

NIDRA AS A FOUNDATIONAL PILLAR OF HEALTH: A CLASSICAL AND CONCEPTUAL REVIEW IN AYURVEDA

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ABSTRACT

In the classical text of *Ayurveda*, life is likened to a building supported by three foundational pillars: *Ahara* (food), *Nidra* (sleep), and *Brahmacharya* (controlled sensory indulgence). Collectively known as the *Trayopastambha*, these elements are the prerequisites for structural integrity and longevity. *Nidra* is specifically termed *Bhutadhatri*, a "provider like a mother," because it nourishes the body's tissues (*Dhatus*) and restores mental clarity. From an *Ayurvedic* physiological standpoint, sleep occurs when the *Manas* (mind) becomes exhausted and the sensory organs (*Indriyas*) detach from their objects. This process is governed by the natural increase of *Tamo Guna* and *Kapha Dosha* at nightfall. The quality of one's sleep directly dictates the state of *Ojas* (vital essence). Proper sleep (*Samyak Nidra*) promotes *Pushti* (nourishment), *Bala* (strength), and

Varna (complexion). Conversely, *Anidra* (insomnia) or *Nidranash* (disturbed sleep) leads to the aggravation of *Vata* and *Pitta*. Ultimately, *Nidra* is not a passive state but an active, biological necessity for achieving *Dhatu Samya* the equilibrium of bodily tissues that defines true health.

KEYWORDS: *Trayopastambha*, *Bhutadhatri*, *Dhatu Samya*, *Ojas*, *Tamo Guna* *Dinacharya*.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine rooted in ancient India, emphasizes a preventive and holistic approach to health. It describes three fundamental pillars of life *Ahara* (diet), *Nidra* (sleep), and *Brahmacharya* (regulated conduct)—collectively known as *Trayopastambha*, as mentioned in classical texts such as the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*. Among these, *Nidra* occupies a central role in maintaining the equilibrium of physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Sound sleep occurring naturally at night is termed *Bhutadhatri*^[1], meaning “that which nourishes all living beings.” Although one may exert temporary control over sleep by postponing or restricting it for short durations, prolonged absence or inadequacy of sleep leads to systemic disturbances. These include impairment of digestion (*Agni*), elimination (*Mala pravritti*), reproductive functions, and other vital physiological processes.

Acharya Sushruta poetically compares sleep to Lord *Vishnu*, the preserver of the universe, emphasizing its nurturing and protective qualities. He refers to *Nidra* as “*Vaishnavi*,” symbolizing its sustaining and life-supporting role.^[2]

Sleep is a natural, restorative process essential for sustaining life. *Ayurveda* considers *Nidra* not merely as a period of rest, but as a dynamic physiological state that facilitates tissue repair, energy replenishment, cognitive restoration, and emotional stability. Proper and timely sleep supports digestion, strengthens immunity, enhances vitality (*Bala*), and promotes longevity (*Ayu*). It also plays a crucial role in maintaining *doshic* balance and preserving *Ojas*, the essence of immunity and vitality.

In the modern era, lifestyle changes, stress, and irregular routines have significantly disturbed natural sleep patterns, leading to an increase in sleep-related disorders and chronic health conditions. Scientific research increasingly validates the traditional *Ayurvedic* understanding that inadequate or disturbed sleep contributes to metabolic, cardiovascular, neurological, and psychological disorders.

Therefore, understanding the concept, importance, and therapeutic implications of *Nidra* is highly relevant in contemporary healthcare. This paper aims to explore the *Ayurvedic* perspective on *Nidra*, its physiological and psychological significance, and its vital role in promoting holistic health and disease prevention.

AIM

To explore *Nidra* as a foundational pillar of health in *Ayurveda*.

OBJECTIVES

1. To review the classical concept and types of *Nidra*.
2. To emphasize its role in maintaining *Dosha* balance and vitality.
3. To highlight its role in nourishing body and mind

MATERIAL AND METHOD

A comprehensive literary review was undertaken to explore the Ayurvedic perspective of *Nidra*. Classical texts of the *Brihatrayi*, including the *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Ashtanga Sangraha*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya*, along with their available commentaries and related *Ayurvedic* literature, were critically analyzed to gather classical insights on *Nidra*. In addition, contemporary scientific evidence was reviewed through published research articles accessed from databases such as PubMed and Medline to correlate traditional concepts with modern understanding.

