

Yoga Nidrā as a Tool in Yoga Training

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Yoga nidrā is a term that has many interpretations – from relaxation to the state of Unity with the Absolute. Various yoga schools developed their own system of yoga nidrā practice. They are all effective, as they all affect the mind in a similar way, though through different mechanisms. In this paper, the yoga nidrā of the Bihar School of Yoga (BSY) is compared with other concepts of relaxation, *pratyāhāra* and yoga nidrā. The BSY booklet inspired by swami Satyananda on yoga nidrā (Satyananda 1978) became a sort of standard procedure in many countries. This is related to other concepts of relaxation and yoga nidrā. Some research results on yoga nidrā are indicated. Notes on mastering the teaching of yoga nidrā are also included.

1 Theory

Traditional descriptions of yoga nidrā as we know it presently are rare. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (5: 24), we hear about *antara rāmāsthatā*, “relaxation”. Also in *Bhagavad Gītā* 2: 69 it is written: “*When it is night for all beings, the controlled man is awake; when all beings are awake, that is the night for the sage who sees.*”

This implies a state of mind, where the world as we usually see it “no longer exist” – we are not able to maintain awareness, when it happens. In case of yogis, however, awareness can be maintained. Experienced meditators can maintain low theta dominant states and use it also for designing solutions needed in everyday life.



About the author

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2 Objective Parts of Yoga Nidrā Process

As it was shown in the research at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, yoga nidrā has a special brain response. Apart from sequentially activating well defined areas of the brain, it changes the dominant EEG patterns of the brain (Nilsson 2017).

Tab. 1 shows the main types of EEG frequencies. Tab. 2 shows the correlation of in various states of mind with EEG frequency domains. Fig. 1 shows the shifts of awareness during the process of falling asleep and relaxation plus meditation (Hirai 1972). Delta dominant states can be maintained without sleep only by very advanced yogis, like it was shown in case of swami Veda Bharati (Bharati 2014).

Tab. 1.
The most important EEG frequency domains.

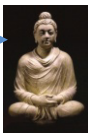
Superbeta ("gamma")	42 – 200 Hz
Beta	12 – 42 Hz
Alpha	7 – 12 Hz
Theta	4 – 7 Hz
Delta	0.1 – 4 Hz

Tab. 2.
The most usual states mind and the EEG responses.

Usual working regime of mind	<i>Beta activity dominates</i>
Relaxation, superlearning	<i>Alpha activity dominates</i>
Creative visualization, meditation (also SEMS and REM sleep)	<i>Theta activity dominates</i>
Immersion into deeper states of meditation (also dreamless sleep)	<i>Proportion of delta activity increases</i>
Panics, fear, intensive stress	<i>Fast beta rhythms dominate (also > 80 Hz)</i>

Fig. 1.
Transition from beta to delta dominant states in case of untrained and trained meditators (adapted after Hirai 1972).

Beta dominant state	Alpha dominant state	Theta dominant state	Delta dominant state
Usual wakeful state of mind	Unbroken wakeful attention during relaxation or meditation State of comfort <i>Sleepiness start</i>	<i>A state conducive for visual elements of relaxation and meditation</i> REM states during sleep	Deep meditation Dreamless sleep



3 Description of Relaxation in Yogic Literature

Classic yoga literature usually defines only one *āsana* – *śavāsana* and the associated mental states. It is only in modern literature where we find the description of the relaxation processes (Timčák *et al.* 2004).

Haṭhapradīpikā

“Lying supine on the ground like a corpse – that is śavāsana. Śavāsana wards off fatigue and brings mental repose” – “Uttānam savavadbhāmau sayanam tacchavāsanam savāsanam srāntiharam cittavisrāntikāranam” (Haṭhapradīpikā 1: 32).

Yuktabhavadēva

“Lie on the back on the ground like a corpse. This is śavāsana which wards off fatigue and brings mental repose” (Yuktabhavadēva 6: 16).

Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā

“Lying on the back on the ground like a dead body is called śavāsana which removes fatigue and gives relief to the mind [citta visrāntikāranam]” (Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā 2: 19). A dead body does not enable being conscious of it. Thus, in śavāsana one should reach the state when the mind is relieved of the perception of the body.

