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Conscious Breathing

Yoga in the WEST

yoga nidra IN WINTER SOLSTICE

Spirituality & MENTAL HEALTH

NEUROSCIENCE of MEDITATION

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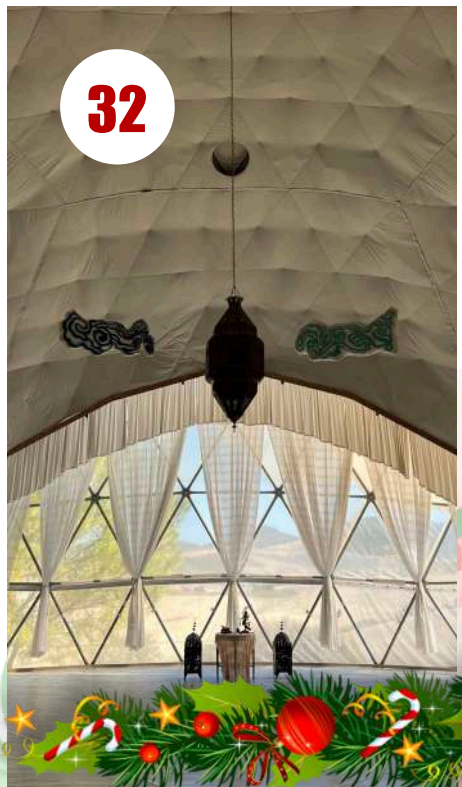
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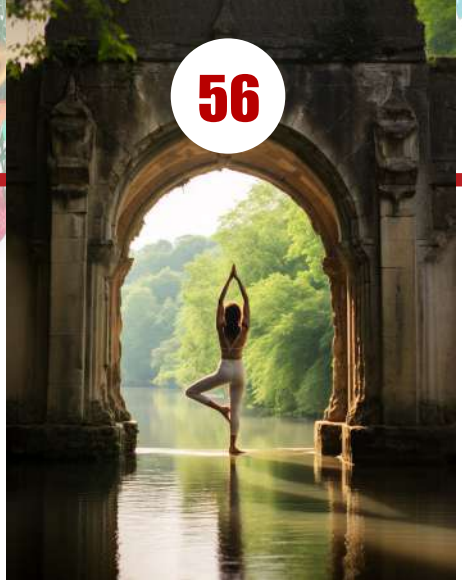
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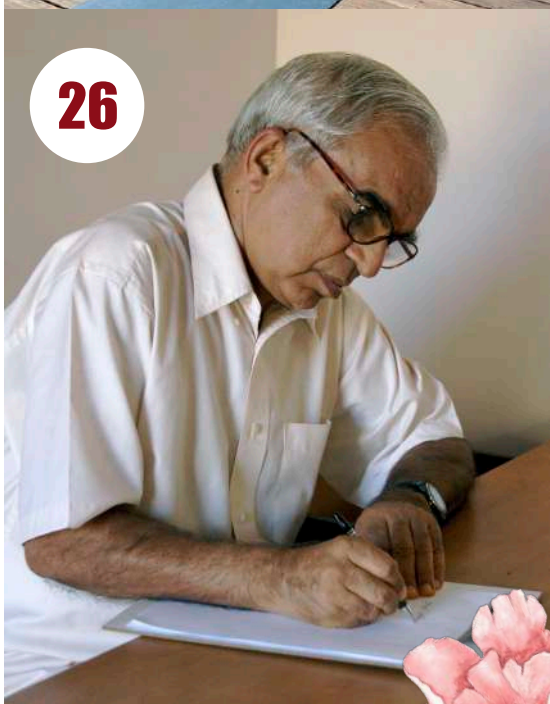
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THE LONGEST NIGHT

YOGA NIDRA FOR THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Author: Catherine Annis, BWY Accredited Tutor and Course Leader for Intelligent Yoga Teacher Training

On the shortest day of the year, the earth's axis tilts the northern hemisphere as far from the sun as it will go. In the UK, this often means darkness before four o'clock, cold mornings and a low winter sun that disappears long before the day is over.

The Winter Solstice – from the Latin *solstitium,* meaning 'sun standing still' – marks the point when the sun's daily path stops sinking lower and begins, almost imperceptibly, to climb back up. It is the hinge of the year: the darkest point, and also the turn towards more light.

It's a strange, quiet threshold, and it tends to fall at the time when most of us are at our most depleted – shopping lists, deadlines, family commitments and the tail end of a long autumn term. Which is why, of everything in a yoga teacher's toolkit, this is the practice I feel most drawn to at this time of year.

Yoga Nidra means 'yogic sleep', though that's slightly misleading as the aim is not to fall asleep. Instead, lying still and warm, you're guided into a liminal space, the state of consciousness between waking and sleeping: aware enough to hear everything, while the body sinks deeply into relaxation. The practice asks nothing of your strength, your flexibility or your concentration. You don't need to hold any positions or find a particular way to relax. You lie down, listen, and allow the practice to do the rest.

