

# Yoga Nidra - Sleep Relaxation

For many centuries, yogis have used the technique of yogic sleep-relaxation as a highly effective method of recharging mind and body. You may feel that you are asleep, but in fact, the practice of Yoga Nidra simply takes you to a different level of consciousness. This consciousness allows the inner intelligence of prana to move freely throughout your system, relaxing, rejuvenating and healing you on all levels – mental, emotional, and physical. The benefits of yogic sleep-relaxation are many. The human body is designed to restore itself. We are bio-engineered to heal. Given the right circumstances and the right conditions, the body will repair itself. It is our nature to be healthy.

Because we are reactionary beings, we hold onto a lot of tension. This tension affects circulation, reducing system efficiency and the body's natural ability to heal. When the body is at rest and the breath is calm, the nerves are soothed, releasing stress from the body. Relaxation allows us to let go, to release that hold we have on reality both mentally and physically. Any relaxation technique (contraction and release, mantra, breath following) is beneficial. Being relaxed brings a sense of wellbeing, equanimity and peace.

After a hatha Yoga session, the body is in the best state to receive the beneficial qualities that relaxation brings. During hatha Yoga exercises, the bodily systems are stimulated, irrigated and detoxified making possible a more efficient, health-restoring human system. The postures also affect the musculature system; contracting and lengthening the muscle fibers flushes the tissue with fresh oxygenated blood (the lymph system), removing toxins and waste. Thus, by practicing yogic sleep-relaxation on a daily basis, you will gradually decrease the level of tension in all of your activities. Yogic sleep-relaxation may be done at any time. Remain in this state for a suggested minimum of 10 minutes daily. As there is no set maximum time of practice, you may remain in yogic "sleep" for as long as your schedule permits.

Like swimming, the true experience of deep relaxation can only be understood by jumping in and trying it. Follow the instructions below. Try to practice the technique regularly, at least once a day. Soon you'll become old friends with a state that is rightfully yours: the peace and tranquility of a tension-free body and mind. Such an experience will continue to be reflected in what you think, say and do. The experience will also help your ongoing awareness of your physical and mental states. You will come to recognize your potential for calm awareness, resiliency and adjustability to unexpected events or demands made upon you. At first, you may find it easier to have a close friend quietly read you these instructions, until you have practiced and memorized them. You may also wish to try a CD or downloaded version to guide you.

## **Prepare your room, your family, yourself.**

If possible, darken the room, see that the temperature will be comfortable for you (fairly warm, because the body will feel cool due to slower metabolism as in sleep), put on extra clothing or cover yourself with a blanket. Let your family members or co-workers know that you'd like ten or twenty minutes by yourself. Close the door (perhaps lock it or put up a sign, so you will really feel secure from interruption) and begin to feel that this time is just for you.

The actual position for relaxation is called Savasana (the corpse poses); the practice is called Yoga Nidra (Yogic Relaxation). The position is simple; you lie on your back, legs straight with a space between your feet that's comfortable, between 5 and 20 inches, with the legs completely relaxed. Place your arms alongside your body, not too close and not far away, between 5 and 20 inches with the palms facing up comfortably. The exact spacing is unique to the build of your body and physiology; the right position should be very comfortable. The reason this horizontal position is so beneficial is because the body is completely at rest. No part of your body is above or below your heart, so your heart actually slows down. The energy or prana can move freely. Your joints are resting and supported. If this position isn't comfortable at first, try placing a rolled up towel or a pillow under your knees.

## Let's get started.

Lie down on your back, get comfortable and close your eyes. Let your body be still and relaxed. The first thing that usually happens when you close your eyes is that they begin to dart around under your eyelids in an attempt to feed your mind with input about your surroundings. That's in part due to the mind's wish to be all knowing, let it happen until you are comfortable; soon this will pass. Then the thoughts in your mind start to become obvious and distracting to you. Some people find it difficult to relax their mind and body, and for others it seems easy. For this reason it may be helpful to focus your mind on one of the following techniques to draw your attention away from your thoughts themselves and yet keep your mind occupied. Here are several techniques for you to try. I suggest trying them one at a time on different days to see which one you like best.