Haṭharatnāvalī

“Lying by extending legs and hands due to tiresomeness is called śavāsana. It removes all kinds of fatigue due to the practice of different āsanās.” (Haṭharatnāvalī 3: 77).

Haṭhatatvakaumudī

“Śavāsana follows, for quieting the mind [cittavisrāntau]. One lies on the ground on the back, legs are apart, placing the folded arms on the chest, gaze fixed on the tip of the nose, while meditating on Siva [smāran sivaṃ]. This is śavāsana.

Practice of śavāsana cures the knots [granthi] caused due to vitiated vāta in the chest [hṛt], removes the fatigue of the body and mind arising due to the practice of all the āsanās and exhaustion. This brings wellbeing to the yogi.” (Haṭhatatvakaumudī 7: 11–12).

Yoga Tarawali

This short work describes, that the *munis* are able to stay conscious in yoga nidrā and thus achieve a special type of yoga nidrā. This yoga nidrā is described by Adi Shankaracharya in *Yoga Tarawali*: *“For the yogi in this extraordinary state, the old patterns are completely cleansed, the state of yoga nidrā arises, and the yogi is totally devoid of any interest in this world.” (Shankaracharya, verse 24).*

Further verses from *Yoga Tarawali* elucidate on this point: *“Through appropriate practice, done steadily when all thoughts and intentions are completely rooted out, when we are freed totally from the web of karma, then the yogi reaches and remains in the state of yoga nidrā.*

Resting in the bed of the turīya state, higher than the other three states; always having the vision of the highest; my dear friend [ātman]! Enter and remain in the nirvikalpa state, the state of yoga nidrā.

When the light of the paramātma glows, the darkness called avidyā is destroyed totally; then the yogi who perceives everything clearly, does not see anything in this world.” (Shankaracharya, verses 25–27).

4 Implications of Yoga Nidrā as Given by Yoga Tarawali

Even though Consciousness is the Ground, the Foundation on which our life is based, that what we ordinarily perceive is termed as *māyā* – the perceptive modus in the state of *avidyā* (see “*That which is beginningless, fruitful, open to both proof and disproof, neither real nor unreal, nor real-unreal – nonexistent when, because of the immutability of its own substratum, the cause of change is ascertained, – existent, when it is not so ascertained – thus that which is indefinable, is called māyā.*” *Sarvopaniṣad*, verse 4). Thus our state of existence holds a veil before us onto which it projects a wonderful, and unbelievable perfect “illusion” that mirrors all our needs, desires and aspirations, and induces in us a false hope for their permanent possession. Yoga nidrā of *Yoga Tarawali* promises to realize the highest state of existence.

5 Principles of Yoga Nidrā

The Bihar School of Yoga uses the elements of guided body relaxation as used in westernized yoga classes and elements of archetypal, guided visualization. Yoga nidrā as we know it now, – whichever school of yoga we belong to – usually represent the first step to the state indicated by the *Bhagavad Gītā* or *Yoga Tarawali*. They indicate, that yogic “sleep” is when we are asleep for the world as usually perceived and awake to Consciousness. As shown above, research has shown that in yoga nidrā the brain’s activity (EEG) indicated, that the subjects tested by PET scanner were in a deeply relaxed state, similar to that of sleep, during the whole yoga nidrā. The theta activity rose significantly (11 %) on all the twenty-one scalp electrodes. The reduction of the alpha activity (2 %) was insignificant, showing that this meditative state is altogether different from that of the sleeping state and comprises conscious awareness. Furthermore, the state was constant and evenly distributed over the entire brain for the forty-five minutes the relaxation lasted. In the various parts of the yoga nidrā as given by the Bihar School of Yoga (Satyananda 1977), various areas of the brain became active, thus giving a possibility to experience subjectively the states when different areas are becoming active, whilst others are less active.

6 Relaxation and Yoga Nidrā

Systemically, relaxation became a process where the mind is being taught to recognize subtle information from the body

and to release tension maintained in the muscular system or the tension/discomfort coming from internal organs and from different *kośas*. Relaxation was further extended to areas, where mental processes and states were worked on. Thus it evolved to what we now regard as yoga nidrā.

