

The Practice of Yoga Nidra

Introduction

Yoga Nidra^[1] means yogic sleep. It is a state of deep conscious relaxation and is a form of pratyahara or the turning inward of awareness. It is considered to be an active or preliminary form of meditation though many of the benefits of meditation are also realized through this state of consciousness.

In the state of Yoga Nidra the body appears to be asleep but awareness is acutely present. The mind does not wander aimlessly or drift into dramas or dreams. Rather, the “witness” emerges. This is that part of the self that watches our experience from a place of detachment. Unemotional and absent of thought, awareness of the witness brings about great joy and peace.

Yoga Nidra is not a technique but rather a state of consciousness. There are several techniques that can lead a person into this state. In the method taught at the California College of Ayurveda^[2] the participant is led on a conscious journey of awareness inside their body. At first, the mind is directed to focus on singular parts of the body learning to identify blockages to the flow of prana (energy). These blockages create tension. As the practitioner succeeds in letting go of the tension, prana flows freely and higher awareness develops. One of the early realizations is that the body is not a solid structure but rather a densely packed field of energy. At this time the practitioner realizes that he or she is neither their body nor their mind. The practitioner then asks him or herself the most basic and important question: who am I? The answer is not found through the intellect but realized through the experience. We are that which lies beyond the body and the mind. We are nothing more than the embodiment of consciousness. The product of this state of awareness is pure bliss.

According to the teachings of Yoga and the other great philosophical traditions of India, we are Pure Consciousness experiencing life through a body and mind. Blockages exist in the subtle channels of our body called nadi. There are 72,000 nadi. While most of those nadi are related to the functions of the body and mind, there are specific channels related to consciousness. To one degree or another, we all experience a certain amount of blockage within these channels. This blockage causes us to forget our true nature as Spirit and the wholeness inherent in all of existence. As a result, we experience separation and suffering. The practice of Yoga Nidra is an active practice of purifying these channels bringing about a return of greater awareness. While higher awareness is certainly the most important goal of this practice, the benefits are felt not only in the channels of awareness but in all 72,000 nadi. In other words, prana flows more freely in the body and mind supporting the healing process. The practice of Yoga Nidra is one of the most beneficial practices for self-healing.

How to Achieve the State of Yoga Nidra

Yoga Nidra is most commonly achieved through guided meditation or instruction from a teacher. The teacher uses his or her voice to guide the awareness of the student and takes the student deeper within. The teacher’s voice is the first focal point. The teacher guides the student to examine individual parts of the body and to seek out areas of holding, control or tension. These are areas of disturbed pranic flow. Following the teacher’s guidance, the student then relaxes those areas allowing the prana to flow more freely. The teacher’s voice guides the student through the body. Each body part is the second focal point of the process. At the end of the process, the entire body is deeply relaxed, the student has remained awake and now is the state of consciousness called Yoga Nidra.

The Origins of Yoga Nidra

No one knows the origins of Yoga Nidra for certain. The term is quite ancient. It is mentioned in the

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Devi Bhagavat wherein Lord Vishnu reclines on Naga Shesha and creation manifests as if creation is the manifestation of his dream. The term is also mentioned in Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Taravali. However, in none of these references is there instruction or great explanation of the concepts.

One of the earliest “modern” teachers was said to be Paramyogeshwari Sri Devpuji who died in 1942. He was said by his devotees to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. One of his disciples was Bhagavan Sri Deep Narayan Mahaprabhuji who lived in Rajasthan. He lived from 1828 to 1963. Yes, that is 135 years. He was revered by his devotees as an avatar (a divine incarnation). Some of his writings about Yoga Nidra are preserved and they are quite beautiful and poetic. Bhagavanji had two main disciples to whom he is said to have passed on this knowledge. One was Swami Muktananda (1908 - 1942) and the other was Swami Sivananda (1887 - 1963).

