

## Yoga Nidra: a yogic technique against stress

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### ABSTRACT

Yoga nidra is the ancient practice that provides a deep relaxation similar to sleep but in an awoken state. One's health and quality of life is influenced by the stressful thought patterns. Yoga nidra is a yogic relaxation technique which is a type of pratyahara that helps in eliciting the relaxation response. Yoga nidra is a specific technique that moves a person out of fight – flight state and triggers the relaxation response, i.e. the parasympathetic system. While in yoga nidra, an individual dives into delta brain waves. This is the most restorative and restful state in which the organs regenerate and the body metabolises corticoids which are the stress hormones. Yoga nidra increases the endogenous release of dopamine in the body by 65%. It is a critical antidote to depression and amplifier of motivation. Thus, yoga nidra has a preventive, promotive and curative value against stress and stress related disorders.

**Keywords:** *Yoga Nidra, Deep Relaxation, Relaxation Response, Stress, Stress Related Disorders*

Yoga nidra is the ancient, least known and the most under-appreciated practices of yoga. It is the art and practice of not doing anything to arrive exactly where one wants to be. It provides a deep relaxation similar to sleep but in an awoken state. It takes an individual to the realms beyond the mind. One's health and quality of life is influenced by the stressful thought patterns. Yoga nidra helps in redirecting the thought patterns of worry, anxiety and fear. It is an effective way of relieving stress.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is stress?**

Stress is defined as the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation.<sup>2</sup> According to Selye (1956), stress represent the effects of anything that seriously threatens homeostasis.<sup>3</sup> Stressor is the actual or perceived threat to an organism. Stressors have a major impact on mood, sense of well-being, behaviour and health. Stressor could be related to work, relationship or financial problems. Any response to the stressor is called stress response which is adaptive in process. But severe, prolonged stress response leads to tissue damage and disease.<sup>4</sup>

### **Body's response to stress**

In most people with stress, mind always remains in a state of arousal and tension. Stress causes physical changes like increase heart rate and breathing in the body. Stress response

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prepares body for fight or flight mechanism. Thinking skills improves as stress increases. So in short bursts, stress can be a good thing and after the stressful event the body returns to the normal state.<sup>5</sup> But if the stress response prolonged, body is not able to return to its normal state. Attention, memory and emotions are negatively impacted. Chronic stress has an effect on physical and mental health. The hypothalamus pituitary adrenal system is activated.<sup>6</sup> The adrenal gland secretes glucocorticoids in response to stress which leads to activation of sympathetic system and inhibition of parasympathetic system. Corticoids inhibits digestion, reproduction, growth and tissue repair. Immune system is suppressed.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Relaxation response*

The same mechanism that started the stress response can also stop it which is known as the Relaxation response. The regulatory mechanism in the hypothalamus is set at new normal state that results in decrease sympathetic activity and increase parasympathetic activity.<sup>8</sup> It is a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional response to stress. As soon as one perceives that the situation is no longer a threat, brain ceases to send the panic messages to the nervous system. The flight or fight response burns out and metabolism, heart rate, breathing and blood pressure returns to their normal levels. Relaxation response can be activated by either repetition of words or prayer or passive disregard of everyday thoughts that inevitably comes to mind. Research suggest that one can use mind to change the physiology and improve the health by using the natural restorative process i.e. the relaxation response.<sup>9</sup> Yoga nidra is a yogic relaxation technique which is a type of pratyahara that helps in eliciting the relaxation response leading to the relaxation of the body and the mind.<sup>10</sup> It is a guided meditation and relaxation practice.<sup>11</sup>

### *Yoga nidra: a type of pratyahara*

The classical yoga system consists of eight limbs, of which pratyahara is the fifth limb which helps in gaining mastery over the unruly senses. Pratyahara is a Sanskrit work composed of “*prati*” meaning against and “*ahara*” meaning food or anything we take into ourselves from outside. It literally means gaining mastery over external influences and the withdrawal from the senses. Ahara are of three types in yogic sciences. First is the physical food to nourish the body, second is the impressions which bring in the subtle substances necessary to nourish the mind and third is the associations with the people that one holds at the heart level necessary to nourish the soul. Pratyahara involves withdrawal from wrong food, impressions and associations and at the same time opening up to right food, impressions and associations. Pratyahara’s controls the sensory impressions which helps in freeing the mind and moving within i.e. internalization.<sup>12</sup>

