

## **“Sleep Yoga” for Sleepless Yogis**

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Balance. It's something we all strive for. Balance in movement and breath, balance in diet and digestion, balance in thought and action, to name a few examples. And of course we all know that yoga is the most practical, delightful way to achieve balance in all aspects of mind, body, and spirit.

And then there's sleep. Restful, restorative sleep is a matter of balance, too. Our bodies need to deeply rest for eight hours or more, at least one-third of each day. Therefore our sleep and waking are balanced when they are in a ratio of at least 1:2. This is one of the most fundamental dynamic relationships governing the life process. The quantity and quality of our sleep reflects our alignment, or lack of it, with the rhythms of night and day, the seasons, nature and the cosmos.

For many of us, this balance between waking and sleep is a delicate one. According to the latest annual survey conducted by the National Sleep Foundation, the average American sleeps only 6.9 hours on weeknights and 7.5 hours on weekends, and 24% of us get less sleep than we believe we need to feel fully awake the next day. The survey also found that over one-half (58%) of adults suffer insomnia a few nights a week or more. In other words, we are experiencing a nationwide epidemic of insomnia.

### **The stress of life**

What is the cause of this insomnia epidemic? Medical research indicates that stress is the most common cause of insomnia. And modern life is stressful all by itself. Whether we're aware of it or not, pollution, traffic, noise are all significant stressors, as are deadlines, overtime, rush-hour commuting, and sedentary occupations. Their combined, cumulative effect can not only keep us awake nights, but undermine our health and happiness as well.

The stressful nature of settled life has been recognized for centuries. Ancient ayurvedic physicians considered living in a village to be extremely stressful, notes Ketul, the founder of New York's Rasa Yoga and an authority on ayurvedic medicine. They urged their village-dwelling patients to take frequent retreats in the countryside to recover from the stresses of

village life. What irony, then, that most present-day city dwellers, who endure the exponentially greater stresses of urban life, would consider a sojourn in a village as not only non-stressful, but as a golden opportunity for rest and recuperation!

Overtaxing work schedules can also be a powerful inducement to insomnia. Americans work more hours and have less time off than any other industrialized nation. Sleep researchers have discovered a simple work/sleep equation: the more hours you work, the less you are likely to sleep. The same holds true for commuting: the longer you commute, the less sleep you get. As ever, it's a question of balance. Those who over-do, under-sleep.

### **Deeper than sleep?**

The Dalai Lama, interviewed in the Utne Reader, has called sleep our "[m]ost important meditation!...Not for nirvana, but for survival." His Holiness is quite right of course — we wouldn't survive long without our daily dose of "Vitamin S." And the connection between sleep and meditation runs even deeper than that.

Between waking and sleep lies a state that the ancient yogic seers called the *nirvikalpa*, the state free of thought-constructs. Modern science calls it the *hypnagogic* state. This is our natural gateway to the wild interior of our minds, and our common departure point for meditation, introspection, contemplation, dreams and sleep. There, unencumbered by the stresses and strains of daily life, our hearts unfold to dreams and wonder, and we catch a nightly glimpse of our original, divine nature.

This restful path to higher consciousness was well-traveled by the yogis of ages past. For example, verse 75 of *Vijnanabhairava* (Divine Consciousness), a millennium-old manual of yogic meditation practices, advises:

"When you are about to fall asleep and all external objects have faded from view, concentrate on the state between sleep and waking. There the Supreme Goddess will reveal herself."

In modern times, great scientists and artists have looked to the *hypnagogic* state as a font of creative inspiration. Einstein realized an important piece of his relativity theory while strolling on a sunbeam, deep in dream. Vincent Van Gogh used to say that the pictures came to him "as if in a dream." And the great conductor Arturo Toscanini used to enter the *hypnagogic* state during his concerts, as described in one of his recently published letters:

"Do you know that at the modulation of E flat [in the Adagio of Beethoven's Ninth] I always conduct with my eyes closed? I see extremely bright lights far, far away; I see shadows moving around, penetrated by rays that make them even more disembodied; I see flowers of the most charming shapes and colours. And the very music I'm conducting seems to descend from up there—I don't know where!"

So you see, that time you spend each night waiting for the ferry to Slumber Land need not be wasted. It can be a time of deep introspection and a rich source of insight. As a result, your sleep will become a spiritual practice and therefore, somewhat paradoxically, a vehicle for self-awakening.

