

Yoga Nidra – The Blissful Relaxation

Shivesh Shukla

Director of Physical Education Narsee Monjee College of Commerce & Economics,
Mumbai, MS, India

Abstract

During the last hundreds of years or so, the way of life has changed greatly throughout the world. We are now facing with a new epidemic of stress-related disorders caused by our inability to adapt to the highly competitive pace of modern life. Psychosomatic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, migraine, asthma, ulcer, digestive disorders and skin disease arise from tensions in the body and mind. The leading cause of death around the world are cancer and heart disease, which also stem from tension.

Yogic philosophy, as well as modern psychology, enumerates three basic types of tension (muscular tension, emotional tension and mental tension) which are responsible for all the agonies of modern life. And through the practice of Yoga Nidra, these threefold tensions can be progressively released.

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. True relaxation is actually an experience far beyond all this. 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 sleep, but the consciousness is functioning at 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 subconscious and unconscious dimensions occurs spontaneously.

Introduction

Understanding Human Nature

Before applying yoga nidra for a specific purpose, it is necessary to study the nature of the person you are instructing so that the material you teach does not cause a revolt in him. Although you may suggest great and sublime things in yoga nidra, the personality of another might oppose them. At some stage in our lives, most of us revolt against established rules, canons or political order. This is because the ideas put into our mind are contrary to our real nature.

The Five Koshas

Modern psychologists refer to the three dimensions of the mind as the conscious, subconscious and unconscious. In the philosophies of Vedanata and Yoga they are known as the gross, subtle and casual dimensions of the human personality. These three dimensions are again sub divided into the five koshas or bodies. These five koshas can be

related to the psychological dimensions, physiological states and different level of awareness.

The five koshas are defines in the yogic text as follows:

AnnamayaKosha, the food body, is the physical body of blood, bone, fat and skin, which is perceived through the sense. This is the gross level of human manifestation. The level of awareness is of physical plane.

PranamayaKosha, the pranic body, is the underlying energy network of the human structure, which consist of currents of prana or bio-plasmic energy. The level of awareness here is physiological functions, e.g. digestion and circulation.

ManomayaKosha, the mental body, is the layer of conscious operation within the sphere of the mind. Awareness here is of the mental and emotional processes.

VijnanamayaKosha, the psychic body, is the dimension of our personality which is operating on the astral plane. This is the body we experience during dreaming, out of the body experiences, and the various types of psychic phenomena. Awareness is of the psychic and casual planes.

AnandamayaKosha, the bliss body, is the transcendental dimensions of the human personality existing in total absence of pleasure and pain. This is very important, but difficult to explain. Ananda has been misinterpreted as 'felicity', 'joy' or 'bliss'. It is actually a particular state where there is awareness of neither pain nor pleasure.

The 4 stages of consciousness from waking to the deepest sleep are:

1. Jagrut: State of wakefulness, use of logic, reasoning, decision, willpower, fully awake and conscious.
2. Svapna: State of dreams. Higher consciousness. Usually we are not conscious during this state, we are unconscious and our subconscious enjoys this state.
3. Shushupti: Deep sleep, almost coma-like, without dreams, total blacking out, deep highly regenerative sleep.
4. Turiya: State of void. It is very rare to experience consciously. Everybody falls into turiya for at least a few seconds a night. This is the cataleptic state, which is 'deeper' than the deepest sleep, where the body becomes rigid. In this state the chakras are simultaneously aroused and consciousness is elevated. Turiya is the Samadhi state.

Stages of Yoga Nidra

There are several stages that make up the structure of Yoga Nidra. Each stage emphasizes a different body sheath. These sheaths include, as mentioned before, the physical body, the energy body, the sensation, feeling and emotional bodies, the bodies of thought and imagery, and the bodies of bliss and ego identity. Upon arrival at each

stage, we explore and get to know each of our body sheaths, without any judgment on our part.