This makes it especially suited to this time of year. Outside, much of the natural world has turned inwards. Growth has stopped, and for many plants and animals, rest has become the priority. Modern life doesn't allow us to hibernate: the dog still needs walking, there are still emails to answer, classes to plan and routines to maintain. But the winter solstice offers a timely reminder to pause. An hour of guided rest can be a way of honouring that instinct: to stop pushing outwards for a while and let ourselves settle inwards instead.

What It Feels Like

Yoga Nidra can sound abstract when described in terms of brainwave states or thresholds of consciousness. In practice, it is much simpler.

Most sessions begin with the practitioner lying on their back, gently supported. A bolster or cushion under the knees, blankets for warmth and something soft over the eyes can all help you settle (I recommend a folded scarf or an eye bandage, rather than an eye pillow). The first few minutes are usually spent noticing the contact with the floor, the breath and any areas of the body still holding tension from the day.



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It's worth taking time to set up properly, as a body negotiating a draught or an unsupported hip will distract attention from the practice.

Rather than guiding awareness through the body from head to toe, which I find more distracting than settling, I prefer to lead you on a journey, using imagery from nature. That might be Exmoor, a stretch of coastline or perhaps snow falling through bare trees. Alternatively, I might stay with the breath or the feeling of the body in contact with the floor. The intention is to give your attention somewhere specific and undemanding to rest, so the mind can gradually move away from everyday concerns and drop down into quiet.

What I notice, teaching this practice, is how much people seem to need *permission* to stop rather than a *technique* to help them stop. In Yoga Nidra, the guiding voice can provide that permission. It's an anchor that gently connects you to the room, a vocal soundscape that draws you away from everyday distractions and thoughts. The practice offers some of the deep restfulness of sleep, yet participants are usually aware throughout and can often recall the experience afterwards in great detail.

The Value of Rest

Research into 'wakeful rest' [c1] – quiet, low-stimulation restfulness – has found it helps consolidate memory, including in older adults [1,2]. Yoga Nidra hasn't been tested in the same way, but a small 2023 study of 41 beginners found better sleep and improved accuracy on some learning and working-memory tasks after four weeks of practice.[3]

There is also a long tradition of using this liminal, half-awake state to support problem-solving and creativity. Thomas Edison is famously said to have napped while holding a ball bearing, allowing it to drop and wake him if he drifted towards sleep. Similarly, a small study of Yoga Nidra found higher creativity scores after a three-week programme of regular practice. [4]

Preparing for Stillness

It can be difficult to move directly from a busy day into Yoga Nidra. This is why I always begin Yoga Nidra sessions with fifteen or twenty minutes of slow, gentle, somatic movement.

This might include simple floor-based movements, such as gently rolling the head from side to side, rocking the hips to release the lower back or leaning the legs from side to side to mobilise the spine. The aim is to ease tension in the body gradually, moving slowly enough to notice the sensations in the body rather than just making a shape.

Slow, somatic movement gives the nervous system time to recognise that there is no urgency. That unhurried movement, combined with relaxed, steady exhalations, can make it easier to settle into stillness.

What Beginners Should Expect

The most common surprise for newcomers is how little is required.

There's no single 'right' way to relax. Responses to Yoga Nidra can vary. Some people feel emotional, while others find themselves laughing or simply enjoying the stillness. Many describe feeling grounded yet light and refreshed afterwards and often need a little longer than usual before returning to the rest of their day. Allowing a few quiet minutes after the practice can help its effects settle.

Don't write off a first attempt that feels underwhelming – it can take a session or two for the mind to learn it's allowed to switch off. And it isn't possible to do it wrong. Falling asleep is fine – it may mean that rest was needed; a busy mind may simply be adjusting to having nowhere urgent to be.

Coming out of the practice is also worth taking slowly. Guidance usually widens gradually, returning attention to sounds in the room, the weight of your body on the floor, the temperature around you and the time of day. Once awareness has returned, having something small to eat can help ground the body and ease the transition back into everyday activity. Taste and texture can be a simple, effective way of reconnecting with your surroundings and yourself.

Tips for Practising Yoga Nidra

Wear something loose and warm. You tend to feel colder once you stop moving, so add a layer, a pair of socks and a blanket to cover you, even if you're warm when you lie down. Avoid anything tight around the waist or neck.

Switch off the world. Put your phone in another room, close the door and let anyone at home know you'd like to be left alone for the length of the practice.

Have everything within reach. Gather cushions and a bolster before you lie down, so you won't need to move once you've settled.

