

Yoga Nidrā

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“Can you suggest a place where we can learn the practice of Yoga Nidrā?” This is a question that is often posed to us by people in India and abroad. Being Indians and working in the field of sleep, people tend to assume that we have a good knowledge of traditional Indian practices related to sleep. There are several centres in India and abroad where Yoga Nidrā is taught in detail. Though there is a burning desire within us to learn more about Yoga Nidrā, we are far from competent to give any suggestion or advice in this matter. It was by sheer coincidence that we met Prof. Stephen Parker at Rishikesh.

Dr. Ravi Gupta conducted the 11th National Sleep Medicine Course of the Indian Society for Sleep Research at Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences, Dehradun, during November–December 2016. He arranged a visit for us to Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama at Rishikesh, which is about 27 km from Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences. He also arranged for an overnight stay at Sadhaka Grama in Rishikesh. It was there that we met Prof. Stephen Parker. During the course of the interaction with Prof. Parker, we came to know that he gives instructions on Yoga Nidrā as part of the programme on the “Art of Shavasana: subtleties of deep relaxation and meditation” during 20th–25th March every year. We decided then and there that we will attend this course and after that, on the basis of our own experience, we will decide about the future course of action.

On returning to Trivandrum and Delhi, after attending the National Sleep Medicine Course, we registered online for the programme “Art of Shavasana”, booked our accommodation and bought our tickets for the journey.

Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama is situated in an eight acre plot of land in Rishikesh about 23 km from Dehradun Airport, also known as Jolly Grant Airport.

Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama has 40 furnished, single and family cottages with one or two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom with shower (hot and cold water) and western style toilet. Participants in the programmes in Sadhaka Grama will have to follow the daily ashram schedule which begins at 5:00 AM and runs until 9:30 PM. Daily activities start and end with prayers, with yoga exercises, meditation, guided practical classes and lectures occupying the rest of the time, during the course of the day. There are set timings for breakfast, lunch, tea and supper in between. Guests are served simple vegetarian meals, cooked and served from the common kitchen.

First day’s exercise was meant as a prelude to the art of relaxation of various muscles in the body. In this session, we were taught to move the various parts and muscles of the body and observe the movements. This was followed next day by exercises to tense and relax the various muscles of the body, including those muscles involved in respiration. With this started the training to imagine that the breath is flowing through different parts of the body. A day was spent in teaching point to point relaxation of muscles and joints, along with regulated breathing. An exercise of moving breath in a descending direction was taught to help in relaxation and manage stress. On the other hand, an exercise of moving breath in ascending direction was taught to prepare one for meditation. Ascending breath or *shitali karana* is a practice which involves coordination of the breath with the inner motion of attention. Attention moves downward with

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exhalation and upward with inhalation, progressively moving to smaller and smaller distances in the body as part of the preparation for the Yoga Nidra. A practice in which one was guided to move his or her attention through 61 points in the body was another exercise which was given. The 61-point exercise is considered as an excellent practice for entering Yoga Nidra. A key point which was emphasised on was to focus attention to the point between the two nostrils, while breathing deeply and evenly. All these exercises prepare one for the practice of Yoga Nidra. So in a way, we can say that to be initiated into Yoga Nidra, one has to master the art of relaxation, control of breath and meditation. These are preparatory lessons for introducing one to the practice of Yoga Nidra towards the end of the course.

Now, let us come back to the first question that we started with in this commentary. After having had the first hand experience, we can recommend Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama for getting initiated into the practice of Yoga Nidra. But, of course, one has to practice for years to gain true expertise in this Yogic practice. Yoga Nidra taught in this Himalayan Institute emphasises on the heart centre in the practice of Yoga Nidra. In that way it may be, in a way, slightly different from some other schools where Yoga Nidra is taught. But these are subtle differences. There may be many other institutions where one can get good training in Yoga Nidra. There are several good books, cassettes and CDs which can teach Yoga Nidra. We are not competent to comment on other Institutions, or on merits and demerits of learning Yoga Nidra through the above mentioned devices.

After having attempted to answer the initial question that we started with, we would also like to state a few other things which may be useful to readers. First of all, we enjoyed our stay at Swami Rama Sadhaka Grama. We had the good fortune of interacting with Prof. Stephen Parker. He kindly accepted our invitation to attend the 12th National Sleep Medicine Course of the Indian Society for Sleep Research at Goa on 21 Sept 2017, where he addressed those who attended the Sleep Medicine Course. He also gave a lecture during the silver jubilee conference of Indian Society for Sleep Research on 23 Sept 2017. From a sleep scientist's perspective, our aim was not restricted to finding a place where Yoga Nidra is taught. It was also our intention to find a person who could address the issues related to Yoga Nidra in the language that sleep scientists understand. Lectures delivered by Prof. Parker at Goa served that aim to a great extent. It is also very important for the sleep scientists to investigate Yoga Nidra using the tools available not only today but also those that may become available in future. The article written by Prof. Parker in this journal serves that purpose very effectively [1].

Reference

1. Parker S. Yoga Nidra: an opportunity for collaboration to extend the science of sleep states. *Sleep Vigil.* 2018;2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41782-017-0026-5>