritability, often leading to neurosis. As the imbalance is further aggravated, physical changes in sensitive or weakened organs result. In this way, major psychosomatic diseases such as asthma, peptic ulceration and hypertension evolve out of poorly managed psychological tensions which are relayed into the physiological systems of the body.

The work of Dr K.N. Udupa of Banaras Hindu University (India) suggests that stress-related disorders evolve gradually through four recognizable stages. Initially, psychological changes such as anxiety, irritability and insomnia arise due to over stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system. In the second stage, distinct physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, elevated heart rate or increased intestinal motility appear. In the third stage, a more profound physical and/or biochemical imbalance sets in, and evidence of malfunctioning organs manifests clinically. Finally, detectable and often irreversible lesions appear, often with severe symptoms requiring surgical or long term pharmacological management.

Yoga nidra is now prescribed by doctors in many countries both as a preventive and curative therapy in the first three stages of stress-related disease. In addition, it is also a most effective adjunct in management of psychosomatic disorders that have progressed to a severe or structurally irreversible stage. Here yoga nidra provides effective symptomatic relief, alleviates depression and long standing anxiety, and helps the sufferer to recognize and accept his condition and evolve the best possible outlook towards it.

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➤ The relaxation response

The yoga nidra state appears to reflect an integrated response by the hypothalamus resulting in decreased sympathetic (excitatory) nervous activity and increased parasympathetic (relaxatory) function. This 'relaxation response' can be thought of as the inverse counter part of the so-called 'fight or flight' response. This well known state of sympathetic hyper activation of the hypothalamus and endocrine network prepares the body for immediate protective action in response to imminent danger. It is an evolutionary remnant of man's early tribal life when his physical existence was under constant threat.

Unfortunately this mechanism has become a distinct liability for the average individual of today, who has not attained any degree of automatic control. The highly stressful conditions of modern urban life often cause this emergency coping mechanism of our tribal forebearers to remain permanently activated. This has seriously detrimental short and long term effects. Research studies have clearly implicated the 'fight or flight' mechanism, which was defined by Cannon as long ago as 1931, in the pathogenesis of arterial hypertension and many of the other mental and psychosomatic disorders which confront modern society.

The level of relaxation attained in yoga nidra serves to lessen the harmful effects of this 'fight or flight' response. Studies have shown that regular practice of yoga nidra induces a significant decrease in both systolic and diastolic blood pressures in hypertensive patients, and also alters the circulating levels of the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, which are secreted by the adrenal glands.

Increasing stress resistance

The ultimate objective of yoga nidra goes far beyond merely combating stressful influences and rectifying the imbalances created by poor stress management. The rishis who first formulated the practice were not concerned with the complexities of modern life. They devised yoga nidra as a direct pathway for the attainment of self-realization (samadhi). Samadhi is not a state of trance, torpor or passivity as many people believe. The term 'self-realization' suggests a passive experience, but samadhi is a dynamic state of activity and self-expression.

The glimpse of samadhi obtained by the practitioner of yoga nidra is sufficient to transform him from a victim of stress into a victor in life. As well as becoming 'stress resistant' amidst the pressures, insecurities and difficulties of modern life, he actually learns to thrive on the same

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difficulties, tensions and adverse circumstances which lead others to the brink of mental anguish, emotional self- destruction and physical breakdown. This is the great secret of yoga nidra. It is not only a way of coping with stress; it provides a means of transforming and positively utilizing tension as a stepping stone to greater awareness, efficiency and achievement in life.

Science behind Yognidra

Yoga nidra appears to work by changing the neurohumoral reactivity to stress, creating somatic conditions essentially opposite to those prompted by sympathetic over activity. During yoga nidra the organs and systems of the body attain deep, physiological rest and the body's powerful, inherent, regenerative mechanisms are set in motion. As a result, body tissues are physiologically braced against stress, becoming less susceptible to its harmful influences. The profound experience of muscular, mental and emotional relaxation attainable in yoga nidra enables a balance of psychic and vital energies within the psychic channels (nadis) of the energy framework underlying the physical-body. Free flow of these energies forms the basis of optimal physical and mental health.

Therapeutic Applications of Yognidra

Yoga nidra has widespread application in the management of diseases of all kinds, and promises to play a far greater role in the future as its potential becomes fully recognized by doctors, psychologists and healers. Its value as both a curative and a palliative has been investigated in recent years in many research centres around the world, with extremely favourable results.

Yoga nidra can be utilized either by itself, or in conjunction with other conventional forms of medical therapy. It has been found useful in both acute and chronic conditions, especially in the degenerative and stress-related conditions such as hypertension, coronary disease and arthritis. Diseases with a high psychosomatic component such as asthma, peptic ulcer and migraine headache respond favorably to yoga nidra therapy.

Yoga nidra also plays an important palliative role in the fields of rehabilitation and geriatrics, where intractable pain, loss of motivation and psychological depression pose major barriers in conventional treatment. In addition, yoga nidra has its most widespread application as a preventive measure, to be practiced by healthy, active people as a means of relieving accumulated tensions, increasing stress resistance and overall efficiency, and preventing the development of psychosomatic diseases.'

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Psychological disorders

Yoga nidra is an effective adjunct to traditional forms of psychiatric treatment, especially in cases which are unresponsive to routine psychotherapy. The practitioner of yoga nidra becomes his own psychotherapist, recognizing and systematically alleviating his own personal problems and interpersonal difficulties.