The practice of yoga nidra is divided into the following stages:

Preparation

Yoga nidra is performed in the posture of shavasana or corpse pose. The body is stretched out with the head in a straight line with the body. After getting into a comfortable position, there should be no more movement. (Chopra 1996) In this stage, initial relaxation of the body and mind is brought on by the awareness of stillness, comfort, posture, position, breath, and listening to the external sounds with the attitude of a witness. (Bhushan 2001)

Intention

In this stage, the practitioner asserts his or her intention to enter into the practice of Yoga Nidra. The intention is to remain focused and undistracted throughout the session. For instance, he or she may say, "I will not sleep, I will remain awake." This intention sets the direction and tone of the practice. (Miller 2002)

Sankalpa

When the body and mind are relaxed, then the practitioner is instructed to take a resolve or sankalpa according to his or her own wish. The sankalpa should be short, clear and positive. The practitioner repeats the selected sankalpa three times mentally, with full determination, conviction and confidence. With deep relaxation, we are able to access our subconscious mind. It becomes very open to suggestion, and thus we are able to effectively change deep set patterns. (Bhushan 2001)

Rotation of consciousness

Next, the awareness is rotated around the different body parts in a systematic and ordered manner. The practitioner is instructed to remain aware, to listen to the instructions and to move the mind very rapidly according to the instructions without making any physical movements. The rotation of awareness in Yoga Nidra follows a definite sequence: right side of the body, beginning with the right hand thumb and ending with the little toe of the right foot; left side of the body, from the left hand thumb to the little toe of the left foot; back of the body, from the buttocks to the back of the head; and lastly the front of the body, from the forehead and individual facial features down to the pelvis. The awareness is then brought to major parts of the body – whole arms, whole legs, whole torso, whole right side of the body and whole left side of the body. Eventually the entire body is brought together into awareness. (Bhushan 2001, Chopra 1996)

Breathe awareness

In this stage, one simply becomes aware of the natural breath without making an attempt to change the flow of the breath. One may become aware of the breath by watching it in the nostrils, chest, and abdomen, or in the passage between the navel and the throat. The practitioner becomes aware of each incoming and outgoing breath by counting them mentally. (Bhushan 2001) Counting the breath is an important exercise as it sharpens the practitioner's ability to focus. With practice, he or she will be able to remain wide-awake and alert. (Miller 2002)

Opposite feelings and sensations

In this stage, the physical or emotional sensations are recalled, intensified and experienced fully. The practitioner is instructed to experience pairs of opposite feelings or sensations like heat and cold, heaviness and lightness, pain and pleasure, love and hate, and so on. (Bhushan 2001) The thinking mind is only able to focus in one direction at any one time, it cannot move simultaneously in two opposite directions at once. Thus when instructed to do so, it stops thinking and becomes silent. In this quiet, the practitioner is able to experience his or her self-expanding in a multidimensional spaciousness. (Miller 2002)

Visualization

In the stage of visualization, the awareness is taken to the dark space in front of the closed eyes, referred to as chidakasha in yogic terminology. (Bhushan 2001) The practitioner is then instructed to visualize some images or symbols, which may include a castle, the smell of the earth after rain, the ocean at night, a steady candle flame, a blue lotus and so on. The symbols serve as a catalyst to provoke a reaction in the unconscious mind. However, since the practitioner's mind is not given any time to react, it becomes detached and the ego becomes temporarily inactive. (Gilmore 2004) Suppressed conflicts, desires, and deep patterns hidden in the unconscious are liberated and rise into awareness. As they are viewed in an attitude of welcome and not denial, they surface and then dissolve. When these deep residues move out of the unconscious, feelings of peace, stillness and joy manifest. (Miller 2002)

Sankalpa

Once again the sankalpa, taken in stage two, is repeated mentally three times in this stage with full dedication, faith and optimism. (Bhushan 2001)

Ending the practice

At the end of the session of Yoga Nidra, the practitioner may still be in a very deep state. As such, they are instructed to slowly externalize their awareness by listening to external sounds, and becoming aware of objects and persons in their surroundings and the room that they are in. They are asked then to slowly move the body parts and to

stretch the body. When they are sure that they are awake, they can then sit up slowly and open their eyes. (Bhushan 2001, Chopra 1996)

