

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF AYURVEDA360



**AYURVEDA
360**

**PEER-REVIEWED
BIMONTHLY JOURNAL**



www.ayurveda360.in/journal

ISSN

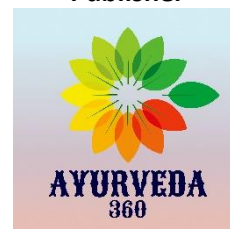
PRINT:

3048-7382

ONLINE:

3048-7390

**2025
VOLUME 2
ISSUE 1
JULY-
AUGUST**



DOI: [10.63247/3048-7390.vol.2.issue1.4](https://doi.org/10.63247/3048-7390.vol.2.issue1.4)

Yoga Nidra: Understanding Its Role in Stress Relief and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Yoga Nidra, a practice rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, is increasingly recognized for its potential in stress relief and overall well-being. While the practice is often associated with relaxation, its deeper impact on the mind and consciousness is less frequently explored. This review aims to examine the concept, benefits, and applications of Yoga Nidra, distinguishing fact from myth.


Methods: This review consolidates information from classical Ayurvedic texts like the Yoga Sutra, Yoga Nidra by Swami Satyananda, and key Ayurvedic literatures such as Sushruta Samhita, Charaka Samhita, Ashtanga Hrdaya, and Ashtanga Sangraha. A critical analysis of published research articles and classical texts has been conducted to understand the physiological, psychological, and spiritual implications of Yoga Nidra.

Results: Yoga Nidra is defined as a state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep, promoting relaxation through a methodical practice that induces mental and physical relaxation. Studies indicate that Yoga Nidra helps in reducing stress, managing psychosomatic disorders, and enhancing self-awareness. The practice aligns with Ayurvedic principles of mental and physical balance, emphasizing the importance of Pratyahara in achieving a deeper state of consciousness.


Discussion:

While Yoga Nidra is often misunderstood, it offers significant therapeutic potential when practiced correctly. It is a versatile tool for managing stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being. However, its benefits depend on individual experiences and life circumstances, and it cannot be generalized as a one-size-fits-all treatment. Further research is necessary to validate its effectiveness in treating various ailments.

Keywords: Yoga Nidra, Stress Relief, Consciousness, Ayurveda, Relaxation, Pratyahara

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR	HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE?	TO BROWSE
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Manuscript Received	Review Round 1	Review Round 2	Review Round 3	Final Updated Received
02/07/2025	09/07/2025	18/07/2025	29/07/2025	04/08/2025
Accepted	Published	Conflict of Interest	Funding	Plagiarism Checker
07/08/2025	15/08/2025	NIL	NIL	9%

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International Journal of Ayurveda360 2025; 2(1)

This journal is published under the tradename Ayurveda360, registered under UDYAM-KR-27-0044910.

Introduction

The concept of Yoga Nidra is subtle and profoundly embedded in Indian philosophy [1]. The usage of Yoga Nidra as a form of relaxation is more recent. While classical texts do not specifically describe Yoga Nidra as a formal practice, it has been an integral part of spiritual traditions and personal development. [2] The experience of Yoga Nidra transcends the jnanendriyas (sensory organs), making it difficult to analyze through the conventional Pancha jnanendriya framework. In recent years, Yoga Nidra has demonstrated significant potential for reducing stress among various populations, and multiple studies have shown its effectiveness in managing psychosomatic diseases [3]. However, there are also misconceptions and myths surrounding this practice that need to be addressed. This article aims to critically review the available literature on Yoga Nidra, distinguishing facts from misconceptions.

Materials and Methods [4]

For this review, a wide range of literary materials were compiled, explored, and analyzed critically. Sources include texts such as the Yoga Sutra, Yoga Nidra by Swami Satyananda, and Ayurvedic texts like Sushruta Samhita, Charaka Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, Ashtanga Sangraha, and their

commentaries. Additionally, various published research articles on Yoga Nidra have been reviewed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept and its applications.

Review of Literature

The term Yoga Nidra is composed of two words: Yoga (union) and Nidra (sleep). Descriptions of Yoga Nidra can be found in several classical texts, including the Mahabharata, Markandeya Purana, Mahamaya Tantra (Buddhist Tantra), and Cincinimata Sarasamuccaya (Saiva Tantra) [5]. In the Mahabharata, Yoga Nidra is symbolized as the sleep of Vishnu. In Buddhist literature, it is depicted as a state in which perfect Buddhas enter to realize secret knowledge. [6] In the Saiva texts, particularly in Cincinimata Sarasamuccaya, Yoga Nidra is elaborated as a peace beyond words. According to Swami Satyananda Sarasvati, Yoga Nidra is described as a systematic method for inducing complete physical, mental, and emotional relaxation [7]. This relaxation is achieved by turning inward, away from external experiences. Yoga Nidra can be considered a state of consciousness that is neither sleep nor wakefulness, neither concentration nor hypnosis. [8]

The Three States of Consciousness [9]

Every life form passes through three states of consciousness: Jagrath (wakefulness), Swapnam (dreaming), and Sushupti (deep sleep). Jagrath refers to the state of consciousness, while Sushupti is the state of unconsciousness. Sushupti is completely inactive, with breathing continuing in the body to sustain the prana. Swapnam, the dream state, occurs in the transition between consciousness and unconsciousness. During this state, physiological changes occur in the body, such as increased heart rate and sweating. The dreaming state causes the individual to traverse between Jagrath and Sushupti. The subsequent state, Tureeya, represents ultimate salvation or Samadhi, where one attains a state of pure consciousness, united with the non-dual self. Samadhi can be either Savikalpa or Nirvikalpa.

