

THE HISTORICAL, BIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF YOGA NIDRA

YOGA often inadequately described and translated as “union”, represented both the action of awakening to, as well as the description of our underlying true nature or pure being that is the birthing ground of authenticity.

NIDRA or sleep, is the state in which we are unconscious to the true nature when we are identified with, and swayed by thoughts and actions that are based on misperception and reactive patterns.

YOGA NIDRA represents a paradox that is a play on the words SLEEP and AWAKE, as it means THE SLEEP OF THE YOGI; or YOGIC SLEEP; and implies that the normal person is asleep to their true nature through all states of consciousness: waking, deep sleep and dreaming.

YOGA NIDRA

- is an ancient, sacred yogic process of meditation that can be practiced for relaxation, healing, for the purpose for profoundly connecting our mind, body and spirit, healing relationships, resolving trauma and more;
- has been a common terminology used in many **empirical** studies to refer to relaxation and guided imagery. Such techniques do not represent the intention or physiological correlates of Yoga Nidra as discussed in the traditional yoga literature.

THE ORIGINS

The origins of Yoga Nidra can be traced back to ancient Eastern Teachings of Yoga. Various yogis have revitalized the practice of Yoga Nidra throughout the past century. Traditional Yoga Literature.

Descriptions of Yoga Nidra in the traditional yoga text tend to be oblique and often refer to the state of Yoga Nidra rather than descriptions of the practice.

When discussing the traditional yoga text we are not rigidly referring to texts of formal yoga philosophy. Because yoga is primarily a discipline of meditation, we have taken into consideration information about meditation practices from multiple oral and written perspectives, including the Upanishads, Vedantic, Ayurvedic, and Buddhist texts.

Though the topic of Yoga Nidra is vast, there is a paucity of descriptions related to relaxation exercises and subtle-body practices. For example, the hatha yoga texts contain few explicit descriptions of Yoga Nidra, which might lead one to conclude that few exist (see Vasistha-samhita III.57-75; Yoga Yajnavalkya VII-1-37, translated in Bharati, 2001; 771–773).

The Oral Tradition of Yoga: There are two potential explanations for the scarcity of textual accounts of Yoga Nidra. Many practices were traditionally taught in response to the needs of the individual and were almost solely communicated by word of mouth.

Further, the practices of Yoga Nidra were often reserved for those deemed to be qualified, which was determined in the context of a one-to-one relationship between teacher and student; which traditionally was done one-on-one.

One of the **pramanas** (means of correct knowledge) in the yoga system is **agama**: that which has come. The yoga tradition includes the action and speech of a master as agama, not what is solely written in the books (Bharati, 1986). It is important to consider the oral teachings as well as the written works, many of which were deliberately left incomplete or did not explain the practice of Yoga Nidra in its entirety.

Ergo, we do not rely exclusively on written material when we refer to the textual tradition of yoga.

The term Yoga Nidra can refer to practice as well as to an object of devotion. In the Vedic literature (roughly 5000 BCE to 1000CE) and Epic literature (approximately 700 BCE to 1000 CE), Yoga Nidra refers to the mythological dissolution of the cosmos, or Vishnu's cosmic Yoga Nidra. It also represents Vishnu's power and the universal principles as described in the text, and is identified with the Divine Mother as Kali, the shakti energy.

Buddhist Literature: The Mahayana Buddhist traditions, and the Vajrayana in particular, refer to a practice of clear, light sleep similar to classical yoga's account of Yoga Nidra. This light sleep is described in the 14th century text, Book of Three Inspirations, by Tsongkhapa the Great, guru of the first Dalai Lama. This practice involves concentrating on the heart center, the chakra associated with the state of deep sleep. The individual progresses through four stages of emptiness to an "experience of a light like that of a dawn with a clear sky". Its description is identical to that of the practices included in the Yoga Vedanta and Tantric traditions.

These experiences are described in Mahayana tradition as states of samadhi. It is likely that the clear, light state is very similar to the state of turiya described by Vedantic writers from Gaudapada onward. As with turiya, the clear, light state is an experience beyond which there are “no further signs” (ie: the highest attainment, liberation), and it eventually pervades all states of consciousness, waking, dreaming, and sleeping.

Through the experience of turiya, there appears to be a practical link between the clear light meditation practice and Yoga Nidra.

The Theravada Buddhist yoga literature contains no references to Yoga Nidra, because it is described in the hatha-yoga literature. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition has a discipline of dream yoga, which does not apply to the state of deep sleep; however, it is related to the practice of clear, light sleep and involves the dissolution of all thought and an experience of nothing but pure awareness.

