

Yoga Nidra

Sometimes called “the sleep of Vishnu,” *yoga nidra* is a technique for attaining perfect mental and physical relaxation. By some accounts it is the ultimate yoga practice. Yoga nidra has many benefits and is an excellent tool for relaxation, meditation, and developing mental acuity. It can be used to induce sleep, intentionally enter into lucid dreaming states, or provide physical and psychological rejuvenation. Yoga nidra improves memory and accelerates learning, stimulates the potentials of the mind, and awakens the power of intuition. It can be a means for inner exploration, and can also help eradicate deep-rooted psychological problems and psychosomatic ailments.

The word yoga means spiritual integration or union – both the state of spiritual union and the processes that lead to that state of union are yoga. One of those processes (or yogas) is the yoga of meditation called raja yoga. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra is the fundamental scripture for raja yoga. The Yoga Sutra defines the yoga of meditation as “control of the changes to ideas of the mind.” Patanjali then goes on to define five kinds of ideas to control: right knowledge, wrong knowledge, fancy, memory, and sleep. Nidra (pronounced “Nee-druh”) means sleep. So yoga nidra means both yogic-sleep and the techniques that induce the state of yogic-sleep.

There are three different levels or states of nidra: normal sleep, psychic sleep (lucid dreaming), and sleepless sleep. Which level you rest in and what you get from the practice depends on your intention in the practice and your experience with the practice.

Normal sleep is the most common state that is experienced in yoga nidra. Many people will fall into a deep restful sleep when they attempt yoga nidra. This is alright; the benefits of adequate restful sleep can not be overstated. A good night's rest can be hard to come by in our hectic modern world. Without enough rest our nervous system overloads and it becomes more challenging to deal with the stresses that are making it hard to sleep. Yoga nidra can help to “recharge your batteries” and be well rested.

Psychic sleep is a very interesting mental state. This state is sometimes called “lucid-dreaming,” a sort of conscious dreaming wherein you know you are dreaming and may even intentionally direct the course of your dream. This may also be an entry point for a broad range of psychic experiences such as remote viewing (clairvoyance and pre-cognition), communication with spirit guides, astral projection and the like.

Sleepless sleep is the highest state of yoga nidra and it is the gateway to an incredible form of perception. This state provides all the benefits of restful sleep, but the actual experience is way beyond normal sleep. In this state you can rejuvenate the mind and body in a fraction of the time you would need in normal sleep. This is the point of consciousness between introversion and extroversion, the hypnagogic state between waking consciousness and sleeping consciousness. Here is the gateway to a profound mystical awareness. From here you can awaken all of the latent potentiality or your mind. From here you can move beyond the three states of normal human consciousness into the transcendental “fourth dimension of being” called 'turyia'.

[NOTE: I am not suggesting you need to believe in psychic phenomena, some other “dimension of being,” or whatever. I am simply describing the ideas; you will need to make your own determination about the relative value of such ideas based on your own experience and your own experiments with yoga nidra. It takes practice to experiment with the nidra states. Most people can only dwell in the hypnagogic state for a few moments – five minutes at the most. It takes practice to make the state last longer. You may not experience deep transcendent states – not everyone does, that's alright if you don't. Many of those “deep experiences” are just hallucinations, the mind processing images in unfamiliar patterns. Visions and hallucinations are not necessary for your spiritual growth, they can actually be a hindrance rather than a help.]

For more information go to www.antiochyoga.com

The Tracks

Track 1 is just a brief piece of music to give you a chance to lie down and relax before the narration for the guided meditation begins. The mantra near the end of the first track is “Om Gan Ganapataye Namah,” an invocation for the removal of obstacles.

During the first track you should lie down on your back in *shavasana* (“Corpse Pose”) and prepare to relax completely. You will gain the greatest benefit from yoga nidra if you prepare with a brief yogasan routine. Twenty minutes of sun salutations or moon salutations would be excellent preparation for yoga nidra, but at least do a few stretches and deep breaths before you stretch out into shavasana. If you want to make an effort to stay awake (recommended) you should lie on a firm surface, like your yoga mat on the floor (maybe with a small pillow or rolled towel behind your neck). If you want to sleep, by all means, stretch out on your bed. I find the experience more interesting without a pillow (it has something to do with the neck alignment). But honor your own body – be comfortable. You don’t want to be cold, so cover yourself with a blanket as necessary for your own comfort.

Shavasana is the classic yoga relaxation pose. It is the best position for yoga nidra. You should wear loose comfortable clothing. Remove wristwatch, glasses, earrings, and any other jewelry. Lie flat on your back. You should lie on a firm surface. A yoga mat or a folded blanket on the floor is usually the best option. You want to be as comfortable as possible so that you can lie still for the entire meditation. The room should be comfortably warm, but not too warm. You want fresh air, but you don’t want a draft. Although it seems like a nice idea, we are advised not to practice yoga nidra outdoors.

In shavasana your body should be aligned straight from head to toe. Your face should be turned upward, eyes closed; arms near your sides with the palms turned up; relaxed shoulders resting on the mat; relaxed hips, legs (slightly separated), and feet. Wiggle around a little bit so that you can settle into the mat and lie completely still – your only movement is the movement of your breath. Breathing through your nose, deep steady breath, your abdomen rises and falls with each breath – each exhale your body relaxes more and more.

Track 2 guides you into yoga nidra. There is an initial period of relaxation in shavasana. The narration guides your attention around the body, beginning at the feet, and quickly works your way up to your head. During this period you should just relax and listen to my voice. Follow my instructions to let your attention around your body, but don’t analyze the process or the experience. Just be with the moment, with your breath, and with my voice. Don’t try to concentrate. Concentration is an effort to focus attention, for yoga nidra we want to cultivate effortless focus. So don’t worry about staying focused, just relax and when you notice that your mind has wandered off somewhere just bring your attention back to your breath, my voice, and my instructions.

After the initial relaxation the narration will guide your attention around your body with a much more detailed focus on different body parts (for example, each finger and toe). Again, don’t try to concentrate, just relax and always gently bring your attention back to your breath, my voice, and my instructions. Don’t analyze the experience or the process, you can do that later, but during the session just relax the body and the mind and gently let your attention return to your breath and my voice.

At a certain point in the process I instruct you to repeat your *sankalpa* three times (the instruction is repeated near the end of the yoga nidra session). A *sankalpa* is something like an intention or an affirmation. The *sankalpa* should be formed with positive intentions (“don’t,” “can’t” and “shouldn’t” type words or ideas need to be avoided) and in the present tense (“I am” rather than “I will be”). At this point in the yoga nidra the boundaries between your subconscious mind and your normal consciousness should be breaking down. This is a period of heightened suggestibility so we want to take advantage of the mental state and embed your *sankalpa* deeply into your subconscious mind. This is a very powerful practice, so take care about the *sankalpa* you choose.

When you are deep into the yoga nidra the narration begins to lead you through a guided imagery meditation. The images change rather quickly, don’t try to dwell on them or analyze the visualizations intellectually – just relax and observe the entire experience. You can intellectualize about your experience later. The apparently random sequence of images is not as random as it seems. There is an intentional movement of mental form that may be induced by the sequence of images, but don’t over analyze the process – just be with it. [The the guided imagery is read from a transcript of a yoga nidra session guided by Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Satyanandaji developed yoga nidra based on a technique called nyasa meditation. Nyasa is a technique of “placing mantras” on different parts of the body.]

Track 3 is intended to gently bring you back to normal consciousness. A collection of singing bowls, bells and chimes start slowly and then build to a symphony of ringing brass.