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## Yōga Nidrā: The art of transformational sleep

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### Abstract

Yōga nidrā is often used as a therapeutic tool to help manage stress, anxiety, insomnia, and other stress-related conditions. It is also considered an effective technique for improving concentration, memory, and overall well-being. Some studies have shown that regular practice of Yōga nidrā can positively impact brain function, reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and promote emotional healing. Yōga nidrā sessions can vary in length, ranging from a few minutes to an hour, depending on the specific guidance and purpose of the practice. It is suitable for people of all ages and fitness levels, making it accessible to a wide range of individuals. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word nidrā is 'sleep'. Thus, Yōga-nidrā means 'yogic sleep'. But, in reality, the person who practises Yōga-nidrā avoids sleep in the whole process. He is awake in the process, although his awareness is different from the normal state of wakefulness. His state of consciousness in Yōga-nidrā occupies a stage which is in between the usual state of wakefulness and that of sleep.

**Keywords:** Yōga-Nidrā, sleep, yogic

### Introductions

Yōga nidrā, often referred to as "yogic sleep," is a deep relaxation and meditation technique that originated in the ancient Indian tradition of Yōga. It is a systematic method of guided relaxation designed to induce a state of profound physical, mental, and emotional relaxation while maintaining awareness and consciousness. The term "Nidrā" means sleep in Sanskrit, but in the context of Yōga nidrā, it refers to a state of conscious deep relaxation. During the practice, the practitioner lies down in a comfortable position and is guided through various stages of relaxation, breathing techniques, and visualization. The primary objective of Yōga nidrā is to access the subconscious mind, allowing the practitioner to explore and release deep-seated tensions, fears, and anxieties.

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Yōga nidrā, also known as yogic sleep, is a powerful relaxation and meditation technique that originates from the ancient Indian tradition of Yōga. It is a systematic method of inducing complete physical, mental, and emotional relaxation while maintaining full consciousness. The practice is usually done lying down in a comfortable and relaxed position. The term "Yōga nidrā" is derived from two Sanskrit words: "Yōga" meaning union or integration, and "nidrā" meaning sleep. While the practitioner remains aware and conscious, the practice guides them through different stages of relaxation, leading to a state of deep rest, similar to the state between waking and sleeping.

### The original Myth of Yōga-Nidrā

Modern Science, in general, uses a language which does not contain symbols and myths. They do appear in literature, especially in the genre of poetry. Ancient Indian wisdom, in the field of philosophy, religion, art, literature and science, is a departure, however. Very often, the language used is symbolic and mythical even though the subject, dealt with, covers scientific fields. The modern practice of Yōga-nidrā is traced back to a myth which is purely symbolic. Here, in this context, we render a classical Indian prayer (viṣṇu śāntākara mantra).

*ōm śāntākāraṃ bhujagaśayanam padmanābhaṃ surēśam  
viśvādhāraṃ gaganasadyśam mēghavarṇam śubhāṅgam.  
lakṣmīkāntam kamalanayanam yōgibhirdhyānagamyam  
vandē viṣṇu bhavabhayaharam sarvalōkaikanātham.*

The expression bhujagaśayanam is the focal point here. The Sanskrit word bhujagā means 'serpent' and sayanam means 'sleep'. The classical picture of ananta-śayanam. The Lord of the universe reclines on the coiled body of the serpent named as 'Ananta' that spreads its hood over the Lord in the shape of an umbrella which protects a person from the scorching sun or the torrential rains.

The Sanskrit word ananta means 'that without finitude'. Ananta Naga (naga means 'a snake') is the Divine Serpent with infinite strength. Who can support the Lord of the universe if it possesses a limited quantity of strength? The strength with reference to spring action in mechanics may be alluded to. And so is the coiled serpent on which the Lord reclines. A question is raised: Who other than the Lord himself can support the Omnipotent? Ananta Naga is not different from the Lord, the One and the only One Lord of the universe. He is the Rudra (fiercely roaring, terrifying) aspect of the Lord who engages himself in the continuing process of annihilation and the final process of dissolution.

One name of Lord Visnu is Padmanabha (One with a lotus- navel). Brahma emanates from the Lord through the umbilical cord. He is the same One Lord' who engages himself in the initial and the continuing processes of creation. Lord Viṣṇu stays in Yōga-nidrā. His Power (Sakti) or Consort is Mother Lakṣmi who sustains the universe.

Any picture is bound to be spatial. Nevertheless, Lord Visnu does not reside in any special locality, either inside or outside the universe. He is non-local and non-temporal.' He is spaceless and timeless. He is immanent and transcendent. He is all-pervasive. The Sanskrit word Viṣṇu is derived from the verb-root vis which means 'to pervade'.