### **Sleep yoga for sleepless yogis**

Daily yoga practice provides an excellent grounding in self-awareness and self-regulation, which are fundamental to **sounder sleep**. But what if you do practice yoga on a regular basis, yet you still can't sleep? For sleepless yogis, sometimes no more than a gentle nudge is required to "tip the balance" away from stress, and toward easier, more restful sleep.

Following is an abbreviated version of a technique that I teach in all my "healing sleep" workshops. In it, you'll focus on gentle, lulling physical movements synchronized with your breathing. Because physical movements are immediately present to the senses, it's easy to become deeply absorbed in this breath, this movement, this moment. Your body relaxes and your mind becomes very still. In that potent state, you can deeply rest, meditate, or sleep according to your present need. I call this practice "sleep yoga."

At first, have someone read the instructions to you as you practice. Soon you'll find it easy to practice on your own. Done at bedtime, these synchronized movements and breathing will deliver you to the shores of sleep. Alternately, you can use them as an adjunct to savasana (corpse pose) during your regular yoga practice. You will relax and meditate more deeply than ever.

**Step 1.** Lie on your back in bed, or on a soft mat or carpet on the floor. You can use a pillow to support your head and neck if you like. Do whatever you need to get comfortable.

**Step 2.** Bend your right elbow and bring the four fingertips of your right hand to lightly touch your sternum. (Your sternum is the vertical breastbone in the center of your chest, where the ribs come together.) Let your thumb come to rest somewhere on your chest, wherever it falls

naturally.

**Step 3.** Now do the same thing with your left hand. The tips of the four fingers of both hands rest on either side of the sternum. Your thumbs rest comfortably somewhere on your chest. (Figure 1.)

Your elbows may lie on the bed or floor, or they may rest against your ribs, whichever is most comfortable for you. Let your wrists, hands and fingers be at ease. The tips of your fingers rest lightly on your sternum. Do not press. No force is required.

**Step 4.** Slowly inhale. As you inhale, feel your chest rising and falling with your breath. As you slowly inhale, your chest rises a little bit. As you exhale, your chest sinks. Notice how your hands rise and fall with the movements of your chest. Touching your sternum with your fingertips makes it easier to feel the movement of your body as you inhale and exhale.

You may have been taught that it is correct to breathe a certain way—please set that aside for the moment. Just breathe naturally, without trying to do anything special. Breathing in, simply allow your breath to arrive. Breathing out, just allow your breath to flow out. It should be the easiest thing in the world.

**Step 5.** Now, turn your attention to your thumbs and the areas of your chest that lie directly under your thumbs. Notice how those areas of your chest rise as you inhale and fall as your exhale, and how your thumbs rise and fall with them.

Now, slowly inhale, and as you do, very slowly and gradually lift your thumbs a little bit. (Figure 2) Then, slowly exhale, and allow your thumbs to gradually come to rest on your chest as before.

Make the movements of the thumbs easy and gradual. For our purposes, easy, gradual movements are far more effective than quick, powerful ones.

Repeat six to eight times, synchronizing the movements with your breath. That means, however long it takes you to slowly inhale, that's how long it takes you gradually to lift your thumbs. However long it takes you to slowly exhale, that's how long it takes your thumbs gradually to come to rest on your chest.

Inhale, your chest rises, you lift your thumbs. Exhale, your chest sinks, you relax your thumbs. Take all the time you need to complete each breath.

When you move your thumbs like that, does the area of your chest under your thumbs move a little differently? Maybe the movement of your chest gets a little freer, a little fuller. Or, you may feel nothing in particular. Don't try to make anything happen. Just see what is.

**Step 6.** Pause, rest quietly for six or eight breaths. Feel the effect of what you have done. Notice any differences you may feel in the movement of your chest, in your hands, in your breathing or in your mood. Take the time to savor the profound stillness you have created within yourself.

**Steps 7-10.** Try the same procedure with your index, middle, ring, and little fingers in turn. For each finger, do six to eight movements synchronized with your breath, then rest for six to eight breaths or more. Do not hurry! Keep an open mind, and you will make many wonderful self-discoveries along the way.

Little by little, allow these gentle, synchronized movements and breathing to deliver you to the shores of sleep. Once you're there, just relax and enjoy the scenery. You don't even have to lift a finger. Allow the innate wisdom of your own mind and body to decide what happens next. Make no effort to fall asleep — after all, sleep is the antithesis of effort. Rest quietly, think of nothing in particular, and the warm luxury of slumber will come to enfold you. Sweet dreams!

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