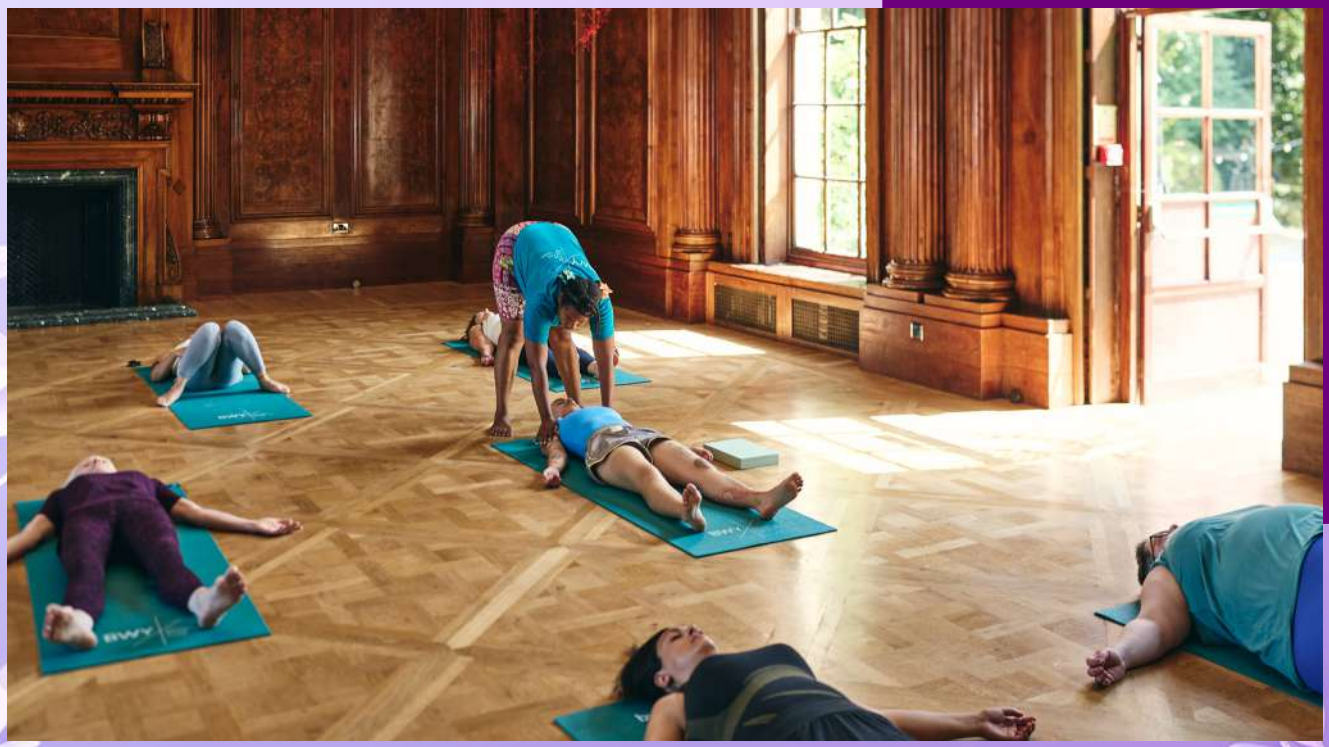
Prepare your body. Visit the bathroom first, and avoid a heav meal beforehand. A full stomach makes it harder to settle.

Plan a gentle landing. Leave a few quiet minutes afterwards, keep something small and delicious to hand (a square of chocolate works well) and try not to schedule anything demanding straight afterwards.

Coming Back to the Light

The world keeps turning, regardless of busy schedules, short days or the demands of daily life. The winter solstice marks a quiet turning point: the darkest day of the year, and the gradual return towards longer days.

Yoga Nidra offers a gentle pause within that continuing rhythm. It does not ask anyone to fix anything or feel differently, only to lie down, rest and become more aware of the body, breath and present moment. Practised regularly, these conscious pauses can help us feel more in tune with ourselves and with the natural rhythms of the season, supporting a calmer, more rested outlook as we move through the day.



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Experience Yoga Nidra

Catherine Annis will lead a Yoga Nidra session at the British Wheel of Yoga's Winter Solstice Festival, taking place online on Friday 18 December. She joins a great line-up of expert tutors including Nikki (Tulsi) Short, Ranju Roy, Brenda Ward and Ankit Kumar. Further details and booking information can be found here:

https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/events/1173



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Catherine Annis has been practising yoga since her early teens, and now specialises in Scaravelli-inspired movement, somatic practice and resistance-based strength training for people wanting to stay strong and capable as they age, taught both online and in person. Alongside regular workshops, she runs retreats, a monthly Friday Night Somatic Yoga & Nidra session, and the Intelligent Yoga Teacher Training course for teachers looking to deepen their own practice. Find out more, browse upcoming classes and retreats, or get in touch, at catherineannisyoga.co.uk.





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