During a typical Yōga nidrā session, the practitioner is guided through various stages, including body awareness, breath awareness, and visualization. The practice also involves setting an intention (known as a "Sankalpa") that acts as a positive affirmation, reinforcing personal goals and aspirations. Yōga nidrā is accessible to people of all ages and fitness levels. It can be particularly beneficial for individuals dealing with stress, insomnia, or other mental and emotional challenges. It is also often used as a complementary practice for those seeking to develop a more profound meditation or mindfulness practice.

Yōga nidrā is a powerful relaxation technique that can help promote mental peace and reduce stress and anxiety. It is often referred to as "yogic sleep" because it induces a state of deep relaxation while maintaining a state of awareness. Practicing Yōga nidrā can lead to improved emotional well-being, mental clarity, and a sense of inner calm.

**Find a Comfortable Position:** Lie down on your back in a quiet and comfortable space. You may use a Yōga mat or lie on a soft surface. Make sure you are warm and won't be disturbed during the practice.

### Set an Intention

Before beginning, set an intention for your Yōga nidrā practice. This can be something like "I am calm and peaceful" or any other positive affirmation that resonates with you.

**Progressive Relaxation:** Take a few deep breaths to relax your body. Then, start focusing on each part of your body one by one, starting from your toes, moving up to your head. As you focus on each body part, consciously relax and release any tension you may be holding.

**Breath Awareness:** Now, shift your attention to your breath. Observe the natural flow of your breath without trying to control it. Feel the rise and fall of your abdomen as you breathe in and out. Stay with this breath awareness for a few minutes.

**Sankalpa (Positive Affirmation):** Repeat your chosen intention or positive affirmation mentally three times with conviction and sincerity.

**Visualization:** Engage your mind in visualization. You can imagine serene landscapes, peaceful places, or any image that brings a sense of calmness. Let your mind explore the details of the visualization, making it as vivid as possible.

**Body Scan:** Bring your awareness back to your body. Gradually scan your entire body from head to toe, feeling a sense of relaxation and peace spread through every part of your being.

**Sensory Awareness:** Shift your focus to your senses. Notice any sounds around you without getting attached to them. Feel the sensation of your body touching the floor or mat. Be aware of any smells or tastes in your mouth.

**Return to the Breath:** Once again, bring your attention back to your breath. Feel the natural rhythm of your breathing, and let go of any remaining tension or thoughts.

**End of Practice:** Slowly become aware of your surroundings. Gently wiggle your fingers and toes, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

### Hypnotic trance

In the late 1700s, Franz Mesmer claimed that hypnosis worked by 'animal magnetism'. In 1842, a surgeon in Nottinghamshire, England, amputated a patient's leg while the patient was in a mesmeric trance. Notwithstanding this success and similar other ones, hypnotism was viewed with skepticism for more than two centuries. It was associated with the bizarre and occult. Hypnosis was successfully used in both World Wars by physicians, dentists and psychologists. Since then it has become a respected field of scientific enquiry. Medical Associations and Psychological Associations in the advanced countries now support the teaching and judicious practice of hypnosis. Hypnosis is associated with a state of altered consciousness. This concept has, however, been challenged. Sarbin and his associates' have proposed a role-enactment theory of hypnosis. They theorize that the subject becomes so deeply involved in a role that what is done takes place without conscious intent. Barber is another theorist who believes that hypnotic behaviours can be accounted for by the usual principles of behavioural and cognitive psychology. Whatever may be the conceptualization of hypnosis, the phenomenon itself is no longer questioned. Altered consciousness seems to be common in both hypnosis and Yōga-nidrā. But the two states of altered

consciousness in hypnotic trance and yogic trance are not identical. In spite of the provision of auto-hypnosis in Yōga-nidrā, hypnosis, in general, involves two persons, namely, the hypnotist and the client or the subject. The former induces drowsiness or deep sleep by special techniques and suggestions in the latter and then suggests to do this or not to do that. The client becomes very suggestible in the deep trance-like state so produced.

The heightened suggestibility is used to get clients to comply with the direct suggestions of the hypnotist. Yōga-nidrā, however, is an auto-suggestive procedure in which the person brings himself to the altered state of consciousness or the yogic trance which is a transitional phase between wakefulness and sleep. In this state of yogic trance, the person repeats his resolve (saṅkalpa) which is short and definitive. This auto-suggestion is retained by the Subconscious or the Unconscious that subsequently translates it into action. Thus, the similarity between hypnosis and Yōga-nidrā is apparent and not real.

#### Four states of the self

The Mandūkyaopaniṣad states that the universe is verily Brahman, that the self is Brahman, and that the self has four quarters (catuspāt).

