

Exploring the Relationship between Sleep, Dream, and Yoga Nidra: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Sleep and dream are essential aspects of human life, influencing cognitive functions, emotional well-being, and overall health. Yoga Nidra, an ancient practice originated from the Indian tradition, offers a unique approach to conscious relaxation and introspection. This paper aims to elucidate the intricate relationship between sleep, dream, and Yoga Nidra. It explores the neurophysiological mechanisms underlying sleep and dreaming states, delves into the psychology of dreams, and investigates the principles and practices of Yoga Nidra. Additionally, it reviews existing research on the effects of Yoga Nidra on sleep quality, dream experiences, and psychological well-being. The synthesis of scientific findings and traditional wisdom provides valuable insights into the holistic approach to sleep health and personal transformation.

Keywords: Sleep, Dream, Yoga Nidra, Consciousness, Relaxation, Well-Being

Sleep that soothes away all our worries. Sleep that puts each day to rest. Sleep that relieves the weary laborer and heals hurt minds.

~ Shakespeare

“विच्चिन्न संकल्पविकल्पमूले निःशेषनिर्मूलिता कर्मजाले
निरन्तरा अभ्यासनीतान्ता भद्रास जृम्भते योगिनी योगनिद्रा”

“*vicchinna saṅkalpavikalpamūle niḥśeṣanirmūlita karmajāle/
nirantarābhyāsānitānta bhrāsā jṛmbhate yoginī yoganidrā*”

~ Adi Shankaracharya

Sleep and dreaming have captivated human curiosity since ancient times. While sleep is a universal physiological phenomenon necessary for survival, dreaming adds layers of mystery and intrigue to our understanding of consciousness. In parallel, Yoga Nidra, a meditative practice, offers a profound exploration of the subconscious mind and inner experiences. This paper seeks to explore the interconnectedness of sleep, dream, and Yoga Nidra, shedding light on their psychological, physiological, and spiritual dimensions.

Sage Patanjali in his Yoga Sutra mentioned that
अभावप्रत्ययालम्बना तमोवृत्तिर्निद्रा ॥१०॥

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abhāva-pratyaya-ālambanā tamaḥ vṛttiḥ nidrā ||10||²

Deep sleep is the fluctuation of obscuring, supporting a non-appearance of psychic activity. The primary functions of sleep is to facilitate memory consolidation and learning. During sleep, the brain processes and stores information acquired throughout the day, strengthening neural connections and enhancing memory recall. Adequate sleep is therefore vital for optimal cognitive performance, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making skills.

Moreover, sleep plays a crucial role in regulating mood and emotional well-being. Sleep deprivation has been linked to increased irritability, mood swings, and susceptibility to stress. Chronic sleep disturbances can contribute to the development of mood disorders such as depression, anxiety and can lead to insomnia.

In addition to its cognitive and emotional benefits, sleep is essential for maintaining physical health. During sleep, the body undergoes essential repair and regeneration processes. Hormones responsible for growth and tissue repair are released during sleep, promoting muscle recovery, immune system function, and overall physical health.

Dreaming, a phenomenon that occurs during the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep, is another integral aspect of human life. Dreams provide a window into the subconscious mind, offering insights into thoughts, emotions, and desires that may not be readily accessible during waking life. Dreaming is believed to play a role in processing emotions, consolidating memories, and problem-solving.

Yoga Nidra, an ancient practice rooted in the Indian tradition, offers a profound pathway to conscious relaxation and introspection. Derived from the Sanskrit word's "yoga" meaning union or integration, and "Nidra" translating to sleep, Yoga Nidra is often referred to as "yogic sleep" or "dynamic sleep." Despite its name, Yoga Nidra is not about falling asleep but rather about entering a state of deep relaxation while maintaining full awareness and consciousness.

Dating back thousands of years, Yoga Nidra has been described in ancient yogic texts such as the Upanishads and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Traditionally practiced by yogis and sages as a means of deepening meditation and exploring the depths of consciousness, Yoga Nidra has gained popularity in modern times as a powerful technique for stress reduction, relaxation, and personal transformation.

In Bhagavat Gita it is said that

या निशा सर्वभूतानां तस्यां जागर्ति संयमी |

यस्यां जाग्रति भूतानि सा निशा पश्यतो मुनेः || 69||

yā niśhā sarva-bhūtānām tasyām jāgarti sanyamī

yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśhā paśhyato muneḥ ||³

At its core, Yoga Nidra involves a guided relaxation process that systematically relaxes the body and mind, leading practitioners into a state of profound calmness and inner awareness. During a typical Yoga Nidra session, practitioners lie down in a comfortable position and are guided through a series of instructions aimed at inducing physical, mental, and emotional relaxation.

