

# *Yoga Nidra*

In our modern day society, human life has become very fast, hectic and demanding. We often hear people complaining that they are highly stressed, and if not controlled properly, negative stress may manifest in the forms of physical, mental or psychological problems. In a bid to manage their stress levels, many people are now turning to meditation, which has become a powerful tool in helping people to achieve relaxation for both their mind and body. In my own experience, one meditation technique that I have found to be easy to do, yet deeply relaxing is Yoga Nidra.

## **Introduction**

Yoga Nidra originates from ancient Tantric practices. The word “tantra” means to expand and to liberate, and Yoga Nidra, like other tantric rituals consist of methods that seek to expand our understanding of the depths of our mind. When we experience for ourselves the expansion of our knowledge and insight, we are able to master our minds and thus freedom is gained. (Janakananda 1992) While the yogis have known Yoga Nidra for thousands of years, the practice was revived when Swami Satyananda Saraswati, founder of the Bihar School of Yoga in Munger, eastern India, adapted and presented it in a systematic and scientific way in the 1960s.

Yoga Nidra is a systematic method of inducing complete physical, mental and emotional relaxation. While the relaxation is a very important aspect of Yoga Nidra, it is not the ultimate goal of the practice. In line with tantric tradition, Richard Miller, a clinical psychologist and leading practitioner of yoga therapy, says that Yoga Nidra is also a complete program of intensive self-inquiry, where we carefully and thoroughly examine the nature of the structures and beliefs that mould our personal identity. These structures, also known as sheaths, include the physical body, the energy body, the sensation, feeling and emotional bodies, the bodies of thought and imagery, and the bodies of bliss and personal ego identity. (Miller 2002)

## **Purpose of Yoga Nidra**

The word “Yoga” can be translated as “the joining together of two things that have never been separate” and the word “Nidra,” from the Sanskrit, means “sleep.” When taken together, one common interpretation of “Yoga Nidra” is psychic sleep or deep relaxation with inner awareness, where one appears to be asleep, but consciousness is functioning at a deeper level of awareness. (Bhushan 2001) In psychology, the state achieved in Yoga Nidra is termed the hypnogogic state, a state between sleep and wakefulness. It is thought that when we are in this state, we have access to the latent or subconscious level of the mind, and are even able to influence it. For instance, we are able to directly attenuate the deep habit patterns of attachment or aversion that drive our actions in the waking state. (Bharati)

Miller goes one step further; he interprets sleep as a state of being unconscious or unaware. As such, he says that from the perspective of Yoga Nidra, we are asleep when we view the world as consisting of solid and separate objects. He defines the yogi as one who, whether asleep or awake, is aware of the fundamental nature of reality – that all things are inherently One, and there is no separation anywhere. He purports that the aim of Yoga Nidra is thus to come to the first-hand experience that “we are not the limited, finite creatures that we mistakenly take ourselves to be,” but rather, “we are non-separate awareness, a joyous Beingness that is always present.” (Miller 2002)

Swami Janakananda Saraswati, founder of the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School, as well as the disciple of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, supports Miller’s argument. He too says that the purpose of Yoga Nidra is to touch and experience the various dimensions of our being and to awaken consciousness in areas where it is usually dormant due to tensions. The aim is that by doing so, we are able to experience that we are not bound to just one plane of consciousness, but rather that we

consciously contain them all. That in turn is meant to lead to the insight that our true identity is the experiencing consciousness behind it all. (Janakananda 1998)

## **Pratyahara**

Yoga Nidra is one of the practices of Pratyahara. The word “Pratyahara” means abstracting, leaving something, distancing or letting go. (Janakananda 1992) It involves the process of withdrawing the mind from distracting sensory impressions like sounds, smells, sights and thoughts so that the mind remains in a calm and undisturbed state of silent witnessing. (Miller 2002) This is done by surrendering to the experience of the sensory impression and saturating the mind with it. The experience becomes the object of meditation. In Pratyahara, we constantly observe the process of perceiving; we observe the sensory impression and the reactions of the mind to it. We do not try to change anything. (Janakananda 1992) “Any sensory impression that is allowed to be in awareness without either the movement of repression or expression, dissolves back into the ever-present background of awareness and disappears.” (Miller 2002) Conversely, when we try to suppress a sensation, we prevent the mind from studying it. The mind is unable to conclude whether the sensation is dangerous or useful. It is thus unable to let go and the disturbance remains, consciously or unconsciously. (Janakananda 1992) Hence, trying to withdraw from anything ultimately ends in failure. It is only when we are able to be with things as they are that we are able to go beyond them.