7 Guiding Yoga Nidrā

Those *yogācāryas* – yoga teachers that guide people through yoga nidrā should themselves be able to be in the state of yoga nidrā. In order to guide yoga nidrā the *yogācārya* should be aware of the following: Real yoga nidrā does not flow from his words, but from the support obtained by his being connected to higher continua and beings (or Masters). The *acharya* should be aware of his own thought and feelings (general and related to the group). He should not willingly modulate on his words and outgoing energy flow any unrelated contents of his mind. He should be able to eliminate also subconsciously occurring unrelated information from his mind. In psychology: “*The therapist is supposed to be a tabula rasa, a blank tablet upon which the patient could project her own feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. These then could be analyzed by the therapist, enlarging the arena of the patient’s mind*” (Weiss 1988).

8 Silence in Yoga Nidrā

Aparokṣānubhūti says: “*The wise should always be one with that silence wherefrom words together with the mind turn back without reaching it, but which is attainable by the yogins*” (*Aparokṣānubhūti*, verse 107). Sleep is here called *laya*. The ability to reach this state of noble nidrā needs however, effective yoga sādhanā as indicated, e.g., in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Adidevananda* 1967).

When we realize the depth of the task of guiding a yoga nidrā session, surely we will do the best to train oneself to the task.

Naturally, the best advice is – first realize the *ātman* in us as shown, e.g., by *Adi Shankaracharya* in *Aparokṣānubhūti* (*Vimuktananda* 1977). This would mean that we would be able to help to “pull” the yoga nidrā participants towards the Absolute from within. If that is not possible, we have to see that we at least point in the right direction and do not harm the class participants.

Fig. 2.
The information system effective during yoga nidrā sessions
Information flow in yoga nidrā.

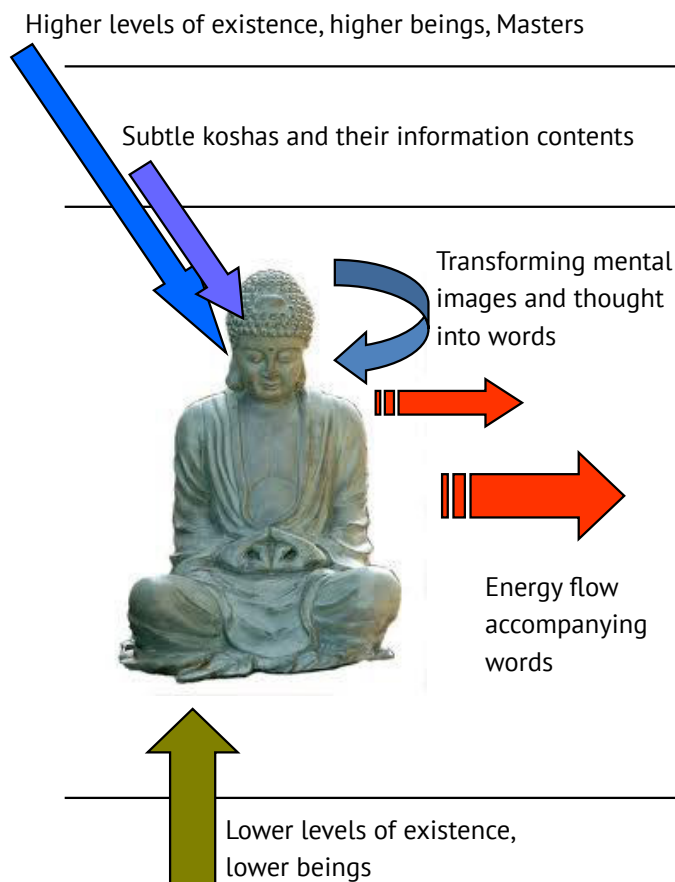
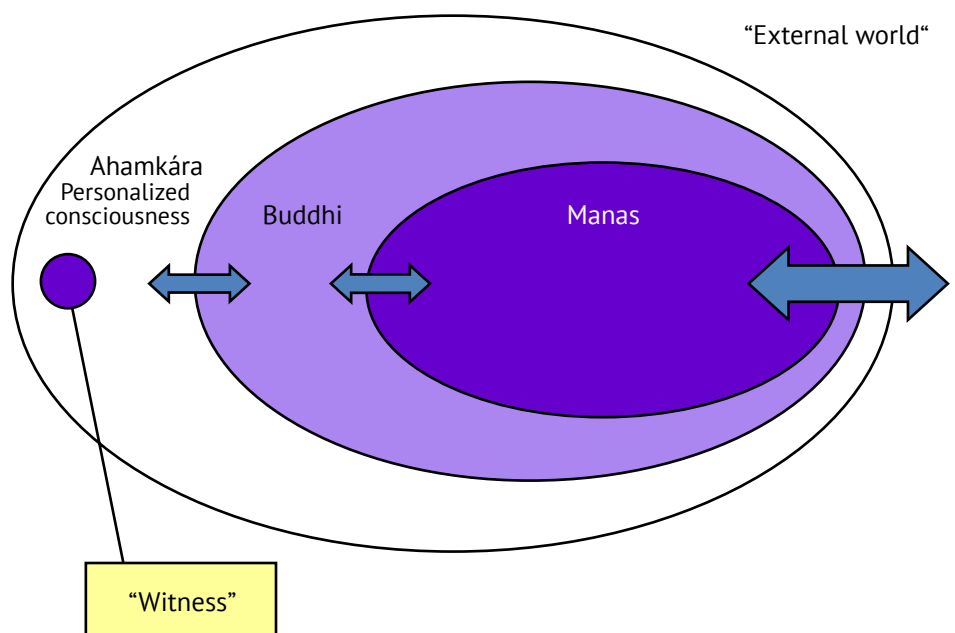