### *Yoga nidra*

According to Swami Satyananda (1998), yoga nidra is a complete pratyahara practice in which the awareness is internalized. Each step of yoga nidra works as to systematically withdraw an individual’s senses inwards from all external stimuli so that it is completely withdrawn to a point where it is only operating through the auditory sensory channel.<sup>13</sup> Literally, *yoga nidra* means 'psychic sleep' i.e. sleep with full awareness. In the practice of yoga nidra the body sleeps but the mind remains awake listening to the instructions. It is an altered state of consciousness.<sup>8</sup> In psychology, the state achieved in yoga nidra is termed the hypnogogic state, a state between sleep and wakefulness.<sup>10</sup>

### *Stages of yoga nidra*

Yoga nidra comprises of eight stages. The first stage is the internalization stage which constitutes disengagement of mind from the immediate impact of the senses so that the

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interaction with the world seizes temporarily and the mind begins to internalize. In this stage, attention is taken consciously to the surroundings by listening to the external sounds and the mind is saturated with the senses of touch, smell, sight, taste and sounds.<sup>14</sup> Second stage is that of Sankalpa. Here a positive resolve is taken and repeated that calms the mind and deepens the pratyahara by concentrating individual's awareness with positive statements of change. In the Third stage which is the rotation of consciousness stage, pratyahara is again deepened by reengaging an individual's concentration to follow the flow of prana to the physical dimensions of the body. The awareness is rotated around the different body parts in a systematic and organized manner. Fourth stage is Breath awareness stage where, awareness is shifted to totally focus on the breath of an individual. It guides the mind inwards as conscious awareness of breath is a process of a more evolved brain.<sup>10</sup> Fifth stage is sensation of opposites. Here, the awareness is directed to experience opposite feelings and emotions. This help in achieving equilibrium of mind as emotions and feelings are cleansed of their emotional charge. Sixth stage is of visualization. In this stage, the mind is deeply internalized and is in a calm state where it is very receptive to change and transformation.<sup>1415</sup> The visualization techniques introduced in this stage further deepen pratyahara, purify the subconsciousness mind, and train the brain to envisage positive outcomes for the future. The awareness is taken to the dark space in front of the closed eyes, referred to as *chidakasha* in yogic terminology. The practitioner is then instructed to visualize some objects, stories or situations in the *chidakasha*. Seventh stage again is of sankalpa where the original sankalpa taken in stage two is repeated again which helps in training the brain to focus on transformation. Last stage is of externalization. It involves externalization of the practitioner's awareness from the deep pratyahara state and re-engages the senses.<sup>1015</sup>

### *Yoga nidra and the sleep cycle*

Yoga nidra is a specific technique that moves a person out of fight – flight state and triggers the relaxation response, i.e. the parasympathetic system. According to Parker, yoga nidra represents a state in which an individual demonstrates all the symptoms of deep, non-REM sleep including Delta brainwaves, while simultaneously remaining fully conscious. In this process, the brain shifts from beta brain waves to alpha brain waves.<sup>15</sup> Beta brain waves dominates when a person is in an awakened state with lot of brain activities. When a person meditates with eyes closed and visual channel disconnected alpha waves dominates. In alpha waves person is deeply relaxed but still awake and mood enhancing hormone serotonin gets released. It brings a feeling of calmness. From here, there is a transition into a deep alpha and theta brain wave state. This is also referred to as the dream state or REM state. Thoughts slow down and one experiences enhanced learning process. This state constitutes the release of emotional charge. It is associated with hearing sounds or seeing images just like we do when we are dreaming. After theta, one dive into more blissful delta brain wave state. This is the most restorative and restful state in which the organs regenerate and the body metabolises corticoids which are the stress hormones.<sup>16</sup> In a study conducted by Lou and colleagues, an Electroencephalograph measuring brain activity displayed significant increase in theta brainwaves typical of sleep state while at the same time alpha waves decrease.<sup>17</sup> Hence it is different from typical sleep where alpha brainwave activity also increases. This indicates yoga nidra as a sleep like state and not sleep. In addition, PET scan shows that yoga nidra is constant and evenly distributed over the entire brain for the full length of yoga nidra session.<sup>18</sup>

