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**Yoga study into insomnia**

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**What is Insomnia?**

Insomnia is essentially classed as an inability to fall or stay asleep. When the resulting sleeplessness begins to affect daily life, one can be termed as suffering from Insomnia. Insomnia can be further categorised as temporary or chronic. Insomnia becomes chronic where disturbed or lack of sleep occurs for more than six weeks in a stretch. In sleep studies up to 54% of Americans and 51% of Brits report having suffered from insomnia in some form during their adult lifetime and in chronic cases this figure is around 15%. Women are three times more likely to suffer from sleeplessness than men.

Insomnia can arise for a number of reasons; hormonal, as a result of stress, anxiety or depression, medical, emotional, due to misuse of drugs, caffeine or alcohol. Often each case is highly individual and can prove complex to treat effectively. Furthermore, those who suffer from insomnia are at higher risk of incurring secondary complications such as diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke. One study in Glasgow determined that each hour of sleep lost per night was the equivalent to 1 IQ point for the following day. From a more holistic view, insomnia often arises when there is imbalance in the body. The good news is that 90% of the battle is in the mind; overcoming insomnia is often a process of letting go. Yoga has a wealth of tools to help bring the body back into balance, to help calm and ground the mind and in doing so returning the sufferer to a state of good, nourishing sleep.

**Insomnia and Ayurveda.**

Ayurveda teaches us that there are three main constitutions called Doshas. These are Vata, Pitta and Kapha. We can also be a combination of these doshas i.e Vata Pitta or Vata Kapha. Briefly the constitutions can be defined as follows.

Vata. Vata is like the wind, it represents movement in the body. A vata body is often slight with prominent joints and bones. Vata governs irregularity in the body, so any one who is unusually tall or short, and people with prominent joints that crack a lot. Those that suffer from constipation and have a tendency towards feeling anxious and blaming themselves are usually vata predominant. Vata's energy levels are changeable, they may be 'good starters' but often lack stamina.

Pitta. Pitta is fire in the body and governs digestion and metabolism. A pitta body is often strong and regular, a typical athletes body. Red heads are pittas –or those who grey early (the fire burns out the colour) and pitta constitutions are usually strong, determined, intelligent and fiery. They digest well and have a tendency to store heat in the body, have a propensity to finish what they have started, so long as they don't burn out and are energetic in their approach to life and physical activity.

Kapha. Kapha is phlegm, the liquidy fluid aspects of ourselves that governs physical structure. Kaphas have flexible bodies, glossy, abundant hair, wide open eyes, clear skin, and white, healthy teeth. Kapha's are like pack horses. When in balance they have an unwavering ability to see a project through to the end in a slow, steady kind of way. Neediness but also loyalty are Kapha qualities.

## **What relevance does this have for insomnia?**

Insomnia is predominantly a vata disorder. Vata is at its most active in the body between the hours of 2 and 6 both am and pm and also during seasonal change overs such as autumn to winter or spring to summer. Vata insomniacs are those who may fall asleep relatively easily but have trouble staying asleep, often waking in the early hours and finding themselves unable to go back to sleep. Pitta insomniacs are those who awake before 2.00am. Sleeplessness is rare for Kapha, but may present if someone falls asleep very early, like 5.00pm and then wakes before 9.00pm unable to get back to sleep.

When vata is out of balance in the body, we tend to get both physically and mentally scattered, like leaves blowing in the wind. We may take on way too many projects, end up rushing around at a million miles an hour and generally spreading ourselves very thin. When the time for sleep arises the vata mind has forgotten how to slow down and thoughts and heart may race inducing feeling of anxiety and panic, the worry about not getting enough sleep keeps the mind alert and becomes a vicious cycle.

## **Insomnia and TCM**

Staying in the East we can also take a brief look at insomnia in relation to a Traditional Chinese view of the body.

The Chinese believe than Shen (which is essentially the heart spirit within all of us) resides in the heart at night time. If for any reason it cannot enter back into the heart during the hours of darkness, it remains active in the body and causes sleep disturbances in the forms of dreams. If this is coupled with a lack of joy or happiness, the dreams become nightmares. We may feel this sense of energetic imbalance in a strong, fast heartbeat, that may transform into a sense of anxiety or panic in the body.

## **Insomnia and Anatomy.**

In a more allopathic or anatomical way of seeing the body, insomnia can be classed as the rebellion of our nervous system. 'Connected' life means that the sympathetic nervous system gets stuck on 'on', just like muscles in the case of say fallen arches or tight hamstrings. The adrenalin response is on rapid fire, this creates excessive heat in the body and causes a corresponding lack of sleep.

## **Other Factors**

One of the major additional factors in sleeplessness is simple habit. We live in a world where we often have trouble disconnecting, we live life on the 'outside' and spend little time reflecting and just being. Habits are often set before the age of 6 and when this is the case they can be challenging, but not impossible to break.

