

Sleep and its role in an Ayurvedic lifestyle

Sleep is often seen as a part of life which can be reduced when lives are busy and too much is taken on; it is very often the first thing which is reduced to 'save time'. However in this article I will show how important sleep is and also what happens when we either have too little or too much sleep and the remedies which can help us overcome these disturbances.

Deep rest is essential for keeping the mind and body in a healthy state. For most people this deep rest is sleep. Sleep is one of the three supports of life which Vagbhata outlines in Ashtanga Hrdyam. The other two supports are food and non-celibacy. These supports along with sleep 'support the body just as a house is supported by pillars.' Happiness, nourishment, strength and knowledge are all dependant on good sleep; and if the right sleep is not maintained then this causes unhappiness and poor health.

Let us first see what sleep actually is within a Western context. It was previously seen as a period in which we are not awake, but research in the last decades has shown that sleep is made up of different stages. Stage One is the light sleep we experience when we are just falling asleep; this lasts for about 10 minutes. Stage Two is a deeper level of sleep and lasts for about 20 minutes. Stages Three and Four are deep sleep. This deep sleep is the sleep our body and brain needs to recover from the day. After about 90 minutes of deep sleep, rapid eye movement (REM) begins and this is when we dream.

There have been numerous studies done to see how sleep benefits the body and how sleep deprivation can seriously weaken the body. For example it has been seen that even by cutting down sleep by one hour, focus is lost and decision making is harder. Sleep affects the mood of the person and less sleep can lead to increased irritability. More and more people suffer from sleep deprivation or insomnia in our ever increasingly technological society. People find it very hard to switch off from their busy lives and often watch television just before sleeping. It is important to switch off from all tasks at least an hour before you sleep otherwise the mind will be over-stimulated and sleep will not easily be got.

According to Ayurveda keeping awake at nights and therefore not sleeping is most commonly a Vata, the air and ether constitution, disorder. This aggravation of Vata means that all conditions of the Vata kind could be manifested. There will be a lot of

body aches and tiredness. Indigestion and giddiness are other problems which could occur. There is difficulty in getting to sleep, disturbed sleep and dreams and when awake it is not easy to fall back to sleep. Treatments for insomnia involve reducing Vata. Snehana (lubricating) and Brahma (nourishing) course of treatments are used. All oil treatments such as Abhyanga (full body oil application) and Shirodhara (oil poured on the head) will be favourable. Milk should be taken and it is also noted in Ashtanga Hrdayam that wine can be taken. However always remember according to Ayurvedic principles that everything should be taken in balance and not excessively as when this is done even the best medicine can be turned into poison. Mental activity should be reduced in the evening and the person should try and sleep before 11pm and also awaken early. Another way to alleviate Vata and so have more sleep is to increase mental peacefulness. This can be done in a variety of ways with meditation, breathing and positive thinking techniques.

Such a technique is Yoga Nidra. Yoga nidra is a practice which can help with insomnia and general relaxation and well-being. It is a systematic method of inducing complete physical, mental and emotional relaxation. When the person is in yoga nidra, they appear to be asleep but the consciousness is actually functioning at a deeper level of awareness. This state of relaxation is reached by turning inwards and away from outer experiences. Yoga nidra is a part of Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) in Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga Sutras. The body can never truly relax unless it is free from muscular, mental and emotional tensions and the practise of yoga nidra removes these tensions. Yoga nidra is practised whilst the body is in the yoga posture of Shavasana (corpse). The body relaxes but does not sleep and auditory messages are given by the instructor. After that a visualisation is done and then the body comes out from relaxation. People usually feel completely energised.

Meditation is another practise which can help with insomnia and general relaxation. A simple meditation is to sit quietly and concentrate on the breath. Meditating often during the day can help the whole mind and body relax and help the person sleep.

Breathing techniques will also be very useful as they will encourage the body into relaxation. Deep inhalation and exhalation can be practised as can Nadi Sudhi, or alternate nostril breathing. Close the right nostril and inhale through the left, and then close the left nostril and exhale through the right. Repeat this for six rounds daily and there should be a difference in mental attitude and rest.

There can also be Pitta (fire and water) type insomnia. This may follow an argument or stress before going to sleep; too much hot food; or exposure to the sun and heat. The sleep is agitated and broken but when awake the person is usually able to fall back asleep easier. The best remedy for this would be with a Pitta reducing diet, so including a lot of cooling foods and avoiding spices, sour and salty food.

During sleep there is an increase of Kapha (earth and water), so in Kapha disorders there is more likely to be excess sleep rather than insomnia. This accumulation of Kapha can lead to the person wanting to sleep excessively and therefore also during the day. Sleeping during the day is only beneficial in the summer season because of

the increase in dryness and the nights are shorter. Sleeping during the day at other times of the year will cause an increase of Kapha or Pitta. This could be the reason that people in hot countries do tend to siesta in the afternoon.

Sleeping during the day is seen as being beneficial in the following conditions:

- Those exhausted by too much speaking, alcohol or physical conditions.
- Those tired by anger, grief and fear.
- The aged and children.
- Injured and unwell persons.

For the above the sleep maintains the normalcy of the tissues and the Kapha nourishes the body. People who definitely should not sleep during the day are those with accumulated Kapha.

If there is excessive sleep during the day and hence at an improper time, this can lead to headaches, weakness in digestion, lethargy and delusion. The remedies for this are to decrease Kapha and thereby decrease the sleep. Anjana and Nasya as outlined in Dinachariya can be done. Anjana is purification of the eyes. A few drops of medicated oil are put into each eye and the corresponding dirt which accumulates is removed.

Nasya is nasal drops. Again a few drops of medicated oil are put into each nostril and inhaled deeply. The oil 'scrapes' excess Kapha in the form of mucus and this is then removed through the mouth. The nasya procedure is excellent for removing excess Kapha from the head region.

Other Kapha reducing therapies for excessive sleep are exercising more, fasting occasionally and thinking more thereby involving oneself mentally. This can be seen to be completely opposite of Vata reduction, where mental peacefulness is encouraged. Dry and hot treatments such as the food intake being of such compositions can help as can Swedhana (sweating) procedures.

In conclusion it can be seen that in both Ayurveda texts and in a Western context sleep is an essential part of healthy living. We need to give an appropriate importance to sleep and ensure that we have a comfortable environment in which to sleep in and plenty of meditation in our lives to sleep peacefully. In this way we will maintain one of the main supports of life.

Sweet dreams!

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