### *Yoga nidra and Dopamine*

Yoga nidra increases the endogenous release of dopamine in the body by 65%.<sup>19</sup> Dopamine is a key component in one's ability to experience pleasure, feel rewarded and maintain

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focus. It is a critical antidote to depression and amplifier of motivation as well as positive outlook towards the world. It helps in taking focused, directed and wilful action. It keeps an individual productive. It has been observed that those practising yoga nidra experiences a dramatic boost in the release of dopamine that heightens one's ability to manage the impulse to act on unhelpful habits and addiction. It has been proven that adequate levels of dopamine reduces impulsivity and increases the ability to withstand cravings without acting on them.<sup>1</sup> In a study done by Kjaer et al, they observed that yoga nidra causes a suppression of cortico-glutamatergic transmission which leads to increased striatal dopamine release.<sup>20</sup>

### *Yoga nidra: Therapeutic value*

Yoga nidra works at both physiological and psychological level. At physiological level, it sets the body to its natural parasympathetic balance, where action is restored to synergistic harmony.<sup>1</sup> It induces deep physical, emotional and mental relaxation thereby rooting out the precursors of the stress and its related disorders.<sup>21</sup>

Psychologically, it helps in easing the mental tension. In individuals with stress, mind is always in a state of arousal due to excessive activity on the mental plane. Yoga nidra helps in identifying thoughts as merely thoughts and allows them to move into the space of awareness, thereby freeing the emotions of their emotional charge. It helps in building the coping ability of an individual. Thus, yoga nidra has a therapeutic application in stress related disorders like anxiety, depression, insomnia, etc as well as psychosomatic disorders like asthma, hypertension, cancer, etc.<sup>10</sup>

In a study conducted by Kumar et al in Haridwar, they observed that yoga nidra significantly reduced the stress and anxiety levels.<sup>22</sup> In another study, Camilla et al reported that yoga nidra as a therapeutic measure is significantly effective against cognitive and physiological symptoms of anxiety.<sup>23</sup> Rani et al in their study in Lucknow, UP found that patients with mild to moderate anxiety and depressive symptoms improve significantly with yoga nidra intervention.<sup>24</sup> Yoga nidra helps in providing rest to the mind and those practicing it experiences as a successful treatment of insomnia. In a study conducted by Datta et al, they found that yoga nidra improves sleep quality, insomnia, depression and anxiety levels. They concluded that yoga nidra can be used as an important adjunct in management of chronic insomnia patients.<sup>25</sup> Shealy (1980) did study on patients with different degree of sleep onset insomnia and concluded it to be a successful treatment for insomnia.<sup>26</sup>

Yoga nidra releases the suppressed and repressed conflicts from the unconscious, thereby relaxing the mind. psychosomatic diseases which arises due to the tensions, conflicts and frustration of the mind later manifest in the form of physical symptoms. When the potent cause (tense mind) of psychosomatic disorders is managed, the disease can be cured.<sup>10</sup>

Brig et al (1974) and Patel et al (1973) in their study on hypertensives found that those practising yoga nidra had a significant reduction in blood pressure.<sup>27</sup> Fuela et al in chattisgarh observed yoga nidra to be an effective measure to reduce level of blood pressure.<sup>11</sup> Gupta et al in their study on asthmatics found that those practising intensive yoga nidra showed improvement in respiratory function and greater freedom of breathing.<sup>28</sup> In another study by Hock et al, asthmatics who practice yoga nidra had reduction in frequency and severity of attacks and reduction in dependency on drugs.<sup>26</sup> Work done by Dr. Simonton in USA suggested that yoga nidra increases the life span of cancer patients undergoing radiotherapy. Dr. Simonton taught patients the visualization practice, where patients imagine their own white blood cells attacking the cancer cells and destroying them.

This enhanced the immune response leading to partial and even complete remission of signs and symptoms of disease.<sup>1026</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Hence, yoga nidra is a unique meditation practice which can still the fluctuations of the mind while riding on the natural process of sleep. It provides rest and restoration of the body organs damage by the stress. It has a role in initiating the relaxation response which helps in relieving the stress and achieving body's equilibrium. It gives the body a chance to heal and recuperate itself back to vitality and health. It dives an individual into a deep sleep while being awake. It has a preventive, promotive and curative value against stress and stress related disorders.

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