In Ayurvedic literature, the Charaka-samhita, a revelation that is partially ascribed to Patanjali, contains a discussion of the theory of sleep in the Sutra-sthana, which culminates in the verse, “The same sleep, if properly enjoyed, brings about happiness and longevity in human beings as the real knowledge brings about **siddhi** (enlightenment) in a yogin” verse 21.38). Although this intimates that sleep is an entry point to elevated, superconscious states, no detailed description of the practice is included.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (approximately 200 BCE) does not explicitly describe the technique of Yoga Nidra, but the nature of sleep as a mental operation is explored (I.10), as are the dream and sleep states as a means to enter samadhi. Sutra I.10, defines the mental process (vrtti) of sleep as concentration, and its cause. When used in conjunction with a mind that has no focus (alambana) or has non-being as a focus, the mind becomes very malleable, and the power of the mind field can be shaped by one's greatest intention (or vow - sankalpa). This is valuable in processes of learning and self-healing. Even more important is the observation of the dream (svapna) and deep sleep (nidra) states as a means to enter into samadhi. Sutra I.38: with support of knowledge of dream and [deep] sleep”. The practical details of this process are not described, however. In Shiva - sutra I.7 of the Shaiva tradition of Kashmir (approximately 950 CE), Vasugupta asserts that the yogi experiences the fourth state of consciousness (turiya) in the midst of the other three states: waking, dream, and sleep. This gives rise to a classification of states of consciousness wherein each of these three states is inherent within the other (Shiva-sutra I.10). The result is a schema of nine states of consciousness (10 or more if you count turiya):

waking in waking, waking in dream, waking in deep sleep, dream in waking, dream in dreaming, deep sleep in dreaming, and so forth.

Shandilya-upanishad (I.35) describes a similar process with the same sequence of steps, as does the Shankaracarya Krishnamachariya / Deshikachar 2003).

In Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Shandilya-upanishad (IV. 43- 44), the process of entry into Yoga Nidra is described in similar terms. When the sushumna nadi, the central the three primary energy channels of the energy body seizes the prana, **khecari** is established, From establishment of khecari, the state of **unmani**, the "upward mind," ensues.

Once Yoga Nidra is attained, there is no such thing as kala (time)" (Digambarji & Kokaje; 1998, p. 49). The text proceeds to describe the state as one in which there is no thought, and life activities (vayu, movement of prana) are reduced to a minimum.

Early Physiological studies of Yoga Nidra were conducted in the 1970s and reported in several non-peer reviewed publications (Greene & Greene, 1977; Moffat, 1974). In one investigation, Swami Rama of the Himalayas participated in an EEG study of Yoga Nidra during which he was observed to enter conscious deep sleep for about 10 minutes, at which time delta waves were recorded. He was able to recount verbatim all the conversations that occurred in the lab during that time, demonstrating his awareness of his surroundings. In his comments about this experiment, Swami Satyananda stated that "the capacity to remain consciously aware while producing delta waves is one of the indications of the super conscious state, turiya". Although it is true that someone in turiya would be conscious of his/her surroundings, this kind of awareness is also characteristic of the state of Yoga Nidra prior to entry into turiya, according to Swami Rama and Swami Veda Bharati. Bharati contends that the state of turiya is accompanied by a flat EEG rather than by delta waves, indicating a moment-to-moment state when measurable cognitive activity ceases altogether, despite apparent wakefulness. To date, no carefully controlled demonstration of such a state has been accomplished (Bharati, 2006).

In 2004 Dr. Dean Radin of the Institute of Noetic Sciences used more tightly controlled experimental conditions in an effort to replicate the Swami Rama study. A number of physiological parameters were measured while Swami Veda Bharati entered a state of delta wave sleep while maintaining conscious awareness of his surroundings, similar to Swami Rama's experience (Bharati, 2006). After examining the

EEG data collected while talking with Swami Veda Bharati prior to the experiment, Radin suggested that “Swami Veda's ordinary state of awareness is **analogous** to that of a normal person in a deep meditative or sleep state” (Bharati, 2006, p. 69). The EEG trace showed pre-dominant production of delta waves even during casual conversation with his eyes open. Neurologically, this is highly unusual.

In 2011 Swami Veda Bharati: a senior Swami Monk from India, and former professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Minnesota, sponsored an international conference on Yoga Nidra to review traditional prescriptions and methods of practice. His goal was to initiate a discussion between those representing the oral tradition of yoga and research scientists.

