

# Yoga Nidra

For the ultimate relaxation,  
try this technique, and  
journey to that place between  
wakefulness and sleep...

By Sara Avant Stover

**P**ause for a moment and ask yourself, Does stress really affect my health? If your answer is “No,” think again. Medical researchers estimate that up to 90% of illness and disease is related to stress, from something as slight as a cold to the more crippling ailments of heart disease and cancer. It seems that no matter what you do—whether you work too much or not at all—you still accumulate tension at the physical, mental, and emotional levels. While certainly yoga can help, stress and tension run deep and may require more attention.

Here’s where you can call on Yoga Nidra. Over 30 years ago, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, founder of the renowned Bihar School of Yoga in eastern India, adapted ancient tantric meditation techniques into a practice he calls Yoga Nidra, which he translates as “Psychic Sleep.” This practice induces complete relaxation while maintaining consciousness. Swami Satyananda calls the prolonged suspension between Yoga Nidra’s wakeful-

©GETTY IMAGES

ness and sleep the “hypnogogic state,” where we can awaken our deepest levels of creativity and healing energies.

In this state, you can ultimately change thought patterns for the better. Yogis through the ages have used the technique to purify *samskaras*, or the deep impressions and conditioned behaviors that are the driving forces behind our habitual negative reactions. Even if deep transformation is not your aim, you will emerge from Yoga Nidra feeling rested and ready to engage in the world. (A 20- to 30- minute session of Yoga Nidra is said to be the equivalent of approximately three hours of deep sleep!)

This is good news, according to Daniel N. Guerra, PsyD, director of Psychological Stress Management Services, P.C., in New York City. “In this fast-paced world we live in, we have lost a much-needed connection with our minds and bodies,” he explains. “Yoga Nidra helps to re-establish this connection and is beneficial on many levels. It brings muscular relaxation, better understanding and control over our emotions, and improved psychological health.”

Practice Yoga Nidra in Savasana (Corpse Pose), as you follow the spoken instructions of a teacher or a recording. In the first phase of the session, you progressively relax your muscles by rotating awareness through different parts of your body. Swami Satyananda drew this technique from the ancient tantric practice of *nyasa* (meaning “to place” or “to take the mind to that point”). This phase is followed by other tantric meditations: awareness of your whole body, brain, and internal organs; awakening the sensations of polar opposites; and feeling contact between the earth and your body. The last phase is a rapid visualization of various images from nature and abstract symbols.

An avid scientist, Swami Satyananda unravels the reasoning behind each of the stages. From the perspective of neurophysiology, he explains that each part of the body has a corresponding control center in the brain, called the motor homunculus. (The movement of awareness through different parts of the body, especially when done routinely over time, not only relaxes them, it also clears nerve pathways to their parallel regions in this part of the brain. One result is less-fragmented awareness.)

(Next, the meditation on polar opposites stimulates the centers of the brain responsible for main-

taining harmony between inner and outer environments.) This helps to balance our basic drives. Finally, when asked to visualize the various symbols rapidly, the conscious mind has no time to react. You remain detached, and the ego becomes temporarily inactive. This phase helps to resolve suppressed conflicts, desires, memories, and *samskaras*.

At the start and finish of each session, you repeat a *sankalpa*, or resolve. It should be a short statement, phrased in positive language and in the present tense. Choose something that you would like to develop in your life: for example, “I am at ease in all that I do.” This resolve gets embedded into the depths of your unconscious, where it will later bear fruit by motivating changes in behavior and lifestyle.

The next time you are feeling rundown, roll out your mat, and fast-forward to Savasana. Then, enjoy diving into the still and deep mystery of Yoga Nidra.

## The Technique

*(As adapted from the Bihar School of Yoga. You can either have a friend read you the instructions, or you can record them yourself and play them back.)*

Before beginning, find a quiet, peaceful space where you will not be disturbed. Get comfortable so you can remain motionless during the entire practice. If you need, put a bolster under your knees, cover up with a blanket, and place an eye pillow on your eyes.


- Lie in Savasana, body stretched out, your head in line with your body, feet apart, arms beside you, your palms turned upwards. Make yourself comfortable, then let your body remain still. Close your eyes and keep them closed until the end of the session. Make a promise to yourself that “I will not sleep. I will remain awake.”

- Take a deep breath in, and feel coolness and calmness spreading throughout your body. As you breathe out, let your cares and worries flow out of you. Become aware of your body, and relax completely, both physically and mentally.