When to Practice Yoga Nidra

Swami Janakananda suggests that it is highly beneficial to practice Yoga Nidra when we are exhausted from work. As it brings us into such a deep state of relaxation, it will be more effective than a normal nap. He also suggests its use by those who suffer from insomnia or are dependent on sleeping pills. Studies conducted by the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School have shown that Yoga Nidra can improve sleep, especially when practiced during the day. Swami Janakananda advises against doing Yoga Nidra right after a heavy meal or drinking coffee. He also recommends using the exercise Tratak, right before practicing Yoga Nidra. If the practice was to be combined with yoga and breathing exercises, Yoga Nidra should be done after them. (Janakananda 1983)

Benefits of Yoga Nidra

The benefits of Yoga Nidra are immeasurable. Each person will find growth, healing, and discovery in unique ways. However, it is clear that Yoga Nidra provides basic value to its practitioners in seven profound ways:

- Stress Reduction
- Management of Chronic Pain
- Improved Sleep Quality and Patterns
- Healing and Navigating Trauma
- Diminished Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety
- Refined Mental Clarity
- Restoring the Physical Body Systems

In supplying holistic healing and health, Yoga Nidra is a powerful way to rejuvenate and restore the body, giving it the rest and replenishment many individuals lack.

1. Stress Reduction

One of the most common and easily recognizable benefits of Yoga Nidra is stress reduction. The physical and mental activities of Yoga Nidra naturally lead to calming states for the body and mind. The body and mind reach these states of ultimate relaxation through deep breathing and visualization. Practicing Yoga Nidra requires body scans and deep breathing, which lead to muscle relaxation, the release of emotional tension, and an opportunity for the nervous system to slow down.

2. Restoring the Physical Body Systems

Yoga Nidra sessions are designed in a way to enhance states of extreme relaxation, triggering the body's nervous and endocrine systems to heal and regenerate. Oxygenation and glandular massage induced through breathwork and the use of props (bolsters and blankets) help to increase serotonin and other mood elevators, while diminishing the effects of cortisol, epinephrine, and estrogen during moments of a women's menstrual cycle. Because of the effects Yoga Nidra has on tissues of the body, it can enhance organ function and negate the issues caused through inflammation's restrictive effects on the body.

3. Management of Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is often caused by a trigger in the nervous system, as well as inflammation and immune dysfunction. Immediately, Yoga Nidra can provide the body and mind a chance to rest and recover, which is a tremendous relief for anyone who experiences chronic pain. However, a continued practice can give the body an opportunity to heal from the harm of inflammation in the tissues and the programming of the nervous and endocrine systems, which often cause the pain to be continuous.

Chronic pain doesn't live in the part of the body experiencing pain, it lives in the neural pathways of the brain. A reaction in the nervous system that repeats itself consistently can cause trauma and triggers that exacerbate the pain.

4. Refined Mental Clarity

Much of the effectiveness of Yoga Nidra relies upon the intentions of the practitioner. In Yoga Nidra, this intention is called a *sankalpa*. It is a commitment one makes toward oneself to be what one wants to be. Goal-oriented guided meditations have been shown to enhance memory, cognitive processing, and creativity by removing mental fog and confusion. Yoga Nidra consists of diving into sleep patterns while still conscious. It is while in different states of brain wave functioning that the brain is able to make new connections, revelations, and seize on opportunities to refine the Self.

5. Healing and Navigating Trauma

Trauma exists in the body as a reaction to an event or series of events that inflict deep pain, confusion, and fear. People who live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) live with the after-effects of managing chronic stress. If the body and mind maintain states of chronic stress, an individual may live with constant and debilitating anxiety, physical ailments, and reactivity to present situations that hurt everyone involved.

Yoga Nidra works to heal past trauma and emotional triggers by creating new "scripts" in the brain. For people living with the effects of trauma, this practice is a way to actively

engage with new scripts but also to gain insight into the emotional triggers that deeply affect the person's life.