Bharati presented that Yoga Nidra (yogic sleep), represents the state in which an individual demonstrates all the symptoms of deep, non-REM sleep, including delta brain waves, while simultaneously remaining fully conscious.

It was explained that modern day yoga nidra as it is practiced today are a group of practices used to prepare for yoga nidra proper. Traditionally the practice has 4 distinct levels.

Level 1: Deep relaxation. This state created alpha waves within the brain, which may verge on theta waves during a deeper practice. these deeper exercises may be used for self healing, such as reducing blood pressure, and dealing with migraine headaches. These are similar protocols to those used in the Hammond 1990 clinical hypnosis study.

Level 2: Creativity. this state is characterized by imagination, invention, decision, and achieving solutions too problems. This state is created by theta waves that verge on delta waves during a deeper practice.

Level 3: The practices of Level 1 and 2 result in the transition to yoga, or the state of ABHAVA PRATYAYA: cognition of negation in the case of the heart centre (Yoga Sutra I.10). During this state the brain may initially produce theta waves, followed by delta waves. The practitioner may experience deep non REM sleep but remains aware of their surroundings. It is advised to not stay in this state for longer than 10 minutes at a time.

Level 4: Progression to this stage occurs once the first three levels are mastered. During this level the mind simultaneously remains in two states of sleep and conscious awareness (A-JAPA JAPA or the

effortless reputation of a mantra in spontaneous meditation), and meditation during with the person is aware of their Kundalini energy.

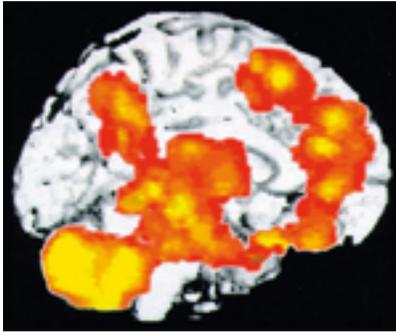
Kundalini is a subjective experience of the very subtle power of consciousness in meditation. A practitioner may alternate between theta and delta waves during this process. Unlike Level 2, which is time limited, this process may last as long as 3.5 hours.

When Levels 3 and 4 are mastered, one may gradually transition into Turiya - during which yoga nidra and turiya become indistinguishable. Turiya is a state during which the highest form of meditation becomes one's normal set of awareness and is maintained at all times. It is hypothesized that at this point EEG readings may register no discernible electrical activity. This hypothesis has yet to be demonstrated under controlled conditions.

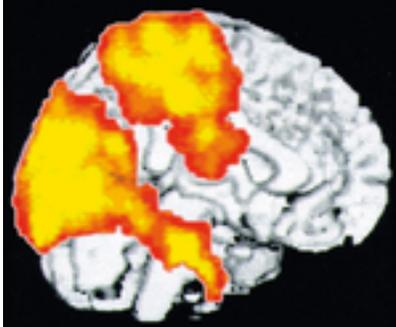
Several studies of Yoga Nidra Irest, developed by Richard Miller have been conducted; these investigations used questionnaires and rating scales to measure participants' experience. They provided evidence of the subjective effectiveness of yoga nidra.

YOGA NIDRA AS A MEDITATIVE PRACTICE

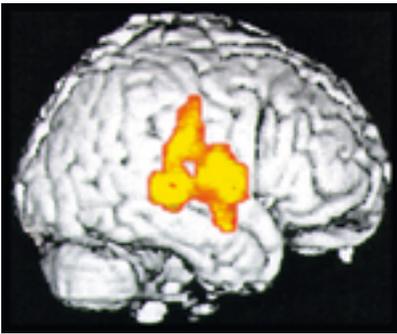
- Yoga Nidra is a time-honoured, reeducational process that teaches us how to combine profound relaxation with innate wisdom into every moment of our waking lives.
- Yoga Nidra is a meditative inquiry through human psychology and spirituality.
- Through Yoga Nidra we can systemically investigate the nature of our beliefs that define our identity and divide us into separation.
- Yoga Nidra guides us through who we think we are, to what we are: Pure conscious awareness.
- Yoga Nidra helps us understand our waking distorted perceptions of reality through creating an achievable meditative state of being and seeing.
- The practice of Yoga Nidra leads us to immense changes within our mind, body, emotions, , energetic awareness, intellectual ability, inter-personal relationships, and within our spiritual connection.
- Yoga Nidra is not hypnosis, but rather the deepest and most profound, but very natural state of mediation.
- Yoga Nidra enables us to reconnect to our deepest, most intimate and relaxed receptivity of our intuitive, spontaneous, ever-connected soul-intelligence.