Sleep and Dream: A Neurophysiological Perspective⁴

Sleep is a complex process characterized by distinct stages that cycle throughout the night. These stages are broadly categorized into non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, each associated with specific patterns of brain activity and physiological changes.

Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) Sleep:

NREM sleep consists of three stages: N1, N2, and N3. During NREM sleep, brain activity gradually slows down, and the body begins to relax and prepare for deeper sleep.

- Stage N1: This is the transition stage between wakefulness and sleep. Brain waves slow down, and muscle activity decreases. During this stage, people may experience sudden muscle contractions known as hypnic jerks. Eye movements are slow, and individuals can easily be awakened.
- Stage N2: N2 is considered a light sleep stage. Brain wave patterns include bursts of rapid brain activity known as sleep spindles and high-amplitude waves called K-complexes. These patterns are believed to play a role in memory consolidation and protecting sleep from external disturbances. Body temperature and heart rate decrease during this stage, and eye movements cease.
- Stage N3: Also known as deep or slow-wave sleep, stage N3 is characterized by slow brain waves known as delta waves. This is the deepest stage of sleep, and it is the most restorative. During N3, the body repairs tissues, strengthens the immune system, and releases growth hormones. It is difficult to awaken someone from this stage, and if awakened, they may feel disoriented or groggy.

Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep:

REM sleep is characterized by rapid eye movements, increased brain activity, and vivid dreams. This stage typically occurs after NREM sleep stages and is associated with various physiological changes.

- Brain Activity: During REM sleep, brain activity increases to levels similar to wakefulness. However, the body remains largely paralyzed, except for minor muscle twitches. This paralysis prevents individuals from acting out their dreams and ensures restful sleep.
- Eye Movements: As the name suggests, rapid eye movements occur during REM sleep. These movements are believed to be associated with visual dream imagery and may correspond to the content of dreams.
- Dreaming: REM sleep is commonly associated with vivid, story-like dreams. Dreams during REM sleep are often more emotionally intense and bizarre compared to those during NREM sleep stages. REM sleep is essential for emotional processing, memory consolidation, and cognitive function.
- Physiological Changes: During REM sleep, heart rate and breathing become irregular, and blood pressure increases. This stage is also associated with increased brain activity in areas responsible for emotion regulation and memory consolidation.

The alternating cycles of NREM and REM sleep play a crucial role in overall sleep architecture and contribute to various aspects of physical and mental health. Disruptions in these sleep stages can lead to sleep disorders, cognitive impairment, and other health problems. Therefore, understanding the different stages of sleep and their associated brain activities is essential for promoting healthy sleep habits and improving overall well-being.

States of consciousness and brain waves

States of consciousness refer to the different levels or modes of awareness that an individual experiences throughout the day and during various activities. These states can range from wakefulness to different stages of sleep, meditation, altered states induced by substances, and even deep states of concentration or flow experienced during tasks. The brain plays a central role in regulating and producing these different states of consciousness, and brain waves are instrumental in understanding and measuring these states.

Brain waves, also known as neural oscillations, are rhythmic electrical patterns of activity generated by the synchronized firing of neurons in the brain. These electrical impulses can be detected and measured using electroencephalography (EEG), a technique that records the electrical activity of the brain through electrodes placed on the scalp.

Different states of consciousness are associated with distinct patterns of brain waves, which can be classified into several frequency bands:

Beta Waves (13-30 Hz): Beta waves are associated with wakefulness, alertness, and focused mental activity. They are often present during tasks requiring attention, concentration, and active problem-solving. Beta waves are characterized by their fast frequency and low amplitude.

Alpha Waves (8-12 Hz): Alpha waves are prominent during states of relaxation, calmness, and meditation. They are typically observed when individuals close their eyes and enter a state of restful wakefulness. Alpha waves are associated with a relaxed and unfocused mental state, often accompanied by a sense of tranquillity and inner peace.

Theta Waves (4-7 Hz): Theta waves are commonly observed during light sleep (stage N1 and N2), as well as during deep meditation and creative activities. They are associated with deep relaxation, heightened intuition, and enhanced creativity. Theta waves are also present during REM sleep and may be involved in dream formation and emotional processing.

