

**DESPITE RECENT BUZZ SURROUNDING** the inspiring 'slow movement', many of us continue living life in the fast lane; breathlessly motoring along full throttle, filling most waking moments doing rather than being ... but at what cost? Perhaps the root cause of common stress-related disorders is that we don't consistently stop to relax and really observe our mind-body relationship? When we sleepwalk through life blindfolded like this, connection with self becomes lost in transit; we seek happiness and healing externally, neglecting intuitive potential within. Systematic meditative techniques of Yoga Nidra – or 'yogic sleep' – could hold the key to awakening innate calmness often clouded by chaos; an ancient belief backed by growing scientific evidence.






# Yogā Nidra

Wake up to life with yogic sleep  
By Dianna Timmins





“The practice is like sending the body to sleep while the mind remains awake and alert.”

Yoga Nidra was practiced among eastern traditions for thousands of years before Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati ultimately revived it worldwide in the 20th century. Following studies with Swami Sivananda, he founded Bihar School of Yoga (India) in 1964 and began teaching relaxation techniques devised from the traditional Tantric practices of Nyasa. Numerous research-based adaptations now exist, including; Yogi Amrit Desai's Amrit Method, and iRest Yoga Nidra (now a registered trademark in the US) developed by American Clinical Psychologist, Dr Richard Miller. Different methods vary slightly, but each progressively enters deeper states of relaxation – not slumber, despite translation – for health and harmony.

“The word ‘nidra’ means ‘sleep’ in Sanskrit, but has double meaning,” says Byron Bay-based Clinical Psychologist and senior yoga teacher, Dr Lauren Tober. “Firstly, the practice is like sending the

body to sleep while the mind remains awake and alert. The second meaning references the idea that many of us walk around in an existence comparable to being asleep, and Yoga Nidra helps us to wake up to our true nature.”

### Scientific stages of Yoga Nidra

As lying down in savasana (corpse pose) – or sitting upright if preferred – is traditionally maintained for the duration of Yoga Nidra, comfort is imperative and can be optimised by utilising blankets, bolsters and eye pillows. “A cushion or rolled blanket can be placed beneath your knees for support if there is discomfort in your lower back. If lying supine aggravates a cough, you may need to lie on your side. If you become physically uncomfortable, observe this and move slowly. Closing your eyes assists the mind to go inwards, but you can open them whenever you need,” guides renowned Satyananda Yoga expert, Swami Muktibodhananda.

Yoga Nidra's gentle step-by-step processes are often externally guided, but potentially self-applied over time. Practitioners internalise awareness by setting an intention or heartfelt desire; sequentially scanning and sensing body parts; tuning into natural breath rhythm; cultivating energy awareness; and witnessing arising emotions, thoughts and beliefs. Finally, resting in total awareness generates profound joy. Where appropriate, the Amrit Method includes added spiritual dimension by connecting to Higher Self, spirit guides and lineages.

According to senior Amrit Yoga teacher and founding director of Melbourne's Prana House, Julie Gargano, intentions are transformational tools based on the principle, ‘where attention goes, energy follows’. “Intentions are dropped in when body and mind are deeply relaxed and the unconscious mind is receptive, providing enormous organising power to masterfully undo programming and dissolve karmic



impressions. They should be worded in present tense, concise and precise, and seen as directions rather than destinations – with no attachment to end result,” she suggests.

Yoga Nidra's structured techniques promote vast physiological benefits, including rebalancing logical left-brain and intuitive right-brain hemispheres.

According to Swami Muktibodhananda, rotation of physical awareness generally commences from the right hand or foot, satisfying the practical, extroverted left-brain. This, she says, aligns the sequence with the brain's cortical homunculus; that is, how the brain views the body from inside.

Recent studies published in the *Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology* also linked consistent practice with improved blood pressure and heart rate variables, and controlled blood glucose levels and diabetes symptoms. As Dr Tober explains, Yoga Nidra also rebalances the nervous system.

“Constant arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (fight-or-flight) can result in physical and psychological imbalance.

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### Take an iRest Nap

It's been said that 20 minutes of Yoga Nidra equates to approximately three hours of sleep! With this in mind, Dr Richard Miller offers an incredibly rejuvenating practice of an iRest Yoga Nidra Nap, which helps you fall into short periods of restful sleep (10-20 minutes) and awaken recharged. This practice promotes overall resiliency and claims to:

- Increase alertness and creativity
- Enhance sex life
- Strengthen memory
- Reduce risk of heart attack
- Enable decision-making
- Overcome acute or chronic pain
- Reduce stress and depression
- Help you lose weight and look younger
- Improve perception, stamina and motor skills

Download the free 10-minute Mp3 iRest Nap practice and a 20-minute Mp3 night time sleep practice to help you fall asleep (and stay asleep!) at [www.irest.us/NourishRestfulSleep](http://www.irest.us/NourishRestfulSleep).

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**“Yoga Nidra lifts the fog so we can traverse our path with greater clarity, more slow than go...”**

By bringing attention to body and breath, the nervous system naturally relaxes. Additionally, when we welcome sensation, breath, emotions and thoughts as they are, we experience profound peace. As such, Yoga Nidra calms the sympathetic nervous system and triggers the parasympathetic nervous system (rest-and-digest), rebalancing the two,” she says.

