

## YOGA NIDRA AND HYPNOTHERAPY: POWERFUL HEALING MODALITIES FOR THE FUTURE

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### Abstract

Yoga Nidra has been in India since time immemorial as a form of spiritual practice as well as a healing modality. In the modern form, it exists as a psychotherapeutic treatment modality and termed as Yoga Psychotherapy. In this document, the primary author who has been a practicing hypnotherapist and trained in the ancient sciences of Yoga Nidra describes the various references to Yoga Nidra from Indian scriptures and describes the theory and practice of it in some institutions which aims to preserve and promote Indian culture and heritage. A comparison and contrast with the key areas of Yoga Nidra with hypnotherapy is also drawn in the next section. The final section discusses on the future of Yoga Nidra and Hypnosis, both of which are not able to get the merit and importance it deserves. It is unfortunate the in a country so rich with spiritual pursuits has failed to promote Yoga Nidra with all its manifestations. It is also a shame that Indian psychology is not taught in Indian academic institutions and a colonial hangover still exists amongst academicians, researchers, therapists and healers who draw resources from western psychology where the element of subjective internal connect, often a spiritual one is ignored or bypassed. Hypnosis and hypnotherapy have also been vogue for quite some time is also recognised as a treatment modality by the Indian government. However, not much progress has been made also in this direction in terms of making it a part of an academic curriculum for doctors and psychologists. Neither is there any governing or licensing body which could oversee and promote this amazing science which utilize the subconscious faculties of the mind. Both hypnosis and Yoga Nidra utilises the subconscious resources of the mind and operates at an altered state of awareness. They bypass the rational faculties of the conscious mind and help to unearth hidden and latent potentials within an individual. Both hypnosis and Yoga Nidra can form a bridge between eastern mysticism and western psychotherapy. Fortunately, very recently a strong awareness is being noticed amongst young Indians to rediscover cultural and spiritual origins of our Indic heritage.

**Keywords:** hypnosis, hypnotherapy, Yoga Nidra

### INTRODUCTION

Yoga-nidra, developed from ancient Indian yogic texts, has been introduced as a contemporary, systematic process of healing by various schools of yoga, both in India and in Western countries. Indigenous healing practices in India had always utilized altered states as a means to facilitate healing (Campion and Bughra 1998) and Yoga and meditation are the main healing modalities amongst others. With time, this has led to the development of a discipline called Yoga Psychotherapy. Unlike the majority of traditional Western psychotherapies, yoga psychotherapy provides the means, not only for the change at the level of personality, but for the change at a much more profound level. Like in modern psychotherapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), Yoga psychotherapy demonstrates that making peace with the current reality is in no way antithetical to change or growth. It is the foundation upon which change takes place. Some of the various attitudes and techniques are: Vairagya,

Meditation, Self-acceptance (not to be confused with self-esteem construct of western psychology), Mindfulness (meditation in action), Pranayama (breath regulation) and Viveka (discrimination).

This article brings into focus India's rich tradition of spiritual science that the west has benefited from, and continues to do so in many ways. Western scientific paradigms are, in many ways, still in their infancy by comparison. The primary author who is a practising hypnotherapist and have been trained in Yoga Nidra provides us with an overview of yoga-nidra, both its origins and current form of practice. Yoga Nidra is compared to hypnosis, a systematic, mind-body, trance-inducing technique, used as an adjunct with western forms of psychotherapy.

### REFERENCES TO YOGA NIDRA

Yoga Nidra is a meditative practice that dates back to antiquity and can be traced back to scriptures like *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana Buddhism*, *Kashmiri Shaivism*, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, and Shankaracharya's *Yoga Taravali*. The contemporary description of Yoga Nidra is equated with a kind of lucid dream state, in which dream imagery takes place for the practitioner, but they do not identify or become attached to them, but become objective observer. (Miller, 2005)

The hatha yoga texts contain few explicit descriptions of yoga-nidra ( Vasistha-samhita III.57-75; Yoga Yajnavalkya VII-1-37, translated in Bharati, 2001; 771–773). There is a scarcity of textual accounts of yoga-nidra and the possible reasons could be:

- The practices were traditionally taught in response to the needs of the individual and were almost solely communicated by word of mouth (Bharati, 2001).
- The mention of injunction, "Do not teach! Do not teach! Do not teach!" was very common in texts about yoga practice (prayogasastra).