In yoga nidra the subconscious mind is tapped, much as crude oil is brought to the surface of an oil well. Previously suppressed material, which is the source of psychic pain and aberrant behaviour, is permitted to rise spontaneously into awareness, where it can be relived and reintegrated into the conscious personality. The process is facilitated by the use of specific images and archetypes designed to liberate this subconscious material. Self-recognition and desensitization to painful memories follow spontaneously.

Yoga nidra is a successful therapy for both recent and long standing psychological disturbances of all kinds, especially high anxiety levels and neurotic behaviour patterns. Anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state or condition characterized by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension and worry, and also by activation of the autonomic nervous system. The practice of yogic relaxation has been found to effectively reduce tension and improve the psychological wellbeing of sufferers from anxiety. The autonomic symptoms of high anxiety, such as headache, giddiness, psychosomatic chest pain, palpitations, sweating, abdominal pain and nervous diarrhoea, respond exceptionally well. Even severely disturbed people can be taught to practice on their own, and to relieve mounting fear or anxiety in any setting, not only during regularly scheduled therapy sessions.

Yoga nidra relaxation and visualization are also excellent therapeutic techniques for children with behavioural problems and maladaptive social and environmental responses. Pediatricians, child psychologists and remedial educators are now investigating it as an exciting new adjunct or alternative to more traditional modes of treatment using drugs and psychotherapy. For example, in studies conducted in the USA and Europe, hyperactive children who were taught yoga nidra displayed significantly decreased hyperactivity levels, improved attention span, decreased fidgeting, fewer random movements, noises and actions, and reduced levels of skeletal muscle tension. The technique has been adapted in other spheres of child psychology, including

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emotional deprivation and handicap and behavioural disturbances, with highly favourable preliminary results.

Yoga nidra is also being used in psychiatric admission units, enabling patients to reduce dependency on tranquilizing and hypnotic drugs and to increase their self-reliance, thereby reducing the duration of their hospital stay. Yoga nidra is also being taught as a suicide preventive to highly disturbed and depressed patient.

Progressive yognidra is an exercise that relaxes your mind and body by progressively tensing and relaxation muscle groups throughout your entire body. You will tense each muscle group vigorously, but without straining, and then suddenly release the tension and feel the muscle relax. You will tense each muscle for about 5 seconds. If you have any pain or discomfort at any of the targeted muscle groups feel free to omit that step. Throughout this exercise you may visualize the muscles tensing and a wave of relaxation flowing over them as you release that tension. It is important that you keep breathing throughout the exercise. Now let's begin.

Begin by finding a comfortable position either sitting or lying down in a location where you will not be interrupted. Allow your attention to focus only on your body. If you begin to notice your mind wandering, bring it back to the muscle you are working on. Take a deep breath through your abdomen, hold for a few second, and exhale slowly. Again, as you breathe notice your stomach rising and your lungs filling with air. As you exhale, imagine the tension in your body being released and flowing out of your body. And again inhale.....and exhale. Feel your body already relaxing. As you go through each step, remember to keep breathing. Now let's begin. Tighten the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as high as you can. Hold for about five seconds. And abruptly release feeling that tension fall away. Pause for about 10 seconds. Now smile widely, feeling your mouth and cheeks tense. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release, appreciating the softness in your face. Pause for about 10 seconds. Next, tighten your eye muscles by squinting your eyelids tightly shut. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds. Gently pull your head back as if to look at the ceiling. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release, feeling the tension melting away. Pause for about 10 seconds. Now feel the weight of your relaxed head and neck sink. Breath in...and out. In...and out. Let go of all the stress In...and out. Now, tightly, but without straining, clench your fists and hold this position until I say stop. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds. Now, flex your biceps. Feel that buildup of tension. You may even visualize that muscle tightening. Hold for

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about 5 seconds, and release, enjoying that feeling of limpness. Breath in...and out.Now tighten your triceps by extending your arms out and locking your elbows. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release.Pause for about 10 seconds.Now lift your shoulders up as if they could touch your ears. Hold for about 5 seconds, and quickly release, feeling their heaviness.Pause for about 10 seconds.Tense your upper back by pulling your shoulders back trying to make your shoulder blades touch. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release.Pause for about 10 seconds.Tighten your chest by taking a deep breath in, hold for about 5 seconds, and exhale, blowing out all the tension.Now tighten the muscles in your stomach by sucking in. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release.Pause for about 10 seconds.Gently arch your lower back. Hold for about 5 seconds, relax. Pause for about 10 seconds.Feel the limpness in your upper body letting go of the tension and stress, hold for about 5 seconds, and relax.Tighten your buttocks. Hold for about 5 seconds..., release; imagine your hips falling loose.Pause for about 10 seconds.Tighten your thighs by pressing your knees together, as if you were holding a penny between them. Hold for about 5 seconds...and release.Pause for about 10 seconds.Now flex your feet, pulling your toes towards you and feeling the tension in your calves. Hold for about 5 seconds, and relax, feel the weight of your legs sinking down.Pause for about 10 seconds.Curl your toes under tensing your feet. Hold for about 5 seconds, release.Pause for about 10 seconds.Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading through your body beginning at your head and going all the way down to your feet. Feel the weight of your relaxed body.Breathe in...and out...in...out....in...out. . . The subjects were given full and thorough practice step-wise for 30 minutes.

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