

Yoga Nidra

The Contemplative Heart of Yoga

by **Richard Miller, PhD**

I was first introduced to the rudiments of Yoga Nidra (Yoga = knowingly awake as the unconditioned, ineffable mystery that underlies all of life; Nidra = across all states of waking and sleeping consciousness) in 1970 when, at the end of my initial lesson in hatha yoga, our instructor led us through a prolonged Shavasana, the traditional yogic pose for inducing deep relaxation. The instructor first led us through a gentle form of progressive relaxation by having us tense, then release, various parts of our body. She then guided us through a traditional practice of Shavayatra, inviting us to experience sensations in various parts of our body, beginning in our mouth, and ending in our toes.

She then guided us in perceiving opposing perceptions such as warmth-coolness, heavy-lightness, and tension-relaxation; then opposing emotions such as peace-anger, happiness-sadness, and calm-anxious. I was invited to rotate my attention through the sensations elicited by these various pairs of opposites until I was able to embody these opposing feelings with neither attachment nor aversion to what I was experiencing. Finally we were invited to simply “be,” while basking in the sensations elicited by these various experiences.

“The peace that passeth all understanding”

I drove home that evening feeling utterly relaxed and expansively present. For the first time in years, I felt free of all conflict, radiantly joyful and in harmony—at one—with the entire universe. I experienced life as being perfect just as it is and felt my self to be a spacious, non-localised presence, everywhere, and nowhere specific, yet undeniably present. Instead of my usual experience of being in the world, I was having a non-mental experience of the world being in me. While this experience faded over several weeks, it left behind in me a strong resonance and longing to consciously awaken into and fully abide as this feeling of non-separate presence. It awakened in me an intense desire to deeply understand the art of yoga and this process of Shavasana, which I would later learn as Yoga Nidra. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my yearning would lead me to study with some of the most renowned teachers in the world as well as to become a teacher of Nondual Yoga and an adept in the application of Yoga Nidra through years of personal practice, guiding thousands of students in its process, conducting research, and running a non-profit Yoga Nidra training institute.¹

¹ Integrative Restoration Institute: www.irest.u

The Open Secret

During that first experience with Yoga Nidra, I recovered a secret that I now know is open to everyone who is interested in discovering true peace and equanimity of mind and body that is always present, incapable of being disturbed, no matter our circumstance or situation that life brings to our table. I also know that if I can realise it, so can you. The key to inner peace is not an impenetrable secret. While it may seem at first distant and obscure, it is actually always living in plain sight, readily available. This is why our true nature of innate peace and equanimity is often referred to as an “open secret.”

Most of us only know a kind of fragile peace of mind, which is easily disturbed by the onslaughts of daily life. What I discovered through the practice of Yoga Nidra is an innate, unshakable equilibrium that is present under all circumstances. If it's not unshakable, it not true peace. I know that what Yoga Nidra reveals is true peace because I've tested it over many years, throughout all my experiences of daily life. The true litmus test of inner peace comes not in the meditation hall or on the yoga mat, but in our daily relationships with family, peers, co-workers and strangers in the marketplace. Yoga Nidra revealed to me an innate peace of pure Presence, Being and Equanimity that has remained steadfast and true during even the most intense and difficult times of physical pain, interpersonal conflict, and current events. I've uncovered and tested it. Now it is my heartfelt desire to share it with you.

Setting Up Your Practice Space

Yoga Nidra may be practiced in a variety of positions: lying down, sitting up, standing, and even walking around.

When lying down, set up your practice space by placing a bolster, supported by a block, lengthwise on your mat so that your bolster forms a gentle slant. Lie down with your sitting bones on your mat, so that your bolster supports your torso from your low back to the back of your head. Place a folded blanket or towel under your head for a pillow, and if it's comfortable, an eye-bag over your eyes to help quiet your mind and soothe you into your practice.

Welcoming Everything Just As It Is

Everything you experience during Yoga Nidra is a messenger, so welcome every positive and negative sensation, feeling, thought, and image with curiosity and openness, while inquiring as to the wisdom they're offering you, for each is a guide sent from beyond, welcoming you to experience greater understanding, peace, joy, and harmony with yourself, and the world around you...

Beginning Your Practice

Begin your practice of Yoga Nidra by opening your senses... Welcome sounds, smells, tastes, color and light, sensations, feelings and thoughts in your body... while releasing excessive tension, and feeling ease and relaxation spreading throughout your entire body and mind...