Delta Waves (0.5-4 Hz): Delta waves are the slowest and highest amplitude brain waves, typically observed during deep sleep (stage N3 or slow-wave sleep). They are associated with restorative sleep, physical healing, and regeneration. Delta waves are crucial for the body's repair processes, growth hormone release, and overall recovery.

Gamma Waves (30-100 Hz): Gamma waves are the fastest brain waves and are associated with higher cognitive functions, such as perception, memory, and consciousness. They are often observed during moments of intense focus, problem-solving, and insight. Gamma waves are also implicated in states of heightened awareness and spiritual experiences.

Stage	State of Consciousness	Psychological dimension	Brainwave pattern	Realm of experience
1	Wakefulness	Consciousness mind	Beta Waves (13-30 Hz)	Alertness, focused mental activity
2	Yoga Nidra/relaxation	Hypnagogic borderline between awake and asleep	Alpha Waves (8-12 Hz)	Restful wakefulness
3	Deep relaxation/dreaming state	Subconscious mind	Theta Waves (4-7 Hz)	Heightened intuition, suppressed desires, fears, impressions(samskaras) are expressed

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Stage	State of Consciousness	Psychological dimension	Brainwave pattern	Realm of experience
4	Deep sleep	Unconsciousness mind	Delta Waves (0.5-4 Hz)	Restorative sleep, Samskaras and vasanas are inactivated
5	Heightened awareness	Super consciousness mind	Gamma Waves (30-100 Hz)	Spiritual experience

The hypnagogic state

The hypnagogic state, also known as the "borderland state," refers to the transitional period between wakefulness and sleep. It occurs as individuals begin to fall asleep but are still partially conscious of their surroundings. This transient state rarely lasts for more than 3 to 5 minutes and is characterized by alpha waves. It is accompanied by deep and progressive relaxation and release of muscular and postural tensions throughout the physical body.

During the practice of Yoga Nidra, periodic bursts of alpha waves are interspersed between alternating periods of beta and theta predominance. This means that the consciousness is poised on the borderline between wakefulness and sleep for an extended period, fluctuating cyclically between extroversion and introversion. Extroversion leads into wakeful, sensory awareness, and introversion into dreaming sleep. By remaining aware and alert in the alpha predominant state between these two, a profound experience of total relaxation is gained, which is not only far more beneficial than conventional sleep, but is also the doorway to higher states of consciousness.

The descent into sleep⁵

During the journey from being fully awake to deep sleep, most people's brainwaves slow down from beta to theta, and then finally to delta. This shift corresponds to moving from wakefulness to dreaming, and eventually to being completely asleep. However, in Yoga Nidra, this process is different. Instead of beta waves, alpha waves take over, and this alpha state lasts much longer. Alpha waves indicate relaxation, suggesting that Yoga Nidra promotes a deeper state of relaxation during sleep than usual.

Many people go straight from being awake (beta state) to deep sleep (delta state) without experiencing a relaxed alpha state in between. This lack of relaxation may lead to unresolved tension in the body, mind, and emotions, leaving people feeling tired upon waking up. Deep relaxation during sleep only happens when alpha waves are strong.

The main difference between regular sleep and Yoga Nidra is that Yoga Nidra creates a prolonged state of relaxation with alpha waves before transitioning to deep sleep with delta waves. This intermediate state of relaxation between wakefulness and deep sleep is why Yoga Nidra is so rejuvenating for both the body and mind.

Yoga Nidra is considered a distinct state of consciousness from regular sleep. While "Nidra" simply means sleep, Yoga Nidra refers to a state of sleep after letting go of burdens. It is an experience of absolute relaxation.

Glimpsing the total mind

The majority of individuals slip into a state of unawareness shortly after drifting into sleep. Nonetheless, there exists the possibility of elongating this crucial transition period into the realms of sleep, thereby maintaining a thread of consciousness.

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The ultimate aim of Yoga Nidra is the attainment of complete harmony and synchronization among all layers of consciousness. Mastery of Yoga Nidra leads one beyond the initial three states of awareness, propelling them into a fourth, unified state surpassing individual consciousness—a fusion with universal consciousness. While religious parlance may label this as liberation or God-realization, within the realms of yoga and tantra, it is understood as the experience of the total mind in operation.