- **Breath Awareness:** This method uses your breath as a focal point. Become aware of your breath, and invite your mind to follow it. Notice the sensations that you feel as your breath flows in and out. Over time your breathing will begin to slow down and you will gradually become more relaxed (the rate of your breath is directly related to your nervous system, which is responsible for the levels of physical and mental activity). Continue to focus on your breath until you completely lose awareness of it by having sunk deeply into relaxation. At some point you will have left the realm of focused thought, you will even forget about your breath. At this point you enter a state of consciousness that is blissful, with unconnected thoughts, dream like. At first, you may be startled when you notice that you're relaxed. This is normal if you're new to relaxation. The more you practice the easier it gets, and soon you will be old friends. To come out of relaxation, gradually bring your awareness back to the present moment and your body. Take a few deep breaths, and start to move your fingers and toes, then hands and feet, and gradually the rest of your body, bringing it back to the waking state and eventually up to a seated position for a few minutes of reflection or meditation.
- **Mantra:** This technique is especially helpful if your mental activity is high or if following your breath just isn't working. You just say to yourself the word *one* on every exhalation. No counting, nothing to remember, just saying to yourself the word *one*. Eventually, like the previously mentioned breath-following technique, you will lose track of your focus and sink into relaxation. If at some point you get lost, or suddenly become startled, start all over again *one, one, one*. To come out of relaxation, use the same method as in the Breath Awareness technique.

- **Contraction and Release:** In this technique you consciously contract your muscles and release them. At first you may have to contract and release whole sections together, like your arm or leg, After you become familiar with this technique you will be able to isolate smaller parts, like your foot, ankle, calf, knee, thigh and so on. The more you contract each part, the more it will release or relax. What happens in this technique is that by focusing on these body parts, you become more aware of the tension held in your body, it also gives you a reference point to compare what is relaxed and what is not. Start with one leg and then the other, then the hips and buttocks, abdomen, back, chest, shoulders, one arm and hand then the other, and lastly your neck and face muscles. Once you finish, scan your body for any places that you still notice tension, and contract and release them again. To come out of relaxation, use the same method as in the Breath Awareness technique.
- **Conscious relaxation:** For this technique you have to have pretty good awareness of your body. You progressively relax each muscle. As you continue with deep breathing, begin to consciously relax your muscles. Mentally traveling over your body, tell each part to relax one by one, from the toes to the top of your head. With each exhalation feel as if you're letting go, breathing out tiredness, stress, tension from that body part. With each inhalation, feel yourself breathing in relaxation.
- **Relax in this order:** your feet, ankles, calves, knees, thighs, hips, abdominal muscles, the muscles of the back, chest, shoulders, arms and hands. Relax your neck and skull. Then relax your face. Drop any tension that surrounds your eyes, and let all facial expressions fall away. Relax your forehead, and the sides of your face. Allow your jaw to sag slightly, parting your lips, and relax your tongue.
- **Relax each organ:** Now bring your attention within your body to the internal organs. Without trying to guess their exact location, picture the organs of the abdomen: kidneys, liver, adrenal glands, stomach, intestines, bladder, and reproductive organs. As you relax each organ, picture the deep tensions and organic disorders within dissolving at your mental suggestion to relax. Picture your lungs and heart. Feel their pace become slower, more even, and free of disturbance or tension. Visualize your brain and imagine that the steady rhythm of breath is cleaning it of all tension –dissolving thoughts, soothing and restoring the millions of cells that lie within it.
- **Calm your nervous system:** When your muscles and organs have become relaxed, begin to consciously relax your nerves. Try to discover where the inner pockets of tension lie within your body. As they reveal themselves to your inner gaze, mentally visualize the incoming breath dissolving these buried tensions. Expel their last vestiges with your exhalation. Feel that your tired and overworked nervous channels are closing down, that communication between your brain and nerve centers is being temporarily suspended. Feel that you have completely let go, that your mind is like a clear blue sky with the thoughts as slowly floating clouds. Feel your body growing heavier and heavier as it sinks into the floor.
- **Calm your mind:** Now send your mind as far as it can go from your everyday life. Leave your anxieties and worries, your obligations and responsibilities. Create a strong mental image of a place where you are completely free, completely at peace. Perhaps you will visualize a sunny beach or a silent garden. Retreat into this, your personal sanctuary, leaving only your body lying on the floor. Be completely in your imagined retreat, in a state devoid of all fears for the future and all regrets over the past, secure in the

knowledge that you are at home within yourself. Allow your conscious mind to drift into a state of blankness – that state in which the inner intelligence of prana works to thoroughly heal and restore your being on all levels.

- **Gently come back:** Stay in this state for as long as you wish. When your consciousness begins to return to your body, do not sit up right away. Instead, linger in the twilight state for a short time, gently stretching your body in the way that feels most natural for you. After a few minutes, open your eyes and slowly sit up.

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