NIDRA

Definition

According to the *Charaka Samhita*, *Acharya Charaka* describes *Nidra* as a distinct state of consciousness in which the mind disengages from the sensory organs (*Indriyas*). This withdrawal from external objects (*Bahya Vishayas*) occurs due to physical and mental fatigue. In this condition, both the body and mind enter a state of rest, allowing restoration and rejuvenation to take place.^[3]

According to the *Sushruta Samhita*, *Acharya Sushruta* explains that sleep manifests when *Tamas Guna* one of the three fundamental mental qualities (*Trigunas*) associated with inertia and darkness predominates in association with *Kapha Dosha*. This dominance envelops the seat of consciousness (*Chetana*), resulting in the onset of *Nidra*. In this context, sleep is considered a natural expression of *Tamas*, particularly during nighttime when *Tamas* predominates physiologically, leading to relaxation of the mind and intellect.

Furthermore, the commentator of the *Ashtanga Sangraha* states that during sleep, the *Manovaha Srotas* (channels of the mind) become influenced by *Shleshma (Kapha)*, and due to physical and mental fatigue, the mind withdraws from the sensory organs.

Similarly, the *Yoga Sutras* of *Patanjali* describe *Nidra* as a specific mental modification characterized by the absence of active experiences, expressed in the aphorism: “*Abhavpratyayavalambana vrittir Nidra*”, meaning sleep is a mental state supported by the cognition of absence.

Types

Nidra can be classified into *Svabhavika* (natural) and *Asvabhavika* (abnormal).^[7]

| Criteria | <i>Svabhavika Nidra</i> (Natural Sleep) | <i>Asvabhavika Nidra</i> (Abnormal Sleep) |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Meaning | Physiological and naturally occurring sleep | Pathological or unnatural sleep |
| Cause | Occurs due to normal predominance of <i>Tamas</i> at night | Caused by <i>doshic</i> imbalance, disease, mental stress, trauma, or external factors |
| Time of Occurrence | Regularly occurs at night | May occur at improper times (excessive day sleep or insomnia at night) |
| Nature | Balanced, refreshing, and restorative | Excessive, deficient, disturbed, or irregular |
| Effect on Body | Promotes nourishment, strength, immunity, and longevity | Leads to weakness, metabolic disturbance, and disease progression |
| Effect on Mind | Enhances clarity, stability, and emotional balance | Causes confusion, irritability, anxiety, or dullness |
| Health Outcome | Maintains equilibrium of <i>Doshas</i> and supports <i>Ojas</i> | Disturbs <i>Dosha</i> balance and reduces vitality |

According to Different Acharya

| Sr. No. | <i>Acharya Charaka</i> ^[8] | <i>Acharya Sushruta</i> ^[9] | <i>Acharya Vagbhata</i> ^[10] |
|---------|---|--|---|
| 1 | <i>Tamobhava</i> (Originated from inertia) | <i>Vaishnavi</i> | <i>Tamobhava</i> |
| 2 | <i>Shleshmasambhava</i> (Originated from Kapha) | <i>Vaikariki</i> | <i>Aamayakhedaprabhavaja</i> |
| 3 | <i>Manasharira Shrama</i> (Due to mental and physical exertion) | <i>Tamsi</i> | <i>Chittakhedaprabhavaja Sambhava</i> |
| 4 | <i>Agantuki</i> (Due to exogenous factors) | | <i>Agantuki</i> |
| 5 | <i>Vyadhyanuvaritini</i> (Associated with diseases) | | <i>Kaphaprabhavaja</i> |
| 6 | <i>Ratriswabhavaprabhava</i> | | <i>Dehakhedaprabhavaja</i> |
| 7 | | | <i>Kalavabhavaja</i> |

Classification of *Nidra* According to *Acharya Charaka*

In *Charak Samhita*, *Nidra* (sleep) is divided into six varieties depending upon the underlying causative factors.^[11]

1. *Tamobhava*

This type of sleep arises due to the dominance of *Tamo Guna*, which produces mental dullness and inertia. When the mind becomes clouded and inactive, sleep occurs as a result of this *tamasic* influence.

