

Yoga Nidra: How Doing Nothing Can Lead to Something

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By Sheila Walsh

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Yoga nidra, a form of meditative relaxation and spiritual inquiry, is done lying down. No need to do pretzel poses or show your stamina and athleticism...all you need to do is let go.

Open a magazine, turn on a TV or browse a bookstore, and you'll inevitably be bombarded by yet another way to improve yourself -- whether that means shrinking your derriere in time for bikini season or attaining a higher calling for your big toe. It's enough to make you want to hurl that magazine and spend an afternoon becoming one with your sofa while eating cookie dough ice cream.

That's why I love yoga nidra: It's a personal growth opportunity you can do while lying on your back. Yoga nidra, also known as "yogic sleep," is a form of deep relaxation that involves lying still and listening to a series of instructions akin to a guided meditation.

Very little, if any, physical movement takes place during the session. Even if you fall asleep, you'll still benefit - or at least that's what yoga nidra teachers claim.

A skeptic by nature, I had my doubts about yoga nidra. But now I'm a believer. The practice has helped me sleep better at night, relieve anxiety and energize myself before an evening out.

Yoga without movement

Is it really possible to do yoga without moving? Yoga, contrary to popular belief, doesn't necessarily need to include physical movement. Though most Americans would categorize yoga as a form of exercise or stretching, the practice of yoga has a much broader goal of uniting body, soul and spirit.

Only some forms of yoga involve physical movement, and yoga nidra is not one of them. The stretches and postures (asanas) that are taught in a typical American yoga class comprise just one of yoga's areas of focus. The other focal areas include meditation, ethical guidelines, an ability to concentrate, breathing and transcendence of the self. This is where yoga nidra comes in.

"We use yoga nidra to investigate and go beyond our limiting beliefs and conditioning so that we may live a contented life free of conflict, anxiety, fear, dissatisfaction and suffering," said Richard Miller, Ph.D., author of *Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga* (Sounds True Inc., 2005), in a recent interview.

Sounds nice in theory, but what can one expect during a yoga nidra class? Primal screaming and group hugs? No and no ... just 20 to 45 minutes of relaxation, guided imagery and meditation, all aimed at the pursuit of what Miller calls "pure awareness." Here are some of the highlights of a typical session:

* Find a comfortable position on your back (known among yogis as "shavasana" or "corpse") and begin listening to a series of instructions spoken by the teacher or on a yoga nidra CD.



* Focus on an intention -- your deepest heart's desire, whether that be inner peace or healthier relationships with others, etc.

* Conduct a systematic body scan, focusing your full awareness on parts of your body (one at a time).

* Bring up an emotion you find challenging, then think of its opposite. "By exploring the opposite emotion, it allows people to find alternatives they weren't aware of," Miller explains. For example, "when a person has a feeling or belief of 'I'm not lovable' and then contemplates [the] opposite of 'I'm lovable,' they may come upon an even deeper understanding that 'I am lovable as I am' or 'I am love ... expressing itself in every moment perfectly.'"

Because yoga nidra doesn't involve physical exertion, anyone can practice it, regardless of health condition or level of physical fitness. If lying flat causes someone too much pain, they can still do yoga nidra either sitting or standing up. "Anyone can do yoga nidra from age 4 to 104-plus years of age," Miller says. "Think of it as a form of meditative psychological, physical and spiritual inquiry."

'Can it help me lose weight?'

Some people have used this process of inner inquiry to overcome personal challenges (e.g., weight loss). "In yoga nidra, people get to inquire into what prevents them from losing weight, to examine the various psychological issues that may be preventing them from moving forward," Miller says. "Also, the 'intention' that is a part of the practice can be developed and tailored to a person's particular need, such as losing weight so that they create and hold a deep intention and conviction of losing weight."

For nidra newbies, Miller suggests starting out with an instructor at a yoga studio. "It's always better to start in a class to get your questions answered. The instruction in a class is tailored to individuals," he says. Though yoga nidra is growing in popularity, most yoga studios don't offer classes. If that's the case, Miller suggests trying a yoga nidra CD.

He finds yoga nidra's focus on awareness to be particularly helpful for people facing post-traumatic stress, including the soldiers returning from the war in Iraq who participated in a recent nine-week preliminary study conducted by Miller. Though more studies are needed to demonstrate yoga nidra's long-term effectiveness for post-traumatic stress, Miller reports that the soldiers in his study experienced much improvement, including an increased ease in falling asleep.

"It's through the body that we heal," Miller says. "The mind knows the past; the body knows the present."

I, too, find that yoga nidra helps me deal with insomnia. When I can't sleep, there's nothing better than a yoga nidra CD to knock me out (without resorting to sleeping pills). Even if sleep eludes me, the half hour of deep relaxation certainly beats twisting in the sheets.

When I'm doing yoga nidra, difficult people and stressful situations fade away -- a skill I find invaluable during times of change and uncertainty. Stress still sometimes causes me to wake in the middle of the night, but now I know there is a place of refuge within myself where I can let go and rest deeply, whether or not I sleep.