1. Connecting to Your Heartfelt Purpose: Experience your heart's deepest longing, something that you desire more than anything else in life. Perhaps it is a desire for health, wellbeing, or awakening to everlasting peace and equanimity. Feel your Heartfelt Purpose with your entire body while imagining and experiencing it, in this moment, as already true.

2. Setting an Intention: Reflect on your intention for your practice today. It might be to relax and rest, or to inquire into a particular sensation, emotion, or belief. Whatever your intention, welcome it now, and affirm it with your entire body and mind.

3. Identifying Your Inner Resource: Bring attention to your Inner Resource, a safe haven or sanctuary within your body where you experience sensations of feeling grounded, at ease, secure, peaceful, calm or a pervasive sense of wellbeing. If helpful, imagine a person, place in nature or prior experience that helps you feel secure and at ease, and evokes the felt-sense of wellbeing and calm throughout your body. Continually interweave the felt-sense of your Inner Resource throughout your practice of Yoga Nidra and daily life, so that you continually experience feeling grounded, secure, and at ease during all circumstances that life brings to your table.

4. Sensing the Body: Scanning your body, welcome sensations in your jaw, mouth, ears, nose, eyes... the cool caress of air on your forehead... scalp... back of the neck... inner walls of your throat. Welcome sensation in your left shoulder... left arm... palm of the left hand... right shoulder... right arm... palm of the right hand. Feel both arms and palms simultaneously. Sense your torso, front... and back... inside... and outside... pelvis... and sacrum. Welcome sensations in the left hip... leg... foot... right hip... leg... foot. Sense the entire body as a field of vibrant sensation... shimmering and expansively radiant into all directions within and around you.

5. Sensing the Breath: Sense the body breathing itself... the flow of air and sensation in your nostrils... throat... torso... the gentle rise and release of the abdomen with each breath. During exhalation, release tension throughout your entire body... relaxing even more deeply during inhalation... each breath alive, as flowing energy coursing throughout your entire body.

6. Sensing Feelings and Emotions: Without judging or trying to change anything, welcome feelings that are present such as heaviness... warmth... or tension... and emotions, such as worry... sadness... or anger... as well as their opposites. If you feel worry, invite into your body feelings of serenity; if you feel tension, invite in ease and

well-being. Sense, experience and welcome where and how you experience each opposite of feeling and emotion in your body... just as it is, however it is.

7. Sensing Thoughts: Without judging or trying to change anything, note and welcome thoughts, memories, and images that are spontaneously unfolding. Welcome in particular beliefs that you take to be true about yourself. As you experience a belief, thought, memory, or image, also bring to mind and experience its opposite, contemplating each opposite in turn... welcoming your experience just as it is, whatever it is.

8. Sensing Joy: Welcome sensations of joy, bliss, or well-being emanating from your heart or belly... joy... bliss... and wellbeing spreading throughout your entire body... and into the space around you. With every breath, experience sensations of warmth... joy... ease... and wellbeing radiating throughout your entire body.

9. Sensing Pure I-ness: Be aware of the sense of I-ness or personality that you take yourself to be. Notice how this felt-sense of I-ness resonates in your body when you say your name, or when you affirm: "I'm hungry," "I'm happy," or "I'm upset."

Now feel yourself as the observing witness that is consciously aware of all the movements that are present in your body and mind... feel your self as conscious awareness, aware of itself... set thinking aside ... and dissolve into being awareness... spacious and open... awake and aware of itself.

10. Integrating Yoga Nidra into Daily Life: When you feel ready to complete your practice of Yoga Nidra, reflect on the journey you've just taken. Affirm how the feeling of awareness is always present, as an experience in your body of unchanging peace, wellbeing, and equanimity that underlies every changing circumstance, in which you can deeply relax and feel at home, safe, and at peace, no matter your circumstance.

Allow the practice of Yoga Nidra to integrate into your every worldly experience. Imagine engaging in a conversation or having a pleasant or difficult moment, while experiencing the felt-sense of yourself as unchanging awareness, peace and wellbeing in which your every experience is unfolding.

When you're ready and at your own pace, transition back to your eyes-open, waking life, re-orienting to your surroundings, coming fully back, alert, wide awake, and grateful for taking this time for yourself and the practice of Yoga Nidra.

Relax this Christmas with a Guided Meditation by Richard Miller

Richard has kindly provided an MP3 link from his website, www.irest.us, so that you can experience a deep, relaxing meditation, guided by his voice.

Available from
<http://www.irest.us/projects/irest>