2. *Shleshmasamudbhava*

This form of sleep develops from the aggravation of *Kapha Dosha*. Increased *Kapha* leads to heaviness of the body and mind, thereby inducing excessive or prolonged sleep.

3. *ManaSharira-ShramaSambhava*

Sleep occurring after intense physical work or mental strain falls under this category. It is a natural response of the body to fatigue and helps in restoring energy.

4. *Agantuki*

This type of sleep appears suddenly due to external or unusual causes. It is considered abnormal and is often regarded as an unfavorable clinical sign, sometimes associated with serious prognosis.

5. *Vyadhyanuvartini*

This sleep manifests as a secondary feature of certain diseases. It accompanies pathological conditions and is not regarded as normal physiological sleep.

6. *Ratri-Swabhava-Prabhava*

This is the natural sleep that occurs due to the inherent quality of nighttime. It is physiological, regular, and essential for maintaining proper health.

Classification of *Nidra* According to *Acharya Sushruta*^[12]

In the *Sushruta Samhita*, *Acharya Sushruta* does not clearly classify *Nidra* into specific types, but he explains sleep based on the predominance of *Guna* in the mind.

1. *Satvik*– In individuals dominated by *Satva*, sleep naturally occurs around midnight in a balanced manner.

2. *Rajasik*

Those with *Rajas* predominance experience irregular and disturbed sleep without a definite cause.

3. *Tamasik*

In persons influenced mainly by *Tamas*, sleep may occur excessively, both during the day and night.

Classification of *Nidra* According to *Acharya Vagbhat*^[13]

Acharya Vagbhata classified *Nidra* into seven types

1. *Kalaswabhavaja*

Sleep that manifests at its appropriate or habitual time, particularly during the night, due to the natural cycle of time.

2. *Amayaja*

Sleep that develops as a consequence of disease processes.

3. *ManasikaShrama*

Occurs when the mind becomes overworked or mentally fatigued.

4. *SharirikaShrama*

Results from excessive physical exertion leading to bodily exhaustion.

5. *Shleshmaprabhavaja*

Produced due to dominance or aggravation of *Kapha Dosha*, causing heaviness and drowsiness.

6. *Agantuka*

Arises from external or sudden causes, such as trauma or unexpected events.

7. *Tamobhava*

Develops due to the predominance of *Tamoguna*, which induces mental inertia and darkness.

Importance of *Nidra*

- *Nidra* (sleep) is considered the second important pillar of life in *Ayurveda*.
- Along with *Ahara* (diet) and *Brahmacharya* (regulated lifestyle), it forms the three *Upastambhas* (sub-pillars of health).

- These three pillars support the body like three legs supporting a structure.
- *Nidra* is a natural physiological state that provides rest to the body, mind, senses, and motor organs.
- Proper and adequate sleep maintains balance of *Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*).
- Balanced sleep nourishes body tissues (*Dhatus*) and promotes physical and mental health.
- Happiness and sorrow are influenced by proper and improper sleep.
- Body weight conditions such as obesity and emaciation are linked to sleep patterns.
- Strength and weakness depend on adequate rest.
- Virility and impotence are affected by sleep quality.
- Knowledge and ignorance are influenced by mental clarity gained through proper sleep.
- Life and longevity are closely related to healthy sleep habits.
- Irregular, excessive, or insufficient sleep can disturb body equilibrium.
- Staying awake at night may cause dryness and aggravate *Vata Dosha*.
- Daytime sleep may increase heaviness and aggravate *Kapha Dosha*.
- Diet and sleep together play an important role in maintaining body composition.
- Improper diet combined with disturbed sleep can lead to obesity or undernourishment.
- Proper sleep at the right time is a sign of a healthy individual.
- Sleep is considered as important as nutritious food for sustaining life and well-being.
- As mentioned by *Acharya Kashyapa*, maintaining regular and quality sleep is characteristic of a healthy individual.^[14]