REST

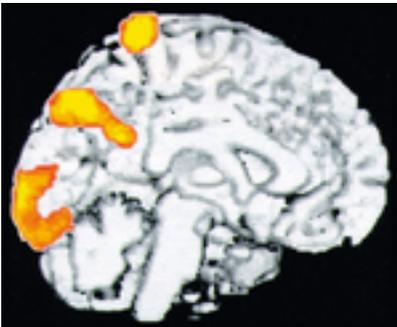
This picture is based on the data gathered prior to and following Yoga Nidra. It illustrates the state closest to normal waking consciousness, though without being a tired or stressed state. Those who use Yoga Nidra remark that not only do they get something out of the deep relaxation while doing it, but that it has a definite beneficial effect on the remaining part of their day. In this picture, it is the frontal part of the brain, responsible for the overall management, which is active. One of its capacities is to ensure that we can function in a complex society, as it processes the signals from the deeper emotional and instinctive regions of the brain. The brain stem and the cerebellum are also active, indicating that one is 'ready for action'.

MEDITATION

This picture shows the general state during the entire Yoga Nidra. The visual centre at the back of the head and the somatosensory centre at the top of the head (for the sense of touch and body position) are active and are in contact with the limbic system. This implies an increased ability to visualise and, more importantly, that there is better contact with emotions. Some of the teachers also had distinct activity in the centre for long term memory, which is consistent with accounts from people who meditate, that very lucid memories can appear during or after a meditation. We must, however, emphasise that the subjects' experience and regular use of Yoga possibly intensifies the effects of Yoga Nidra.

ABSTRACT

This picture is created on the basis of measurements taken during the feeling of happiness and at the end of the relaxation during the experience of identity, of being centred. During these 'abstract experiences' in Yoga Nidra, the centre for speech and language was especially active. It must be said, however, that this and the next picture only show the areas where the most activity occurs, and not the general activity in the whole brain, as is shown in picture 2.

CONCRETE

It was primarily the visual and tactile centres which were active as the subjects went through the body's different parts (especially the face) and also when they experienced a pleasant summer day in the country. When looking at these pictures (1, 2 and 4) one must bear in mind that the luminous areas are within the brain, and not only on the surface of the cerebral cortex. In picture number three, on the other hand, the activity is in the cortex. All active areas were basically the same, that is symmetrical, in both brain halves.

The pictures of the brain were taken in a PET scanner (Positron Emission Tomography), which measures the flow of blood through different parts of the brain. This is done by injecting water with a weak radioactive trace into the blood stream. Tomography is derived from the Greek word tomos, meaning section. In the PET scanner, numerous 4.25 mm thick sections of the brain are registered, giving a three dimensional picture of the brain's activity. When one part of the brain is particularly active, the flow of blood increases, and by comparing several pictures it is possible to see where the brain's activity rises under certain conditions.

Why it is interesting – a comment by psychologist Ronny Öhrnell.

The EEG measurements have previously only been one dimensional – skin resistance, blood pressure etc. – and have only shown that the state changes. That means that a perpendicular dimension has been

described, for example a deepening of the state. On the other hand, it has not been possible to measure or substantiate the content of that altered state. With this latest research, a horizontal dimension is added to the measurements of the altered state of consciousness, giving it life. What occurs on the deeper levels of consciousness can now be measured and shown.

The research shows that some sensory centers in the brain are active, but that activity is internal. From our own experience, we know that internal experiences are more changeable than those we see and hear through our senses in the reality around us. Our thoughts, our imagination and our dreams continuously take on new forms. When we allow these centers to be involved with the inner experiences, without being aware of anything from outside, where then do the impulses come from? From deeper planes? From the surroundings, after all? Or are they formed there, in the sight and touch centers? Does the language center have the same function on the deeper inner plane? Or does it have other functions? There is a new world to be discovered here. It can be done by taking measurements and by combining the measurements with the account the meditator gives of what he or she experiences along the way. The research also confirms a lot of what was previously described about relaxation and meditation by people who knew it through their own experience – and that what you experience within, is another reality to that of the external senses, which to a degree obey different laws.

THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS OF YOGA NIDRA / HYPNOSIS SIMILARITIES

Yoga Nidra has an extremely therapeutic impact on many, if not all, aspects of human existence.

There have been many studies (as aforementioned), that support the therapeutic affects of Yoga Nidra.