Fig. 3.
The pathways of attention during the yoga nidrā.



9 How Could We Do Harm in Training People in the Noble Yoga Nidrā?

I can easily happen if we do not take some precautions. Below are a few points to consider. People in yoga nidrā are trusting the teacher and thus open up their mental and energy system to what comes from him. If information pops up in his mind that are disturbing or improper and he identifies with that, one may infuse them into the course participants.

As shown in the *Our Knowledge is Just Drops in the Ocean* documentary, and as proved by episodes of the life of yogis (like Sri Ramakrishna), our past, even if it is healed (“forgiven”), is imbedded in our energy system and thus can be subconsciously communicated – by thought, touch or speech, to others. Thus special training is needed for blocking these information flows from reaching others.

Texts like *Gorakṣaśatakam* (Timčák 1991, Brzezinski 2015) says that *prāṇāyāma* is able to “burn up” these inharmonious information sources (*vāsanās*). Other texts mention tapas as the best means, without specifying the details. The Steinerian practice adapted by Popper (Popper 1988) in his preparatory practices train the mind to observe the thought-field and to avoid identification with the undesirable thought or emotions.

Ṣaṭkarmas not only purify the physical systems of our body, but also take away energies carrying harmful information. *Mitāhāra* – if we offer yoga nidrā sessions, we should have a sattvic diet. The basic recommendation would be a vegetarian diet. It could be also vegan or vitarian diet, but it depends on one’s constitution, age, climate and motivation.

Aparigraha as one of the *yamas* helps us to avoid the feeling of wanting to own the process of yoga nidrā and may cover the desire to be successful and/or have the admiration or acknowledgement of the class participants. Kindness towards all (without being submissive or too meek) is also beneficial as it cancels any possible negative thought or feeling. It thus helps maintaining constructive states of mind. Realizing the map of our competences (knowing where they end and not crossing over them) is important in case of decision-making regarding the visual/imaging parts of the yoga nidrā.

10 Points to Take Care Before, During and After the Yoga Nidrā

The teacher has to have enough personal experience with relaxation and yoga nidrā. Ideally it means years of training (Bharati 2013). One should then teach others that which we have securely mastered on a yoga teacher training course.