You are what you eat. Many of us live to eat rather than eating to live. 'Bad' choices are common place and in a world where we are constantly connected via Facebook, the internet and mobile phones and email, we have lost sight of the most important connection of all – that to ourselves.

Many of us have forgotten the importance of good food in our lives, choosing rajasic food in the case of stimulants and alcohol and tamasic food in the case of convenience food and junk. If we put in

low grade petrol, or worse, put diesel in a petrol vehicle, the engine ceases to work effectively. In the body, what we eat has a direct influence on our thought processes and we have seen time and time again with Dr Rani that the cause of most disease in the body is in fact the mind. Food is the fuel for the mind. If we put in rubbish, we get out rubbish too. An overstimulated, poorly fed system is effectively running on empty and despite our desperate need for sleep to recuperate, it becomes tantalisingly absent.

Perceived payoff. This is a difficult aspect for insomnia because it forces us to look inside and, in some cases confront our own demons, but if the body is out of harmony, there is often a perceived gain at some level. Our bodies are the possessors of infinite wisdom, they are much, much more intelligent than our limited minds. What other structure in the universe can continue working at every moment of every day for around 100 years without maintenance or parts replacement, or rest days? The mind may have misconnected a perceived benefit of ceasing to sleep. On a personal level when my nightmares became unbearable, my body stopped sleeping as a protection mechanism, but even when the nightmares stopped I was in the habit of not sleeping so the pattern stuck.

Letting go. A common theme of many insomniacs is an unwillingness to let go, a feeling that they must effectively be juggling all balls at one time without letting anything drop. An uptight kind of stress or worry accompanied by fixations on arbitrary rules such as 'needing 8 hours'. If we make sleep another task to be accomplished or dominated, sometimes the body kicks back and plays by its own rules. The truth is, sleep must occur to enable us to function as the best version of ourselves, without sleep we lack the required energy to face the following day, on a physical level our body needs sleep to restore and regenerate and if it misses night time as its opportunity, it is forced into playing 'catch up' for the rest of the following day. It's not hard to see how this cycle can become chronic and unbearable for the sufferer. The process of letting go is often a challenging one, but often reaps huge rewards for insomniacs, we need to learn to let sleep in.

### **What does this mean?**

The good news is that often sleep is an easy thing to bring back into balance with a little bit of planning and care. With treating any imbalance in the body, experience and the sutras teach us that the first point of reference should always be to start with a little bit of common sense and then look for treatable opposition.

### **Ayurveda and TCM**

When vata is high, we feel flighty, anxious, ungrounded. We must first seek to balance this with the opposite qualities of earthing, grounding, calming, cooling. Rubbing the soles of the feet helps to reconnect us to earth, helping us to feel rooted and grounded. For vata disorders, you can use warming sesame oil on the soles of the feet and palms of the hands combined with smells such as orange or fennel. For pitta imbalance, warm almond milk is said to be helpful combined with ujjai breathing and the scent of vanilla. Kapha smells are rose and ylang ylang combined with a cup of warm tea, but again, this is an unusual occurrence.

Pranayama is an invaluable practice as well as a grounding asana practice. Ayurveda and TCM seek to effectively 'close' the heart through soft, cooling forward folds that help to calm the thoughts and balance the high emotions.

### **NLP and the Brain**

95% of what occurs in daily life is governed by unconscious thoughts. Even if there is 5% that really wants to change, 5% versus 95% is a tough battle to win. Most habits are already set by the age of 6 years old and have therefore been with us, literally, for a life time. Fortunately, with the use of yoga nidra, NLP/Hypnotherapy and mindfulness techniques, we can effectively encourage the body to move towards a state of permanent, lasting change and in the case of insomnia, towards good sleep.

The yoga sutras teach us that challenge is an opportunity for growth and learning, what happens if just maybe, we turn the situation around and welcome the extra hours to meditate, discover lucid dreaming or expand in other ways? I tell myself that whilst I am horizontal my physical body is getting all the rest it needs, when my mind stops grabbing, the body often naturally moves towards sleep. Conversely if I allow myself to get agitated, sleep can be elusive for weeks at a time. If we find a place of acceptance with our insomnia, what is the next phase, how can we turn it into a positive, a blessing? If we remove it's power sometimes it chooses to leave of its own accord.

A huge and important tool is positive internal dialogue and positive visualisation. If we start the day with the thought 'tonight I will not sleep' guess what happens? We must begin with the opposite and cultivate a positive inner voice that states, 'I am a great sleeper, my body loves to sleep. Night time is for sleeping, tonight I will get a good night's sleep'. Very simple, but very effective.