### Power of thoughts

The Black Dog Institute estimates one in five Australians aged 16–85 will be affected by some form of mental illness in any one year; most commonly anxiety and depression. Yoga Nidra’s potential to reduce this statistic has recently gained scientific credibility, and hence widely integrated into clinical and corporate settings. A 2006 study at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre (USA) demonstrated how an iRest Yoga Nidra program may alleviate post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms – including anxiety – among soldiers returning from war. Additionally, a 2011 study published in the *International Journal*

### Self-guided relaxation

Dr Lauren Tober shares some simple self-guided Yoga Nidra tips:

- Sit or lie down, making yourself as comfortable as possible.
- Close your eyes and set an intention for your practice; perhaps ‘I am relaxed’, or ‘I welcome life just as it is’.
- Allow your senses to be open; noticing sounds, smells, taste, touch and sight.
- Slowly rotate your attention throughout your body, noticing arising sensations; begin in your mouth, through your face, scalp, neck, arms, hands, torso, legs and feet.
- Finally, sense your entire body at once.
- Move your focus to your breath, counting it backwards from seven to one; inhale and exhale for seven, inhale and exhale for six, and so on.
- Let go of counting the breath and simply relax here as long as you like: nothing to do, nowhere to go, simply being.
- Slowly open your eyes and return to your day refreshed!

Download a free guided meditation by Dr Tober at [www.laurentober.com/ayj](http://www.laurentober.com/ayj)

of Yoga revealed significantly decreased depression and anxiety among patients with menstrual irregularities.

Senior iRest trainer and certified teacher at Gold Coast’s Prema Yoga Studio, Fuyuko Toyota, endured chronic depression until her acclaimed teacher, Donna Farhi, threw her a lifeline by connecting her with Yoga Nidra in 2006. “Yoga Nidra recognises five sheaths (koshas) that cover our true nature: body, breath, emotion, cognition and joy. iRest specifically recognises a sixth, ‘I-thought’.

We often misidentify ourselves with these sheaths; like a lightbulb covered by thin layers of tissue that dims the light. When I was depressed, I was enmeshed with sadness and belief that ‘I am not good enough’. I was identifying myself with those emotions and beliefs as who I am,” shares Toyota.

Mirroring Rumi’s poem ‘The Guest House’, iRest Yoga Nidra not only encourages awareness of senses, emotions and thoughts – they welcome them as messengers without trying to alter them. “By welcoming, magic happens. It liberates us, as we see they are simply objects arising in our awareness. Through meditative enquiry, we recognise we are this unchanging awareness itself. This realisation frees us and returns us to our true home. Awakening to my true nature of



pure awareness evaporated my depression," adds Toyota.

Fellow senior iRest trainer and Integrative Restoration Institute's (USA) director of operations, Stephanie Lopez, was freed from a former lifetime of anxiety when she discovered Yoga Nidra in 2002. "I was blown away by the practice. All sense of separation dissolved. It brought about a deep sense of calm, balance and peace, and has changed the nature of how I meet myself and life," declares Lopez, who regularly hosts workshops and teacher trainings in Australia with Toyota.

### Peaceful sleep

If you have snoozed through Yoga Nidra before, don't despair; you wouldn't be alone, and Gargano assures work is still being done. "The idea of falling asleep is a subtle part of the practice where one phases in and out of sleep and 'yogic sleep state', also known as turiya (highest state of transcendental consciousness). If a student literally falls asleep throughout the practice, their unconscious mind is still receiving instructions and intentions and

therefore able to experience the many benefits," she says.

Contrastingly, drifting off isn't easy for the estimated 90 percent of Australians who experience sleep disorders at some point in their lives; commonly caused by stress and chronic pain. At night, minds can become preoccupied by 'what-ifs', 'should-haves' and 'must-dos', or relentless physical aches.

The required eight hours of shut-eye becomes sabotaged, and well-being suffers. In *Yoga: the Path to Holistic Health* (Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2001), B.K.S. Iyengar says simply lying in savasana 'helps toward refreshing, dreamless sleep, especially for those with sleep disorders'. The practice of Yoga Nidra in this position offers even greater potential for peaceful sleep by directly addressing obstacles.

"If we simply meet pain as a concept, we move into our habitual patterns and reactions to pain. However, in iRest Yoga Nidra, we inquire into the actual direct, felt-sense experience of intense sensations as it arises in the body. When we meet sensation as it is, many find that it opens its

inherent vibration. The sensation may become less intense and may even dissolve for periods of time," explains Lopez.

The pattern of Yoga Nidra's nurturing cycle is clear; sleep better, feel better – and vice-versa. This relationship is pivotal in the eventual goal of applying Yoga Nidra's principles beyond savasana and the four corners of our bed. Even if just for fleeting moments, pure awareness of yogic sleep can be integrated into waking hours; perhaps simply noticing how breathing alters in response to situations, or observing vibrant hues of a rainbow that fills a cloudy sky with promise. Yoga Nidra lifts the fog so we can traverse our path with greater clarity, more slow than go; this fosters deeper connection not only with our Self, but the world around us.

"I feel a deep interconnectedness with life through living this practice. I believe I am a better friend, spouse and human being because of it," inspires Lopez. ☯

Prana House are hosting Yoga Nidra teacher training in Melbourne, November 2015; visit [www.pranahouse.com.au](http://www.pranahouse.com.au) for details.



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