

April 5, 2008

Yoga Nidra offers some serious relaxation

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For The Post-Crescent*



If there's one thing that by nature should be easy, it's relaxing. Just kick back, put your feet up and breathe deeply, right?

But just about the time you get good and comfy, thoughts start racing around your mind. Or, should you park it in front of the TV to unwind, your body and brain, stimulated by light and sound, are never at ease at all.

That's where Yoga Nidra can intervene. This state of consciousness, also known as yogic sleep, requires none of the contortions of the more familiar forms of yoga. Instead, practitioners

simply lie on their backs or sit comfortably in a chair, allowing themselves to be led to a sleep-like state of deep relaxation.

"It's hard to wrap it up into a few words to describe how wonderful it is," said Julie Thiel, a certified yoga instructor at Trillium Yoga in Appleton who integrates Yoga Nidra into the last 15 minutes of the classes she teaches.

"It's sort of the antithesis of what Westerners think yoga is," Trillium Yoga owner Tina Romenesko said. "Yoga Nidra can be done by anyone. It can be experienced by someone lying in a hospital bed or by someone with severe physical restrictions."

Relaxing in layers

While yoga certainly qualifies as an activity, Yoga Nidra is anything but. It is a state beyond activity, in which the body is still and the mind is kept occupied in the present.

"What really happens is there's a physical body and a psycho-emotional layer, and in between, there is an energy body," Romenesko said. "When people drop into that place, there's a lot of healing that can happen."

But it's not as simple as "dropping into" deep relaxation. "(Yoga Nidra is) really considered a science because it takes specific steps to get there," said Debbie Williamson, founder and owner of Midwest Power Yoga in Appleton.

Those sequential steps include relaxing physically, setting an intention, becoming aware of breath, relaxing mentally and emotionally and summoning various images culminating in an open-ended, visualized journey.

That's a lot to do in the 20- to 30-minute duration of a typical Yoga Nidra session. The good news: There's an instructor to step you through it, reading a script that peels back the layers of discomfort and distraction that can prevent true relaxation.

Calming the body, quieting the mind

Williamson, who leads her students in sessions of Yoga Nidra once a quarter, likes to begin the process with the physical activity of slow flow yoga.

"Most people have trouble calming their minds, and it's much easier after physically moving the body," she said. "It gets the kinks out and gets you to a place of rest."

"Working through the physical body, the mind starts to relax without even thinking about it," Thiel said.

Setting a first-person, present-tense intention — such as "I am a creative person" — early in the process helps embed that idea in the unconscious, where, according to Williamson, it can create clarity. "We bring awareness away from the body to the subtle energy inside, our life force," she said.

One step in doing that is relaxing the entire body systematically, part by part, which occurs in the earliest stages on the path to Yoga Nidra. Another important element of the process involves reining in a mind endlessly mulling the debris of daily life.

"(Yoga Nidra) is a really brain-active form of relaxation that allows the mind to let go," Romenesko said.

Thiel put it this way: "Instead of zoning out, you're zoning in."

What they both mean is that the mind is kept moving, shifting its awareness first from the foot to the leg to the abdomen, then from hot to cold and from heavy to light, then from imagining a fire burning to picturing clouds blowing overhead. There's a lot of mental maneuvering to do, but none of it has anything to do with the crisis brewing at work or the bills needing to be paid at home.

"There's enough stimulus during the visualization to take away the day-to-day thinking," Thiel said.

Decreasing stress, increasing clarity

When you achieve Yoga Nidra, Williamson said, "There's really no thinking going on. You're just there and present and peaceful."

That, she said, is when clarity can shine through the fog of your mind: "You have all this stuff in your head, and once you lose that and are still and calm and relaxed and not trying to figure stuff out, all of a sudden, there it is. You see the doors that are open to you. You see the opportunities. You have more of a positive attitude about things."

Such a positive attitude has translated into real-world action for Williamson. During a particularly stressful time a few months ago, she stretched out for a session of Yoga Nidra and arose afterward with a clarity about ceasing procrastination, tackling several major tasks she had been avoiding.

"There's one big task left to complete, and it may take another Yoga Nidra," Williamson said. "I'm not quite finished with my taxes."