### **Cooling, calming yoga practice**

A yoga practice should be slow, steady and mindful. A balanced practice may include the following

Twists to balance and calm adrenals, such as Ardha Matseyendra, Maryciasana C, Gomukasana twist

Forward fold to cool and ground; Paschimottanasana, Baddokonasana, Upavista Konasana

Yoga nidra to relax and restore

Pranayama to balance, left nostril and favour exhale; Nadi Shodana, Chandra Bhedana, Ujayii

No bandhas which stimulate and allow prana to rise

Standing forward fold to realease and free; Prasarita Padottanasana, Uttanasana, Adho Muka Svana

Inversions to increase apana; Viparita karini, Shoulder Stand, Headstand – subjective, Setu Bandha

### **Pranayama Techniques**

Nadi Shodhana

Ujayii

Chandra Bhedana

### **Meditation and mindfulness**

Mindfulness has proven time and time again to be one of the most powerful tools in our armoury for changing negative patterns and behaviours.

Mindfulness is essentially the cultivation of presence and self awareness, of focusing awareness and attention on the present moment, on that which is part of our current and immediate reality. Meditation is probably one of the most powerful tools we have when it comes to cultivating or increasing mindfulness.

As in yoga, mindful meditation usually focuses on a combination of breath body and mind. The first step is to find a comfortable seat in a dedicated space. The spine should be upright and ideally knees below hips as you sit. Take a hand mudra if you can, something simple is fine, this helps to connect us into the energy flow in the body. The second phase is to start to draw the awareness towards the breath, observing the natural flow of breath without judgement if your breath is fast, allow it to be fast, just watch without consciously changing anything and without notions of good or bad. Lastly we come to the mind. The object of mindful meditation is not to stop the thoughts, but to observe and become aware. Sometimes I imagine that I am standing on a bridge watching the river of my thoughts flowing below, I can see the thoughts, but I choose not to jump into the water and swim with them.

Another technique is to begin observing the seat of emotion in the body, it may reside in different places for each of us, but the heart, chest or stomach is often a good place to start looking. Try to become aware of the emotion, be it anger, happiness or sadness. Again, observe without judgement, we are not trying to assign 'good or bad' status, just watching the feelings, our own reactions to them. Often the very act of observations becomes transformative and we can see anger dissipate into love. Again we come back to the idea of opposition, taking your own frustration and choosing to turn it into love or joy can be an incredibly nourishing and healing experience.

The even better news is that cultivating mindfulness also helps with a whole host of other disorders such as; depression, stress, anxiety, chronic pain and chronic fatigue syndrome and addictive behaviour.

### **Creating good sleeping habits**

Another very powerful tool is that of creating good sleeping habits – commonly termed 'sleep hygiene'. Make your bedroom a sanctuary, invest in a comfy mattress with sumptuous sheets, a warm duvet, good supportive pillows, black out blinds and warm, soothing colours or pictures on the walls. Mobile phones, televisions and laptops do not belong in the bedroom. If you are unable to do this, other simple and inexpensive tricks can help such as ear plugs or an eye mask. Breaking every day patterns such as moving the bed to another part of the room or changing the side of the bed you sleep on can be enough to jog the body back to healthier sleeping patterns.

Next agree a cut off time to stop external stimulations, say TV, phones and laptop (blue light) off at least an hour before bed in order to give yourself time to unwind before sleeping. The extra time can be used for meditation, yoga nidra or a gentle yoga practice.

If small worries like what to wear in the morning or remembering to take something with you are likely to keep you up, do your best to eliminate these niggles through a little forward planning. Keeping a notepad and pen by the bed can help with the thoughts that arrive at 2.00am and threaten to keep you up all night.

## **Food**

Throughout the course, we have already established the enormous connection between food and the mind. Food is the body's fuel and we must treat our individual vessels with respect. Vata rejects but thrives on routine, simple food taken little and often can be a good technique, food of a satvic quality, such as fresh steamed vegetables, can help us to feel calm and grounded. Furthermore the way in which we eat can have a big impact. It's not difficult to see the difference between eating a piece of white bread with Nutella on the way out the door and sitting down in a light, quiet living room to a bowl of fresh, organic porridge mindfully eaten with some honey and ghee.

Ultimately the journey of finding what works for you should be an ongoing process, eating in the wrong way, using food as a weapon, being too attached to your schedule or stuck in restrictive or negative food pattern can become as destructive as eating junk. When it comes to food, mindful presence is often the best approach, taking time to chew and swallow, listening to what the body really wants (even if that sometimes means only icecream and biscuits on one day!) but more importantly what it needs.

Some simple, common sense rules are as follows; Big meals at night time give your body a lot of work to do when it should be sleeping and so should be avoided; Avoid stimulants such as tea, coffee, alcohol and sugar; serotonin increasing foods such as complex carbohydrates and brazil nuts are good as they aid feelings of contentment and should be taken frequently; Take food that is warming ,cooling, grounding- vegetable soups, lentils and home-made bread are all good options.

Remember, your body is infinitely wise, if we can reconnect to our intuition and inner guru, we usually find that the answers are already within us. Your body *wants* to sleep, we always gravitate back towards health *if* given the choice, sometimes we just get forget the way back there.