One also has to realize that during the relaxation, the teacher, as well as the participants, enter a state of mind that is more subtle than the usual wakeful state. In that state we are linked to all the participants through an energy and information continuum that even if we would be silent, communicates to all those present our state of being. The teacher of the yoga nidrā usually has a greater influence on the information flow than the rest of the group.

There are a number of points that have to be mastered. To discuss any issues that may need special attention with the participants. It is necessary to take care for possible side effects of the verbally induced mental situations.

- If we feel that there are hypersensitive persons in the group, it is imperative to be very careful about suggestive wording.
- The āchārya has to have the ability to visualize or feel the points that he communicates to the participants.
- It is also important to be thoroughly familiar with the usual effect of the selected archetypal or other image.
- It is not good to use “hypnotic” or suggestive words or voicing.
- Avoid suggesting “full”, “total” or other state descriptions that may not be available to the participants and may cause a feeling of unworthiness, may lower self esteem or self image.
- The ability to relax from any personal feeling (attraction, repulsion) towards any of the participants.
- To stay focused and relax from tendencies of mind to wander.
- To communicate the process of yoga nidrā without the desire to influence.
- To attune and stay in a state of *saṁtoṣa* during the process.
- To stay fully attuned to the process of yoga nidrā.

It may happen that one or more persons get into such a deep state of relaxation that could be better called deep meditation. One can find this out when after the end of yoga nidrā the person does not move, but stays in the śavāsana. First check, whether the person is not just sleeping (it has characteristic breathing pattern). One should not get disturbed by this as usually establishing vocal communication signals to a person in deep yoga nidrā regarding the need to bring the yoga nidrā to an end brings the attention of the practitioner into the usual state of wakefulness. A deeper yoga nidrā happens sometimes when the practitioner went to a meditative state and needs more time for coming back. Below are some further notes regarding such a case.

11 Deep Yoga Nidrā

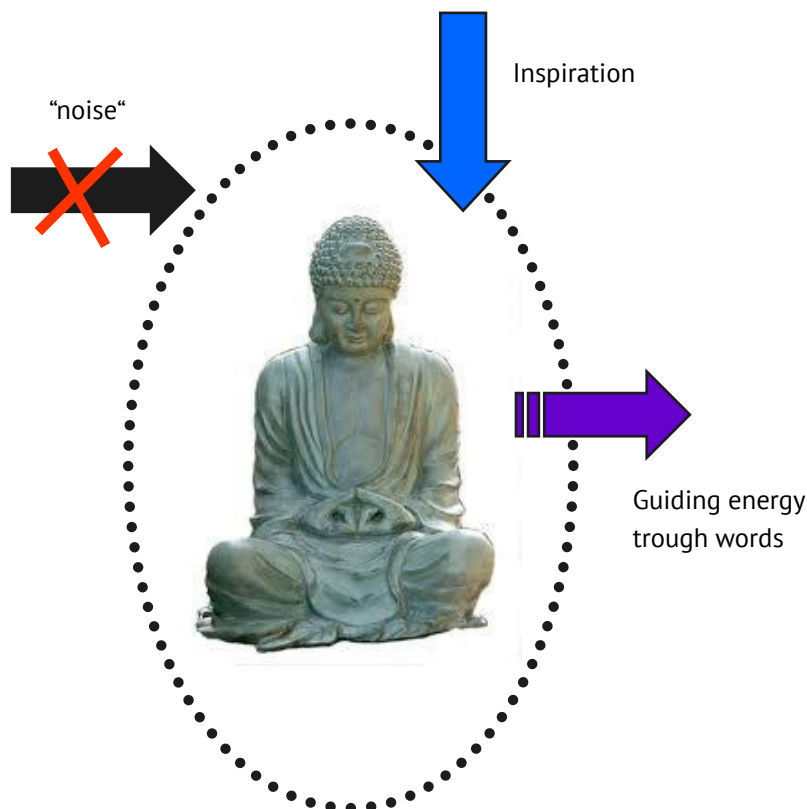
In case of very deep state of yoga nidrā, one is often facing non-ordinary states of consciousness. In delta dominant states of mind, where the breathing nearly stops, the experience from that level is very difficult to bring to the usual level of consciousness.