## **Nyasa**

During Yoga Nidra, Pratyahara is practiced by intentionally locating and investigating sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts and images. This is achieved through another process known as Nyasa. As mentioned earlier, the aim in Yoga Nidra is to touch and hence experience the various dimensions of our being; that is exactly what Nyasa is. According to the Oxford Sanskrit English Dictionary, the word “Nyasa” means to place, to set on or in, to use, to touch. Agehananda Bharati, acclaimed author and authority on Hinduism, defines Nyasa as “the process of charging a part of the body, or an organ of another living body, with a specified power through touch.” (Janakananda 1998) Nyasa can consist of “touching” the different parts of the body by hand, or it can be done mentally, by thinking of the specific areas. By touching and thereby experiencing a part of the body, the body is brought to life and made conscious. Any impressions that arise from this consciousness are allowed to float freely, without any effort on our part to repress it or express it. The impressions are simply allowed to surface and fade into the background. They do not irritate the mind because it has no intention to refuse or deny their existence. (Miller 2002)

As with the physical body, the process is repeated with all the different body sheaths that make up our identity. This approach to Pratyahara is a process of elimination whereby deep and unconscious patterns of habit from all the different levels of our being is allowed to surface into awareness. (Miller 2002) By witnessing these entrenched habit patterns as an impartial observer in the state of Yoga Nidra, a certain transformation occurs. There is an increasing awareness that who I am is different from my thoughts. We gradually experience ourselves as the consciousness beneath or prior to all of our active mental processes, including both conscious and unconscious ones. In Miller’s opinion, “understanding and embodying the realisation that we are non-conceptual Presence is the culmination of Yoga Nidra.”

## **Stages of Yoga Nidra**

There are several stages that make up the structure of Yoga Nidra. Each stage emphasises 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. We have no agenda other than being with the various sensations, images,

thoughts, feelings and any other impression that may arise as we explore. Each stage represents a way our mind has turned what is in fact a non-conceptual Unity into a conceptual, objectified perception. By bringing them to our awareness with an attitude of welcome, the solidity of each sheath deconstructs, and we are hence able to disidentify from each body sheath. By doing so, we gradually realise that all that remains is the consciousness behind all the different sheaths, and that is our true identity – non-objective Pure Presence. (Miller 2002)

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. The feet are slightly apart, the arms are beside the body, the palms of the hands are turned upwards, and the eyes are closed. 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)

**Breath 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 externalise 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 Practise Yoga Nidra**

Swami Janakananda suggests that it is highly beneficial to practise 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. We will "awake" feeling more refreshed, and are afterwards able to get more from our leisure time. 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 practised during the day. However, it can also be done at bedtime. (Janakananda 1983)

Swami Janakananda advises against doing Yoga Nidra right after a heavy meal or drinking coffee. To strengthen the effect of Yoga Nidra, he recommends using the exercise Tratak, where one concentrates on the flame of a candle, right before practising Yoga Nidra. If the practice was to be combined with yoga and breathing exercises, Yoga Nidra should be done after them. (Janakananda 1983)

## **Methods to Remain Awake**

Initially, when one starts to practise Yoga Nidra, one common problem could be the tendency to fall asleep. With practice, this should be overcome. The following are some suggestions by Swami Janakananda on various ways to remain awake:

- Take a hot and then cold shower before the session.
- Before the relaxation, do the Headstand or Clown pose if one is familiar with them.
- During the relaxation, leave the feet uncovered.
- Hold either one or both forearms up in the air during the practice.
- Say the instructions mentally along with the voice that is guiding the practice.
- If all else fails, do the practice standing up. (Janakananda 1983)

## 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 stabilised 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 Jnaneshvara Bharati puts it, “Yoga Nidra is a state of consciousness, not the methods that lead you to that state.”

*~ End ~*

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