The written descriptions are often partial, devoid of essential details, sometimes appearing to be deliberately incomplete and were highly customised depending on individual needs.

The term yoga-nidra can refer to practice as well as to an object of devotion. In the Vedic literature (roughly 5000 BCE to 1000 CE) and Epic literature (approximately 700 BCE to 1000 CE), yoga-nidra refers to the mythological dissolution of the cosmos, or Vishnu's cosmic yoga-nidra. It also represents Vishnu's power of *tamas*, or the universal principles of inertia and entropy, and is identified with the Divine Mother as Kali, the shakti of cosmic *tamas* (see Jagadishwarananda, 2003, for further description). Yoga-nidra may also refer to a deity who was involved in the birth of Krishna (Campbell, 1974). The Mahayana Buddhist traditions, and the Vajrayana in particular, refer to a practice of clear, light sleep similar to classical yoga's account of yoga-nidra. The Theravada Buddhist yoga literature contains no references to yoga-nidra, because it is described in the hatha-yoga literature. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition has a discipline of dream yoga, which does not apply to the state of deep sleep; however, it is related to the practice of clear, light sleep and involves the dissolution of all thought and an experience of nothing but pure awareness (Rinpoche, 1998). Although the Jaina yoga literature includes some references to yoga-nidra, it does not appear to include descriptions of yoga-nidra practice.

In Ayurvedic literature, the Charaka-samhita, a revelation that is partially ascribed to Patanjali, contains a discussion of the theory of sleep in the Sutra-sthana. Although this intimates that sleep is an entry point to elevated, superconscious states, no detailed description of the practice is included.

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (approximately 200 BCE) does not explicitly describe the technique of yoga-nidra, but the nature of sleep as a mental operation is explored, as are the dream and sleep states as a means to enter samadhi.

In Shiva - sutra I.7 of the Shaiva tradition of Kashmir (approximately 950 CE), Vasugupta asserts that the yogi experiences the fourth state of consciousness (*turiya*) in the midst of the other three

states: waking, dream, and sleep. This gives rise to a classification of states of consciousness wherein each of these three states are inherent within the other (Shiva-sutra I.10).

Though most written references describe the state of yoga nidra as the goal, three texts describe the process of achieving yoga-nidra in some detail.

- The Hathayogapradipika (IV.43–50) describes the process of khecari-mudra, which culminates in the attainment of yoga-nidra (Digambarji & Kokaje, 1998).
- The Shandilya-Upanishad (I.35) describes similar process with the same sequence of steps (Aiyar, 2000).
- Shankaracharya also describes the process of going into yoga-nidra in his Yogataravali (Deshikachar & Deshikachar, 2003).

The contemporary yoga literature includes a number of descriptions of methods of yoga-nidra as noted in studies by Miller (2005). Satyananda, of the Bihar School of Yoga, describes several preliminary practices related to yoga-nidra which include the following:

- Making mental resolution or setting an intention (samkalpa),
- Initiating rotations of consciousness through the body,
- Practicing breath awareness (nostrils, throat, chest, counting the breath),
- Relaxing the mind and emotions,
- Visualizing various images, and
- Reaffirming mental resolutions or intentions.

Although this is the most detailed description of the preliminary practices of yoga-nidra, it does not include resting the mind in the heart centre or instruction about how to enter a state of deep sleep during which the mind (or manas) does not function and are not consistent with Shankara's definition.

Satyananda's successor, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, also briefly discusses yoga-nidra in his book, *Yoga Darshana* (Saraswati, Swami Niranjanananda, 1993).