Further, people, who in delta dominant stages of yoga nidrā, experience the joy of Being and often show unwillingness to return “quickly” to the ordinary level of consciousness, where *ānanda* is more veiled.

If the return to the usual state of being is needed, one can make a gentle tactile contact on a culturally neutral part of the body (e.g. abdominal wall, forehead). This usually brings the attention back to the “outer world”. Still, it may also bring a sense of discomfort due to the feeling of being without the ability to have influence on the happenings around the practitioner.

Vocal contact is softer and it serves equally well. We should do this from a culturally acceptable distance. The message could be that the relaxation has ended and thus it would be nice if the person would gently deepen the breath, feel the body, move gently the fingers of hands and feet. One can see the effect of the non-verbal or verbal communication by observing the movement of the chest, abdomen or limbs. Both approaches need time. It is also good, if 2–3 nicely attuned people stay around the person, as he/she perceives the happenings around, but needs time to come to a movement.

Fig. 4.
The full yoga nidrā information flow, where the outer and mental noises are blocked, the teacher is attuned to inner sources of inspiration and thus the verbal guidance is perfect.



12 Obstacles in Experiencing Yoga Nidrā by Participants

There is a number of obstacles preventing yoga nidrā to happen, that usually stem from an inner insecurity of the practitioner, fear of letting go, stress related tension, illness, etc. Below are some of behavioural patterns that have to be resolved before yoga nidrā (even though it may take some time):

- Inability to close eyes (fear of loss of control of happening around the practitioner, curiosity regarding what do the others, etc.);
- Inability to relax (too much bodily or mental stress);
- Cramps (dehydration, fatigue, stress);
- Inability to let the thoughts go (desire to control the process, too busy mind, etc.);
- Falling always asleep (tiredness, lack of mental discipline or – the person is not yet ready for yoga nidrā).

Also, one should go to yoga nidrā class only if one is sure that there is no recent emotional turmoil (negative of positive emotions) in one's mind. As mentioned, these states leave traces in the energy system and during the yoga nidrā could get communicated to others, though without an intention to do so.

What to do, if we are in such situation?

- Have a short relaxation or meditation first;
- Get tuned in and invite a higher help.

13 Additional Training for Making the Yoga Nidrā Experience Deeper

For improving our ability to guide yoga nidrā one can apply a number of yogic techniques, some of which are listed below:

- *Prāṇāyāma* (see, e.g., the Patañjali *Yoga Sūtras*; Bharati 2001, 2013, 2015, 2016; *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*; Timčák 2007);
- *Trātak* (one of the *ṣaṭkarmas*; see, e.g., *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*);
- *Ajapa japa* (see, e.g., Satyananda 1981; *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*).

Some of the mental kriyās of the Bihar School of Yoga (Satyananda 1981) are:

- *Chittākās dhāraṇā*;
- *Antar mauna*.

Some of the applicable mental kriyās of swami Gitananda (Gitananda 1972) are:

- *Bhrūmadhya bindu dhāraṇā*;
- *Ājñā bindu dhāraṇā*.

The Himalayan School of Yoga uses the 61 point relaxation (Rama 2016). The *Vāsiṣṭha-saṃhitā* (Kupalayananda *et al.* 1969) uses for *pratyāhāra* the practice using 18 vital points with a similar result.

It is beneficial to leave some time for feedback after the yoga nidrā session. When the yoga nidrā is finished, it is good not to forget to thank the Absolute, that one have been able to try to help people in getting some peace of mind or to a state close to refreshed alertness. If you felt inspired during the yoga nidrā, never think that inspiration comes just out of your effort, as usually it comes from higher levels of existence. If one is sincere in one's yoga, regardless the visible levels of success, one is always getting help. Only we are usually not aware who is helping us.

14 Conclusions

Yoga nidrā as we know it now, is a tool that developed from the śavāsana practice and has many other dimensions that have been linked to it through yogic inspiration and homonyms. It enables intensive de-stressing and a preparation for meditation. Its positive influence on the function of brain and mind was proved by research. For the teachers – *āchāryas* – who teach the yoga nidrā it is important to master their mental processes, so that no subliminal mental suggestion flows from their mind to those of the participants.

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