Hypnotism [10]

Hypnotism is the process of inducing an altered state of mind, known as hypnosis. This state of trance involves enhanced concentration and focus, with the subject's response to suggestions heightened while external stimuli are ignored. Hypnosis can be induced by an external agent, such as a hypnotist, who directs the subject with commands and suggestions that may sometimes contradict real environmental stimuli.

Yoga Nidra and Nidra in Ayurveda [11]

In Ayurveda, Nidra occurs when the Hridaya (heart) is dominated by Tamas and Kapha. Hridaya is also described as the seat of consciousness. Acharya Sushruta identifies Tamas as the cause of Nidra, while Satva is the reason for the waking state. During the awakened state, the Indriyas (senses), mind, and Atma (soul), guided by Satva, begin to perceive knowledge. When the mind is exhausted, it dissociates from the senses, leading the individual into sleep. Chakrapani Dutta in his commentary quotes Swapna as nirindriya pradesha mano avasthanam, meaning that during Swapna (dreaming), the mind remains disconnected from the senses. The dream state, governed by Rajo Guna, differs from the purely sleep state, where Tamas dominates. In the case of a Satwika (pure) individual, Satwa Guna allows the person to achieve Sushupti, the state of deep sleep, with clarity and enlightenment. Yoga Nidra is a state where an individual attempts to sleep with knowledge, transitioning initially in Rajas and eventually entering Satwa.

Yoga Nidra Mind is Receptive in Nature [12]

When the mind is in the jagrat (waking) state, the sense organs (jnanendriyas) are connected with the mind, making it receptive and functional. In Nidra, the mind appears detached from its objects, as expressed in the phrase

"vishayehbyo nivartanthe." Unlike Nidra, the mind in Yoga Nidra is veiled by Tamas. In this state, neither the jnanendriyas function completely nor is there a conjunction with the external world. However, Rajas, the doer or pravarthaka of the entire cosmos, makes the mind susceptible to knowledge (jnana). When the mind is harmonized, it becomes more sensitive to insight, resulting in a decrease in stress. Yoga Nidra practice helps make the mind more receptive to Pratyahara, the withdrawal of the senses.

Discussion

In a nutshell, the progression of Yoga Nidra can be described as follows: Yama, Niyama, and Asana are Tamasika in nature, Pranayama serves as the first step to Rajasika, and Pratyahara signifies the mind progressing from Rajasika to Satvika. Dharana and Dhyana are Satvika. However, Samadhi is considered a Tureeya avastha, a state beyond Satwa. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, the Atma is composed of five Koshas or coverings. The outermost Annamaya Kosha is purely Panchabhoutika or Tamasika, while the Pranamaya Kosha is Tamasika Rajasika. The Manomaya Kosha is primarily Rajasika, and the Vijnamaya Kosha is predominantly Satvika. The innermost Anandamaya Kosha is realized

in Paramananda, or the level beyond Satwa.

If such variations exist in the lower levels of the Annamaya Kosha, the differences at the higher planes of the Manomaya Kosha are even more profound. Therefore, in Ayurveda, treatments that address multiple levels of existence are referred to as purusham purusham veekshya. Just as different Parthiva (earthly) compounds have distinct variations in Gandha (smell), each individual perceives a different Gandha of the same substance. Thus, the differences in the Panchabhootas (five elements) influence the practices one chooses for spiritual fulfillment. As a result, the benefits and practices of Yoga Nidra are highly individualistic. The notion that Yoga Nidra is a universal cure is inaccurate. The debate over whether Yoga Nidra can serve as a treatment for various diseases must be addressed here. When the Panchabhoutika body is afflicted, only another Panchabhoutika medium can heal it.

The Doshas are both Amoortha (non-material) and functional. Hence, the three triads of Dravya, Guna, and Karma can soothe their disturbances. As one progresses to the higher Koshas of Manas, the Doshas of Rajas and Tamas demand Karma-oriented Satwavajaya and Daivavyapashraya treatment. The

ultimate treatment for Manodosha (psyche disorders) is Jnana, Vijnana, Dhairya, Smriti, and Samadhi. If the disorders of the psyche aggravate the Doshas in the body, Daivavyapashraya (divine healing) should be applied. Yoga Nidra, as a relaxation practice, can indeed offer relief for individuals experiencing stress, which may serve as the Nidana (cause) of their Vyadhi (disease). However, highly developed disorders that overwhelm the Kriyakala (time for action) require a more holistic medical approach.

Conclusion

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Yoga Nidra is neither the same as the third eye nor the ultimate path to Samadhi. It is incorrect to describe Yoga Nidra as an opening of the eye after meditation or as Samadhi. The progression in Yoga Nidra is deeply individualistic, and each experience is unique. The sweetness of sugar is different from the sweetness of sugarcane, and even the sweetness of the same sugarcane can vary from person to person. Therefore, generalizing Yoga Nidra is not productive, as its results are largely dependent on an individual's past life, present experiences, and the purpose they harbor.

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