Panda (2003) describes yoga-nidra vis-a-vis the eight limbs of yoga. This description includes an array of asana and pranayama techniques, as well as mudra and bandha practices. Panda explains the Vedantic theory of the evolution of the mind, the body sheath or kosha system, the cakras system, Kundalini, and a great deal of ancillary Yoga-Vedanta theory. In his description of the preliminary practices of yoga-nidra, he delineates several forms of external and internal rotations of consciousness, as well as a complex tantric system of Nyasa (Panda, 2003). He includes a discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis and contrasts it with Indian theories of mind, then briefly examines common threads between the two theories, characterizing hypnosis as an externally suggested trance and yoga-nidra as an "autosuggestion." His description of Yoga Nidra as a state between waking and dreaming is incorrect because it misidentifies the brain waves emitted during yoga-nidra as primarily theta rather than delta.

Swami Rama writes of five methods of yoga-nidra and describes two of them. The first is a full procedure that includes preliminary relaxation exercises and a short method that follows mastery of preliminary relaxation techniques (Rama, 1988). The full procedure begins with a mental statement of intention to remain aware (samkalpa), followed by progressive relaxation of major muscle groups. This is followed by a 61-point relaxation that focuses on marma points, with the goal of relaxing the subtle body, and "point-to-point breathing," or shithali-karana, translated as "making or doing relaxation" (Rama, 1988, p. 186–191). It is interesting that these are essentially user relaxation exercises and visualizations that do not lead to the absence of mental activity as described by Shankaracharya as essential to yoga-nidra.

## YOGA NIDRA PRACTICE

A review of the historical and contemporary yoga text suggests that yoga-nidra is a state during which activity of the mind is suspended. Neither thoughts nor images are present, and the practitioner experiences conscious, deep, dreamless sleep, possessing awareness of the surroundings but neither thinking about them nor interacting with them.

The process of Yoga nidra consists of eight stages: (1) Preparation (lying in savasana), (2) Relaxation, (using pranayama with or without mantras), (3) Resolve, (elicits sankalpa or intention), (4) Rapid Shifting of Consciousness, involving both external and internal rotation of consciousness called Nyasa (5) Mental Channel Purification, Purification (includes the use of reverse counting while imagining breathing through opposite nostrils), (6) Moving Visualization of Scenarios, (consists of the visualization of religious and nature images, (7) Resolve (repetition), and (8) Finish.

Various experiments proved the efficacy in areas like sleep disorders, anger management, obsessive-compulsive disorder, various digestive disorders, such as colitis and peptic ulcers, cardiovascular disease, arthritis, osteoporosis, dementia, and immune system function, stress and anxiety, reduction of illness-related stress in multiple sclerosis and cancer outpatients, reduction of menstrual-related difficulties, inflammation reduction and positive effects on heart rate variability. Although the findings are promising, they are in the early stages of investigation, and further, more robust studies need to be conducted to provide stronger evidence of its efficacy and effectiveness.

## A STUDY IN CONTRAST: YOGA NIDRA AND HYPNOSIS

Both Yoga Nidra and Hypnosis have tremendous psychotherapeutic uses using trance as a medium of inner focus of awareness and both uses either a teacher/practitioner/therapist guide or are self-guided. Both demarcates a more intensified liminal space for healing than psychotherapy; the boundaries between the therapist and the patient are further removed from the typical, psychotherapeutic environment, and the therapist participates more intensely in the patient's phenomenological field. However, there are the following phenomenological differences:

- **DOMAIN:** Unlike Hypnosis, Yoga Nidra operates within the realm of indigenous spirituality and psychology for those adhering to a spiritual paradigm. Thus, it is important to keep it providing a merely reductionist approach to it, as has happened in many respects to the use of Eastern methods of mind/body healing in the Western paradigm (Goldberg 2010).
- **STATE:** Phenomena that can be labelled hypnotic, such as time distortion, primary process imagery, dream imagery, and catalepsy may take place, but are not necessarily utilized as a convincer for ratification of the special, meditative state in Yoga Nidra ((Bowers 1978; Yapko 2003).
- **USE OF RESOLUTION OR SUGGESTIONS:** The yoga-nidra practice of Sankapla, or resolution before and after the exercise, is similar to a post-hypnotic suggestion used in Hypnotherapy. However, the resolution is decided by the client rather than the therapist giving the suggestions as in case of hypnosis. Hypnotic suggestions are typically delivered by an outside source, and there is an attempt to bypass the conscious mind and implant them in the unconscious (Yapko 2003).
- **ATTACHMENT:** Yoga-nidra differs in that amnesia and other hypnotic phenomena may be apparent, but the practitioner attempts to remain alert with non-attachment to any imagery, sensations, or experiences (Panda 2003).