Modern Yoga Nidra

What is practiced and called Yoga Nidra today comes from this lineage of teachings. Modern teachers have developed their knowledge into a variety of similar but different forms. One of most well known modern teachers is Swami Satyananda Saraswati who passed in 2009. He was the founder of the Bihar School of Yoga. He is often credited with reviving this knowledge. It is said that he had a vision of Swami Sivananda who blessed him as Swamiji left his body in Rishikesh. Through that vision, Swami Sivananda is said to have passed on the knowledge of Yoga Nidra to Swami Satyananda. It is widely regarded, however, that Swami Satyananda developed his own approach or his style of Yoga Nidra, which some believe was influenced by the Tantric practice of Nyasa or focusing mantras on body parts and organs. One of Swami Satyananda’s disciples is Swami Janakananda who went on to found the Scandinavian school of Yoga in 1970. Swami Janakananda and his disciples have strongly promoted Yoga Nidra and sponsored a considerable amount of research on the subject, some of which has been published, demonstrating the different brain wave patterns while in the Yoga Nidra state of consciousness.

Another proponent of Yoga Nidra was Swami Rama, the founder of the Himalayan Institute who passed in 1996. While I do not know from whom he learned Yoga Nidra, he did develop a unique approach to taking students into that state of consciousness. Most recently in 2006, Richard Miller, the founder of the International Association of Yoga Therapy developed his own style of Yoga Nidra and brought it into VA hospitals in order to help heal soldiers with PTSD. He discusses his studies in a recently published book. He calls his technique iRest.

My Own Journey into Yoga Nidra

In 1987 I was very ill with an autoimmune disorder that left me crippled. During my healing process, I went to see a healer who had been trained in the Philippines. He laid his hands on me and, as a result, my body temperature rose from 99 degrees to 105 degrees over the next two days. It then stayed between 103.5 and 105.5 for the next two weeks. During that time, I came into awareness of the witness within me, that part of myself untouched by the disease. I also developed an extraordinary ability to perceive the subtle flow of energy in my body. For two weeks, I laid in bed spending time conscious, witnessing and examining my subtle body, aware that I was not this body. In that state, I became conscious of blockages in the flow of energy (prana) and how to release them through conscious intention. As I mastered that ability, I began to heal. As my fever came down, I lost the acute ability but remembered clearly that state of awareness and strived to recreate it in order to continue my healing process. I had limited results until I found a recording of guided meditation by a teacher named Mary Richards who passed away in 2009. I let her voice guide me and I returned back to the state of conscious deep relaxation and once again began to perceive the flow of subtle energy and remove remaining blockages. I practiced this technique 2-3X per day for the next 10 years as I combated severe Chronic Fatigue following the autoimmune illness. With no trace left of the condition by 1997, my practice was reduced to once per day and then in recent years to a few times per week preferring instead to focus on mantra meditation.

I began to teach programs to my patients and the public in Conscious Deep Relaxation in 1993 and taught regularly until 1997 until my work with the California College of Ayurveda consumed much of my time. I only learned of the name Yoga Nidra in 2005 and came to realize that I had been practicing this technique for 18 years through the Grace of the Divine. I had stumbled upon this state

of consciousness and did not know that such a long tradition existed.

In 1999 or perhaps 2000, I visited the Sivananda Yoga Retreat in the Bahamas. As part of my service, I taught the senior teachers the process of conscious deep relaxation for the purposes of their own healing. In 2009, I was asked by the head spiritual teacher at the ashram, Swami Swaroopananda, to begin teaching workshops again after a 13-year hiatus and this time to train additional teachers. Naturally, I was honored and this seemed like an appropriate next step for the work that had begun within me 23 years earlier. As such, I conducted the first teacher training program in 2010.

Conclusion

Yoga Nidra is an extraordinary technique for both developing consciousness and for self-healing. In our deepest states of relaxation, the physiology of the body returns to a state of balance from which healing occurs. Yoga Nidra is not magic. It works within the laws of nature. Where healing is possible, Yoga Nidra will maximize the ability of the body and mind to heal itself. Yoga Nidra supports the immune system, the nervous system, the endocrine system and all of the organs of the body. Yoga Nidra is an outstanding complementary approach to supporting the healing process of patients suffering from cancer, heart disease, autoimmune disorders, chronic fatigue, pain and much more.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.ayurvedacollege.com/glossary/term/9>

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