Cerebral awakening

Researchers now propose that if the underlying witness consciousness can be maintained during the experiences of sleep and dreaming, a fundamental evolutionary change in the central nervous system and its operation occurs. This change is accompanied by the experience of an altogether distinct fourth state of consciousness in which subtle dream states of perception, including the astral, psychic and causal dimensions, are experienced simultaneously with the normal wakeful state of sensory perception. This fourth superconscious state, which includes simultaneous awareness of the waking, dream and deep sleep states but is not affected by any of them, has been described clearly in yogic texts for thousands of years, and is known as turiya. However, it has remained unknown and unfathomed to researchers until recently, when it was clearly demonstrated in the laboratory. From a neurophysiological point of view, this fourth state of heightened consciousness is mirrored in the electrophysiological operation of the brain as the enhanced operation of the higher cortex – known as the witnessing or ‘conscious brain’ – together with heightened control and reduced arousability of the limbic centres of the ‘emotional brain’. This manifests in the evolution of a human personality possessing heightened levels of internal and external awareness, with simultaneously decreased emotional reactivity. Yoga Nidra thus initiates an ongoing process of increasing self-awareness, which is accompanied by a resetting of the inbuilt controlling and regulatory mechanisms of consciousness in the brain and is reflected in greater autonomic stability, enhanced emotional control and an increasingly conscious destiny.

Experiments with Swami Rama⁶

In 1977, at the Menninger Foundation in Kansas, USA, researchers, led by Dr Elmer Green, observed evidence supporting the existence of a fourth state of consciousness during a study with Indian yogi Swami Rama. Using an electroencephalograph, they monitored Swami Rama's brainwave activity as he practiced Yoga Nidra, a state between sensory and sleep consciousness.

Swami Rama demonstrated the ability to transition between different states of consciousness voluntarily, which was reflected in significant changes in his brain's electrical activity. Initially, he entered the Yoga Nidra state, generating 70% alpha wave discharge by visualizing an empty blue sky with drifting white clouds. He then entered a dreaming sleep phase, marked by slower theta waves, where he experienced subconscious desires, memories, and images.

Remarkably, Swami Rama entered deep sleep while maintaining full awareness, as confirmed by the emergence of delta waves. He recalled events and conversations from the experimental period, even during deep sleep. This mastery over consciousness, exhibited in a laboratory setting, suggests the attainment of the superconscious state (turiya) through Yoga Nidra.

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In this superconscious state, the conventional boundaries between waking, dreaming, and deep sleep dissolve, leading to a unified and enlightened consciousness. Individuals in this state experience a continuous state of being, where waking and dreaming are indistinguishable, representing the pinnacle of yogic attainment.

*Super consciousness*⁷

In the past, the concept of super consciousness was often seen through mystical and religious lenses. However, it is now acknowledged and defined as a physiological reality. Modern psychologists like Carl Jung have attempted to describe it as a merging into the collective unconscious. Furthermore, research in parapsychology, psi phenomena, and psychotronics offers experimental support for the existence of 'the universal mind,' an underlying matrix of consciousness.

The journey towards experiencing the superconscious or universal mind involves the gradual dissolution of barriers between the three distinct forms of awareness. Practices like Yoga Nidra and meditation facilitate this process. As these barriers fade, the individual's previously obscure unconscious mind is illuminated, revealing the vast expanse of the superconscious dimension. This process of illuminating the total mind embodies the true essence of liberation, self-realization, kaivalya, moksha, or samadhi.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comprehensive review has highlighted the intricate relationship between sleep, dream, and Yoga Nidra, shedding light on their psychological, physiological, and spiritual dimensions. Sleep and dreaming are fundamental aspects of human existence, crucial for cognitive functions, emotional well-being, and overall health. The neurophysiological mechanisms underlying sleep stages, particularly NREM and REM sleep, play vital roles in memory consolidation, emotional processing, and physical restoration.

Yoga Nidra, originating from ancient Indian tradition, offers a unique approach to conscious relaxation and introspection. Through guided practices, practitioners can enter a state of deep relaxation while maintaining full awareness and consciousness. This practice has been associated with enhanced sleep quality, dream experiences, and psychological well-being. The synthesis of scientific inquiry and ancient wisdom provides a multifaceted understanding of sleep, dream, and Yoga Nidra. While modern research illuminates the neurophysiological mechanisms and therapeutic applications, Yoga Nidra offers a holistic pathway to explore the depths of consciousness and promote well-being. Future studies should continue to investigate the synergistic effects of Yoga Nidra on sleep health and psychological resilience, fostering integration between Eastern contemplative practices and Western scientific inquiry.

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Conflict of Interest

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