- Become aware of your breath as it moves between your navel and throat.

- Repeat your resolve mentally three times with feeling and awareness.

**“A 20 to 30-minute session of yoga Nidra is said to be the equivalent of approximately three hours of sleep”**

- Now, begin to rotate the awareness from one part of your body to the next. Repeat the name of the part in your mind as you simultaneously become aware of it. Try to remain alert, but do not concentrate too hard.
- Become aware of the right side of your body. Take your awareness to your right hand: the right thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, little finger, palm, back of your hand; then, your wrist, arm, elbow, shoulder, armpit, waist, hip, thigh, kneecap, calf muscle, ankle, heel, sole of your foot, top of your foot, toes.
- Become aware of the left side of your body. Take your awareness to your left hand: the left thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, little finger, palm, back of your hand; then, your wrist, arm, elbow, shoulder, armpit, waist, hip, thigh, kneecap, calf muscle, ankle, heel, sole of your foot, top of your foot, toes.
- Bring your awareness to your back. Become aware of your shoulder blades, buttocks, spine... your whole back together.
- Now, go to the top of your head, your forehead, temples, eyebrows, the space between your eyebrows, eyelids, eyes, ears, cheeks, nose, the tip of your nose, lips, chin, throat, right chest, left chest, navel, abdomen... your whole front.
- Continue to your entire right leg, your entire left leg, both legs together; your entire right arm, your entire left arm, both arms together.
- Do not sleep. Say to yourself: "I am awake, I am practicing Yoga Nidra."
- Become aware of the meeting points between your body and the floor.
- Now, concentrate on your body, as if seeing it from the outside. Look at your body lying on the floor as an object, like a reflection in an imaginary mirror.
- Now, imagine a well, dark and deep. Look into it. There is a bucket on a chain; you lower it into the well. It moves into the darkness of the well. You cannot see it. Now, pull the bucket up, out of the darkness, into the light.
- Ask yourself: "What am I thinking?" Do not think, but become aware of the thought process, become a witness.
- Now, awaken the feeling of lightness, as if your body is made of cotton. Your body seems to be floating away from the floor. Next, awaken the feeling of heaviness, as if your body is made of lead.
- Awaken the sensation of heat. Your whole body is hot. Now, experience bitter cold in your body.
- Try to remember the experience of pain, mental or physical. And the feeling of pleasure: relive it, make it vivid.
- Now, try to visualize some images—on the level of feeling, awareness, and emotion. Let each one appear like a slide on your mental screen: flickering candle, tall palm tree, a car moving on the road, yellow clouds, blue clouds, starlit night, full moon, standing dog, reposing cat, moving elephant, racing horse, rising sun behind the mountains, setting sun behind the mountains, ocean with waves, a big lake with crystal-clear water, blue lotus, white lotus, pink lotus, a boat sailing on the water—see the ripples, chimney smoke rising from an old house, the dawn of the day, a yogi in deep meditation.
- Become a witness of your awareness—not the body, not the senses, not the mind, nothing but awareness. Become aware that you are observing yourself. Look within and be aware of the one who is looking.
- Go into *chidakasa*, the space behind your forehead. In the *chidakasa*, there is a flaming light. Find that light, and you will see in its center a small golden egg, very bright and shimmering.
- Repeat your resolve again, silently to yourself, three times.
- Relax all efforts, draw your mind outside, and become aware of your breathing. Become aware of your surroundings, the room you are in. Lie quietly for some time, and keep your eyes closed. Start moving and stretching your body. When you are sure that you are wide awake, sit up slowly and open your eyes. Yoga Nidra is now complete. 

## Resources

For more information about *Yoga Nidra*, check out these websites, books, and CDs:

- **Bihar School of Yoga.** Swami Satyananda Saraswati. [www.yogavision.net](http://www.yogavision.net)
- **Yoga Nidra** by Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Published by Bihar School of Yoga, 6th edition, October 2001. Available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
- **Relax into Greatness** by Rod Stryker. Audio CD by Pure Yoga, 2003. [www.pureyoga.com](http://www.pureyoga.com)
- **Experience Yoga Nidra: Guided Deep Relaxation** by Swami Janakananda Saraswati. Audio CD by Bindhu Publishers, May 1997.
- **Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga** by Richard Miller. Book and CD by Sounds True, November 2006. [www.soundstrue.com](http://www.soundstrue.com)