- **AWARENESS:** In Yoga Nidra, the cultivation of awareness is described as a means to produce a *witness* state of consciousness, between waking consciousness, *jagrata*, and dream consciousness, *Swapna* (Panda 2003; Henry 2005). While it is essentially different from Hypnosis, some theorists find a resemblance with Ernest Hilgard's idea of the *hidden observer* in the *neo-dissociation* theory of hypnosis.
- **MODE OF APPLICATION:** Suggestions for rotation of consciousness and imagery used in Yoga Nidra are given quickly for the purpose of making the subject more alert. However, in hypnosis, techniques, such as fractionation (brief re-alerting and re-entrance to the trance state) and pauses in the hypnotic induction are a means for deepening the sense of trance where the conscious mind of the patient is bypassed precisely to influence unconscious cognitive sets and influence behaviour (Erickson, Rossi, and Rossi 1976; Erickson and Rossi 1989).
- **THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE:** The relation between the client and the therapist in Yoga nidra is in a more intensified liminal space for healing than traditional psychotherapy; the boundaries between the therapist and the patient are further removed from the typical, psychotherapeutic environment, and the therapist participates more intensely in the patient's phenomenological field.

### RESEARCH IN YOGA NIDRA

Although there has been attempt by researchers to examine the effects of relaxation protocols, Yoga Nidra's physiological and neurological processes were not systematically evaluated. The operational definition of Yoga Nidra has been diluted and confused, making systematic hypothesis testing and cross study comparison and replication difficult. The research literature about yoga-nidra is scarce and limited by the lack of an empirical definition of the state of yoga-nidra. A number of investigations have examined various physiological criteria related to yoga-nidra, but their lack of empirical consistency and rigor make it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions.

Swami Veda Bharati proposed a definition of four levels of yoga-nidra practice that would provide measurable physiological hypotheses for empirical investigation.

Level 1 represents a state of deep relaxation. During this phase the brain first produces alpha waves, which may verge on theta waves during deeper practice. These deeper exercises may be used for self- healing, such as reducing blood pressure and dealing with migraine headaches, among others. These protocols are similar to those used in clinical hypnosis (Hammond, 1990). Level 2 represents a state that is characterized by creativity, invention, achieving decisions and solutions to problems, and composing lectures and research papers, poetry, minutely detailed action plans, and the like. This stage is evidenced by theta waves that verge on delta waves during deeper practice. These bears a strong resemblance to those observed during clinical hypnosis.

During Level 3, the practices of Level 1 result in the transition to yoga-nidra, or the state of *abhava-pratyaya*; that is, cognition of negation in a cave of the heart centre (Yoga Sutras I.10; Bharati, 1986; Zambito, 1992). During this state, the brain may initially produce theta waves, followed by delta waves. The participant experiences deep non-REM sleep but remains aware of his or her surroundings. Attainment of this level may require instruction by an advanced teacher.

During Level 4 the mind simultaneously remains in two states consisting of sleep and simultaneous conscious awareness (*a-japa japa*, or the effortless meditation during which the person is aware of the subjective experience of the very subtle power of consciousness in meditation (the rising of the Kundalini). A practitioner may alternate between theta and delta

waves during this process. It is hypothesized that at this point, EEG readings may register no discernible electrical activity. Thus, yoga-nidra (yoga sleep) represents a state in which an individual demonstrates all the symptoms of deep, non-REM sleep, including delta brain waves, while simultaneously remaining fully conscious.