Rhoni and Hali have worked with clients and have used Yoga Nidra as a form of healing/support for the following:

- cancer support/recovery
- HIV support
- stress
- anxiety
- pregnancy, pre and post natal stress/support
- homeless stress/support
- student pressure/stress/support
- PTSD
- depression
- insomnia/sleep deprivation
- lethargy
- addiction recovery/support
- weight loss / food obsession
- domestic violence recovery
- intimacy and inter-personal relationship enhancement
- lack of energy
- lack of concentration
- recovery/dealing with bullying
- workplace harassment/stalking
- grief/loss of a loved one
- healing infidelity within a marriage
- writers/creativity block
- deal with fear and anger
- personality disorders

Excerpt from the article "Dynamic Sleep" by Swami Satyananda Saraswati

How do yoga nidra and hypnosis differ?

Because yoga nidra can be used to influence the mind, many people think that it is a form of hypnosis. But the truth is that these two are totally different sciences. Although they may start from the same point of relaxation and receptivity, yoga nidra proceeds in one direction and hypnosis in another.

The state of mind achieved in yoga nidra is far beyond hypnosis, but when the mind is dissociated from the sensory knowledge it does pass through a hypnotic state. However, if you can disconnect the sensory channels and still maintain awareness, you will be able to transcend the barriers of your personality and go to any depth or height. The consciousness can go as far as you can lead it. This is the aim of yoga nidra. But at the same time, you must know when you are transcending, that up to a certain point, you are passing through the territory of hypnotism.

Therefore, throughout the practice, one important instruction is always given: 'Do not sleep'. In yoga nidra you must try to keep awake. You are relaxed, but you do not sleep. You are not conscious on the sensual plane, but you are conscious that you are practicing yoga nidra. A process of automatic thinking is going on.

In yoga nidra the brain is completely awake. It receives a higher quality of stimuli and develops a different type of awareness than what we are experiencing now. Whereas in hypnosis, the subject is led into a deep sleep in which the brain is completely shut down. The consciousness is confined to a small area and the capacities are limited. This is a very tamasic condition (state of darkness, inertia, inactivity, and materiality), while yoga nidra increases the capacity and creates a sattvic condition (a balanced and harmonious state).

In yoga nidra the instructor is only a guide. They give the technique and answers to any questions, but they will never force or compel the student in any way. It is the technique which leads the mind to illumination and independence of judgment, not the instructor.

In hypnosis, however, the therapist generally dominates the mind and will of the subject. This often results in obsession, captivity, lack of initiative and self-confidence. The sex drive, intellect, logic and

determination are suppressed. The subject asks his therapist, 'Shall I go to the toilet now?' and the therapist replies, 'Yes' or 'No'.

If you ask the yoga instructor the same question, he will tell you, 'That's your business, not mine. I'm not responsible for you. You are responsible for yourself and I am responsible for myself.' Even if his student's bad habits or behavior rebound on him, he remains unaffected and makes no attempt to alter his character. This is the attitude which yoga nidra develops. When you absolutely refuse to become a part or shareholder of what is happening around you, then yoga nidra becomes a stepping stone to higher yoga.

"Because yoga nidra brings about a state of sensory withdrawal, many people think it is a form of hypnosis. But the truth is that these two are totally different sciences. . . . The state of mind achieved in yoga nidra is far beyond hypnosis, but when the mind is dissociated from the sensory knowledge it does pass through a hypnotic state."

INTENTIONS, VISUALIZATIONS AND SANKALPA

INTENTION

- intentions can change from day to day, relationship to relationship and from moment to moment
- an intention can be considered a momentary visualization, although rather than being descriptive, it is more of an idea

VISUALIZATION

- a visualization takes imagination and creativity
- not everyone is able to connect to the visualization part of the brain
- a visualization is specific and can be played in one's mind like a movie

SANKALPA

- a sankalpa is similar to an intention, but is more serious: it is more akin to a vow
- yoga tradition states that your sankalpa remain the same until it comes to fruition and absorbs into every part of your being (6 bodies)
- sankalpa is considered

REF: Defining Yoga Nidra: Traditional Accounts, Physiological Research, and Future Directions Stephen Parker, PsyD, Swami Veda Bharati, DLitt, Manuel Fernandez, PhD, St. Mary's University, University of St. Thomas, Himalayan Institute Hospital Trust University of Medical Sciences, Swami Rama Sadhaka Gram, Sadhanamandir Ashram, Center Mahamudra, Dr. Richard Miller irest.org, Dyczkowski, Jhoo, Singh, Hali and Rhoni's combined 50 years of practice, Brain researcher Troels Kjær, The Kennedy Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark @yogameditation.com