6. Diminished Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety

Yoga Nidra can be a useful tool for individuals who struggle with depression and anxiety. One of the ways Yoga Nidra is beneficial to the mind is by releasing suppressed emotions and providing the practitioner a way to react differently. It is a practice to help control the mind. For people who experience depression and anxiety, it may seem impossible to control thoughts of regret, fear, or worry. By momentarily detaching from these thoughts and emotions, the individual can begin to deprogram from the incessant chatter and the problems the mind creates.

7. Improved Sleep Quality and Patterns

Because of its naturally restful qualities, Yoga Nidra is an excellent way to help people achieve restorative sleep and fall asleep more readily. Stress, pain, and overthinking can make it difficult to fall asleep. Many people suffer from insomnia as a result of their inability to surrender to a deeply restful period of sleep. Yoga Nidra prepares the mind and body for sleep. In itself, Yoga Nidra is a rejuvenating and restorative practice. As stated earlier, one hour of Yoga Nidra is said to have the healing properties of four hours of normal sleep.

Discussion

Yoga-nidra intervention significantly reduced stress, increase in happiness, and overall improve the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Reduction in stress and anxiety levels and definite increase in general well-being people as a result of Yoga Nidra intervention have been observed by Kamakhya *et al.* YogaNidra improved psychological general well-being like anxiety, vitality, depressed mood, self-control, and positive well-being. The results of assessment tool "Experiential effects of YogaNidra" which was intended to reflect deepest cognitive and behavioral phenomena which underlie the outward effects measured conventionally corroborated with other parameters. Yoga Nidra immensely enthusiastically alert, inspired, the people and improvement in their self-confidence and clarity of thinking. Parker *et al.* demonstrated that there are conceptual difference and practical distinction between YogaNidra and other methods of guided relaxation. Elaboration of deeper and esoteric significance of effects of YogaNidra provided in standard ancient scriptures is beyond the scope of the study.

From of modern psychology perspectives, sustained positive emotion, recovery from negative emotion, empathy, altruism, mindfulness, and emotion-captured attention are novel constituents of well-being. The neural circuits that underlie each of these constituents overlap partially and thus can be transformed through experience and training. From the perspective of ancient descriptions of yoga, the four powers and objects of yoga are purity, liberty, beatitude, and perfection, which too can be cultivated

and attained through methodical self-development, which ultimately foster attainment of highest level of well-being.

Conclusion

There are many ways that we can practice Yoga Nidra. It can be done quickly in a few minutes, or we may proceed slowly, spending an hour to two hours thoroughly exploring each of the sheaths or domains of existence. It is generally recommended that once the practitioner has stabilized his or her practice of Yoga Nidra over a period of time, he or she should then try to stop using the guided versions on tapes or CDs. Instead, the practitioner can begin to experiment with giving themselves the instructions mentally. When the time is right, even the instructions may be dropped for ultimately, the methods used for Yoga Nidra are for training the mind to focus and become aware, subtler and subtler, until finally, the attention dives into stillness and objectless-ness. The eventual goal is that the practice of Yoga Nidra takes us beyond the practice of Yoga Nidra itself into everyday life, so that in every moment we are feeling, sensing, intuiting and knowing our true nature as Undivided Presence. As Swami JnaneshvaraBharati puts it, “Yoga Nidra is a state of consciousness, not the methods that lead you to that state.”

References

1. Swami SatyanandSaraswati (1996), Yoga Nidra, Yoga Publication Trust, Munger, Bihar, pg. no. 1-5, 16-17, 28-30, 89-93.
2. Wikipedia; Yoga Nidra, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga_nidra, retrieve on dt. 15.07.2021
3. Health Essential; What is Yoga Nidra; <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-yoga-nidra/>, retrieve on dt. 15.07.2021
4. Griffin. K. (2012), How Yoga Nidra Benefits Mind & Body, <https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/reflections-of-peace/>, retrieve on dt. 18.07.2021
5. Jeraci R.A. (2017), Yoga International, <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/5-benefits-of-yoga-nidra>, retrieve on dt. 21.07.2021