

In Need of Yoga Nidra

In today's busy world, yogic sleep may be the essential tool for rejuvenation.

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

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I'm stretched out during my first 45-minute Yoga Nidra class, body cradled in a fully supported Savasana (Corpse Pose), limbs limp, breath quiet, thoughts drifting by. In the distance, the teacher's voice blends with the sound of Tibetan bells. All traces of the day fade away, time stops, and stillness washes over me. So this is Yoga Nidra!

Also known as yogic sleep or sleep with awareness, Yoga Nidra is an ancient practice that is rapidly gaining popularity in the West. It is intended to induce full-body relaxation and a deep meditative state of consciousness. "We live in a chronically exhausted, overstimulated world," says Los Angeles yoga teacher Rod Stryker. "Yoga Nidra is a systematic method of complete relaxation, holistically addressing our physiological, neurological, and subconscious needs."

During a typical class, teachers use a variety of techniques—including guided imagery and body scanning—to aid relaxation. And unlike a quick Savasana at the end of asana practice, Yoga Nidra allows enough time for practitioners to physiologically and psychologically sink into it—at least 20 to 45 minutes, says San Francisco Bay Area yoga teacher Jennifer Morrice.

The ancient yoga text the Mandukya Upanishads refers to four different stages of Yoga Nidra. The practitioner begins by quieting the overactive conscious mind, then moves into a meditative state, gradually finding a state of "ultimate harmony," in which the brain waves slow down and a subtle euphoria emerges. Though most practitioners don't slip easily into the more advanced stages, they still tend to emerge feeling rejuvenated. "Yoga Nidra uniquely unwinds the nervous system," Stryker says, "which is the foundation of the body's well-being."

Yoga Nidra is best done under the guidance of a trained teacher, but not to worry if a class hasn't arrived at your local studio. Teachers like Stryker, Shiva Rea, and Jnaneshvara Bharati, to name a few, now offer Yoga Nidra workshops and CDs; you can do a simple search for them online.