**The first quarter is Vaiśvānara.** Its sphere of activity is the waking state (jāgrata)." In this state, it cognizes external objects (bahiṣprajñā) and experiences the gross (sthūla-bhuk) universe. Vaiśvānara has nineteen faces, namely, the five organs of perception, the five organs of action, the five prāṇas, the mind (mānas), the intellect (buddhi) the self-sense (ahaṅkāra) and the subtle organ of conception (citta). Knowledge obtained in the waking state is always mediated through the senses.

**The second quarter is taijasa:** Its sphere of activity is the dream (svapna) state. It cognizes internal objects (antah-prajñā). It experiences things stored in the subtle body (pravivikta-bhuk).

In usual sleep, an individual experiences dreams, created by the mind out of imprinted materials in its memory store. The subtle body, in this state, is separated from the external world. It lives by itself in its internal world. Some of the dream-experiences are remembered on waking; but most dreams are forgotten.

**The third quarter of the self is prājña:** It is a state of deep sleep (suṣupti). Dreams cease to be phenomenalized in this state of profound sleep. It is a desireless condition. The self is completely unified and identified with the super-unified Consciousness (ekībhūta prajñānaghana). This is a blissful state in which the self-experiences bliss (ananda-bhuk) and identifies itself with true knowledge (ceto-mukha).

The self in the prājña state is Iśvara (God), the lord of all, the knower of all, the inner controller, the source of all, the beginning and the end of beings.

**Turīya is the fourth state of the self:** Whereas the third state is Iśvara, the fourth state is Brahman, the Absolute. It cognizes neither the internal impressions nor the external objects; it does not cognize both; it is not the super-unification of knowledge; it is neither cognitive nor non-cognitive. It is unseen, unempirical, ungraspable, devoid of distinctive marks, unthinkable and unnamable. It is the

essence of the knowledge of the only one self, the one into which the cosmos is resolved (prapañcopaśamam). It is the peaceful, the benign, the non-dual.

#### Benefits of Yōga -Nidrā

##### Physical Benefits

Several studies have documented the physical benefits of Yōga nidrā. For instance, a study by Kumar *et al.* (2013) demonstrated significant reductions in blood pressure and heart rate among hypertensive patients practicing Yōga nidrā. Similarly, a randomized controlled trial by Rani and Rao (1994) showed that participants experienced significant improvements in sleep quality and duration.

- 1. Deep Relaxation:** Yōga nidrā induces a state of deep relaxation in the body, which can help reduce muscle tension and alleviate physical stress.
- 2. Improved Sleep Quality:** Regular practice can enhance the quality of sleep, helping to combat insomnia and promote more restful sleep.
- 3. Pain Management:** It can help in managing chronic pain by promoting relaxation and reducing the perception of pain.
- 4. Enhanced Healing:** The deep relaxation state can support the body's natural healing processes, boosting the immune system and aiding in recovery from illness or injury.

##### Mental Benefits

Yōga nidrā has been found to have profound effects on mental health and cognitive functioning. A study by Sharma *et al.* (2005) reported significant reductions in anxiety and stress levels among college students practicing Yōga nidrā. Furthermore, research by Srinivasan *et al.* (2011) indicated enhanced cognitive functioning, including improved memory and concentration, in elderly participants.

- 1. Stress Reduction:** Yōga nidrā is highly effective in reducing stress by lowering cortisol levels and calming the nervous system.
- 2. Enhanced Focus and Concentration:** The practice helps to clear mental clutter, improving focus and concentration.
- 3. Mental Clarity:** It promotes mental clarity and sharpness, helping individuals to think more clearly and make better decisions.
- 4. Reduced Anxiety and Depression:** By promoting relaxation and reducing stress, Yōga nidrā can help alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression.

##### Emotional Benefits

The emotional and psychological benefits of Yōga nidrā are well-documented. In a study conducted by Kjaer *et al.* (2002), participants showed marked decreases in depression and anxiety symptoms after regular Yōga nidrā sessions. Another study by Rajesh and Sharma (2016) found that Yōga nidrā helped in emotional regulation and increased resilience among individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- 1. Emotional Balance:** It helps in balancing emotions by calming the mind and providing a sense of inner peace.
- 2. Increased Emotional Resilience:** Regular practice can build emotional resilience, making it easier to cope with life's challenges.
- 3. Enhanced Self-Awareness:** Yōga nidrā encourages self-reflection and self-awareness, fostering a deeper understanding of oneself.



- 4. Improved Mood:** It can elevate mood by promoting a sense of well-being and contentment.