Interestingly, studies in yoga - nidra in contemporary research is focussed in relation to a state of deep relaxation and imagery generation which is actually a precursor to yoga -nidra. During this state, alpha and theta brainwaves, as opposed to the delta wave activity found during the state of yoga-nidra, are reported. The state of yoga-nidra is devoid of imagery, thought, and mantra repetition on and consists only of the awareness of being. This is characterized by awareness of the breath during which one observes the mind and body in sleep. To date, extant research and findings are inconsistent with those of early studies. It appears that yoga-nidra as it is described by Shankaracharya and its physiological correlates have yet to be studied. Stephen Parker suggests some hypothesis to test Shankaracharya's traditional model of yoga nidra. These hypotheses challenge the contention that consciousness requires brain activity.

### **HYPNOSIS AWARENESS IN INDIA AND NEED FOR INTEGRATION**

Hypnosis, as a well-known technique of eliciting trance states that has its origins in Europe, and has been used therapeutically for at least 400 years (Hammond 2013). There is extensive research required to ascertain whether or not Hypnosis was borrowed from our Vedic scriptures. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume hypnosis as a special case of yoga-nidra.

Apart from a PG Diploma course done in some Universities in India, training on Hypnosis and hypnotherapy is in the hands of lay training institutes some with affiliate training institute in USA. Although Indian hypnotists are quite competent, in the absence of regulation and registration there is a lack of scientific rigor. Also, there is no real repercussion of potential ethical deviance and protection of the general public from negligence or maleficence. Psychotherapy in India is largely unregulated, even with an official licensing board (Hogan and Vaccaro 2007), and there is no regulation of the practice of hypnosis India. The majority of the population does not have access to counselling and psychotherapy services. With respect to mental health services, only a very small portion of the westernized population in urban areas actually uses them (Laungani 2004). There is a movement to foster professionalism in psychology, but many individuals practice unlicensed, and without degrees (Hogan and Vaccaro 2007).

Since both yoga-nidra and hypnosis are taught and utilized in India, it would appear apropos to call for an integration between indigenous and Western models of healing for Indians. The similarities between the two should be further explored, and an understanding and practice of both could inform clinical and research efforts. The systematic yoga-nidra practice from the Bihar school displays commonalities with clinical hypnosis, mindfulness meditation, guided imagery, and relaxation training. Likewise, other schools of Yoga Nidra practised in India need to be explored and are considered for integration into practice. Training programs, run by clinical faculty, for both yoga-nidra and hypnosis could provide standardized, evidence-based, training and practice. This could potentially add more respect from academic circles for, and further application of Indian Psychology.

A specific application of yoga-nidra integration with Western psychiatry could potentially be with *transcranial magnetic stimulation* for depression (TMS) (George et al. 1999). TMS therapy is an FDA-approved treatment that uses direct electromagnetic stimulation to areas of the brain that are hypoactive in depression. Yoga-nidra training with or without the integration of hypnosis as a pre-procedure could provide this, especially with patients from the Indian population.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the academic and clinical presence, psychology is in many ways a foreign concept. Due to colonisation impact, the Indian culture has been dominated by a feeling of inferiority and western

form of science and psychology were upheld superior to indigenous ways. In fact, as per Swami Abhedananda, true psychology recognises the existence of body, mind and soul. But the modern physiological psychology tells us what we call the physical body is the dwelling of the soul. It is manufactured by the soul which is the source of intelligence and consciousness.

Some psychologists have attempted to cross-pollinate western philosophy with Indian culture giving rise to Indian Psychology (Sinha 1994; Bhatia 2002; Laungani 2004) although there is scant acceptance of it. Even though there is a divide between rural and urban India, most therapists in India prefer the western model which are often at odds with the native models of therapies and healing. There is obvious need for more research on the efficacy of Yoga Nidra. It is high time, scholars and academicians realise the true benefit of both Yoga Nidra and Hypnosis and include them in the curriculum at universities for both psychologists and medical professionals.

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