### Spiritual Benefits

- 1. Deeper Meditation:** Yōga nidrā can serve as a gateway to deeper meditative states, facilitating a connection with one's inner self.
- 2. Heightened Awareness:** It can expand consciousness and promote a greater sense of connection with the universe.
- 3. Personal Transformation:** Regular practice can lead to personal growth and transformation, fostering a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

### Other Benefits

- 1. Increased Creativity:** By relaxing the mind and freeing it from stress, Yōga nidrā can enhance creativity and problem-solving abilities.
- 2. Better Memory:** The relaxation and focus attained through Yōga nidrā can improve memory retention and recall.
- 3. Time-Efficient:** Just 20-30 minutes of Yōga nidrā can provide the rest equivalent to several hours of sleep.

Incorporating Yōga nidrā into your routine can offer a comprehensive approach to improving overall well-being, enhancing quality of life, and fostering a deeper sense of peace and relaxation.

### Clinical Applications

Yōga nidrā has been effectively integrated into clinical practice for various conditions. A pilot study by Khalsa *et al.* (2009) highlighted its efficacy in managing chronic pain, with patients reporting reduced pain perception and increased pain tolerance. Additionally, a study by Tekur *et al.* (2008) showed that Yōga nidrā could significantly alleviate symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome.

### Neurophysiological Effects

Research has also explored the neurophysiological impacts of Yōga nidrā. A study by Lou *et al.* (1999) using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) found increased activation in brain regions associated with relaxation and decreased activity in stress-related regions during Yōga nidrā. These findings suggest that Yōga nidrā can alter brain function to promote a state of deep relaxation and healing.

### Comparisons with Other Interventions

Comparative studies have evaluated the effectiveness of Yōga nidrā against other interventions. A study by Sahni *et al.* (2010) compared Yōga nidrā with progressive muscle relaxation and found that while both techniques reduced stress, Yōga nidrā had a more significant impact on improving sleep quality. Another study by Joshi and Sharma (2011) compared Yōga nidrā with mindfulness meditation, noting that Yōga nidrā was more effective in reducing anxiety levels.

### Methodological Considerations

While the existing literature provides robust evidence of the benefits of Yōga nidrā, several methodological considerations should be noted. Many studies have small sample sizes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the lack of long-term follow-up in

many studies means the sustainability of the benefits is not well-documented. Future research should focus on larger, randomized controlled trials with longer follow-up periods to validate the findings further.

### Mechanism of Yoga Nidra

#### 1. Physical Relaxation

- **Body Scan:** The practice begins with a systematic scan of the body, directing attention to different parts of the body and promoting relaxation. This helps to release physical tension and increases body awareness.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Often, the body scan is combined with progressive relaxation techniques, where each muscle group is tensed and then relaxed to deepen physical relaxation.

#### 2. Mental Relaxation

- **Breath Awareness:** Focusing on the breath helps to calm the mind and reduce mental chatter. Techniques such as counting breaths or observing the natural flow of breathing are commonly used.
- **Visualization:** Guided imagery and visualizations are used to induce mental relaxation. Positive, calming images help to create a peaceful mental state.

#### 3. Emotional Relaxation

- **Feelings and Emotions:** The practice may include observing and acknowledging feelings and emotions without judgment. This helps to release emotional tension and promotes emotional balance.
- **Sankalpa (Intention):** Setting a personal intention or affirmation at the beginning and end of the practice helps to focus the mind and integrate positive changes into one's life.

#### 4. Deep Relaxation

- **Guided Meditation:** A guided journey through different layers of consciousness helps to reach deeper states of relaxation. This often involves visualizing different symbols, images, or sensations.
- **Hypnagogic State:** Yoga Nidra induces a hypnagogic state, a state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep. In this state, the mind is highly receptive, and deep relaxation occurs.

### Scientific Basis

The effectiveness of Yoga Nidra can be understood through several scientific principles.

- 1. Relaxation Response:** Yoga Nidra triggers the relaxation response, a physiological state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress, reducing heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension.
- 2. Neuroplasticity:** By repeatedly focusing on positive intentions and guided visualizations, Yoga Nidra can influence neural pathways, promoting positive changes in thought patterns and behavior.
- 3. Hormonal Balance:** Yoga Nidra can help regulate hormones, particularly reducing cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and increasing the production of serotonin and melatonin, which promote relaxation and better sleep.

### Conclusion

By understanding and incorporating these principles and practices, Yoga Nidra can be a powerful tool for enhancing

overall health and well-being. The literature on Yōga nidrā underscores its significant benefits across various domains of health and well-being. It is particularly effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, improving sleep quality, and enhancing cognitive function. While there is a need for more rigorous and long-term studies, the current evidence supports the integration of Yōga nidrā into both clinical practice and general wellness programs. As awareness of its benefits grows, Yōga nidrā is poised to become a valuable tool for promoting holistic health and well-being.

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