Relationship Between *Nidra*, *Dosha*, *Dhatu* & *Mala*

- *Nidra* maintains *Dosha* balance – Proper sleep keeps *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha* in equilibrium.
- *Kapha* & Excess Sleep – Increased sleep and drowsiness (*Tandra*) are commonly seen in *Kapha* disorders.
- *Vata* & Sleep Loss – *Nidranasha* (insomnia or loss of sleep) is mainly associated with aggravated *Vata*.
- *Pitta* & Reduced Sleep – *Alpanidra* (light or less sleep) is linked with *Pitta* imbalance.
- Connection with *Agni* – Sound sleep strengthens digestive fire (*Agni*) and supports proper metabolism.
- Support to *Dhatus* – Adequate sleep nourishes body tissues and maintains tissue integrity.
- Regulation of *Malas* – Healthy sleep ensures timely bowel and bladder evacuation.
- Promotes Longevity (*Ayu*) – Balanced sleep contributes to long and healthy life.

- *Diva-Swapna* (Day Sleep) – Sleeping during the day may aggravate *Kapha* and disturb *Dosha* balance.
- *Ratri-Jagarana* (Night Awakening) – Staying awake at night aggravates *Vata* and *Pitta*.
- Improper Sleep Habits – Untimely or disturbed sleep can vitiate all three *Doshas* and lead to disease. undesirable behaviors like *Diva-Swapana*, or sleeping during the day, and *Ratri Jagarana*, or waking up at night, agitate and vitiate all three *Doshas* and cause a variety of diseases.^[15]
- Proper timing, quality, and duration of *Nidra* are essential for maintaining *Dosha* harmony, tissue nourishment, efficient waste elimination, and overall well-being.

Physiology of *Nidra* (Sleep) in *Ayurveda*

In *Ayurveda*, *Nidra* (sleep) is considered a natural and essential function of the body and mind. It occurs due to specific physiological and psychological changes.

1. Role of *Mana* (Mind)

When *Mana* (mind) becomes exhausted (*Klanta*) due to continuous sensory and mental activities, it withdraws from external objects. This withdrawal leads to sleep.

- During wakefulness, *Mana* actively connects with *Indriyas* (sense and action organs).
- When tired, *Mana* detaches from them, leading to inactivity and sleep.

2. Role of Cerebral Blood Flow (Modern View)

According to Howell, sleep occurs due to cerebral ischemia (reduced blood supply to the brain).

- The cerebral cortex, especially areas responsible for higher mental functions (like association areas and motor-sensory gyri), becomes less active due to reduced blood flow.
- This reduced activity results in mental fatigue and induces sleep. This explanation correlates with the *Ayurvedic* concept of *Mana* becoming *Klanta* (fatigued).

3. Role of *Indriyas* (Sense & Action Organs)

When sleep begins

- *Jnanendriyas* (sense organs)
- *Karmendriyas* (Organ of action) become inactive because *Mana* disconnects from them. This disconnection causes loss of perception and voluntary activity.

4. Role of *Doshas* – *Shleshma* and *Tamas*

According to *Bhela Samhita*, *Nidra* occurs when^[16]

- *Shleshma* (*Kapha dosha*) and
 - *Tamas* (one of the three *Gunas*) predominate and influence the *Hridaya* (heart), ears, and eyes.
 - *Kapha* provides heaviness and stability.
 - *Tamas* causes dullness and inertia.
- Their combined action results in sleep.

5. Activity During Sleep

Even during sleep, some elements remain active

- *Praana* (vital life force)
- *Mana* (in subtle form)
- *Agni* (digestive and metabolic fire)

The *Indriyas* remain in a potential state, meaning they can become active again upon awakening. The depth and quality of sleep depend on the dominance of *Doshas* and *Gunas*.

Benefits of Proper *Nidra*^[17]

In *Sushruta Samhita*, proper sleep (*Nidra*) is described as an essential factor for maintaining overall health. When sleep is obtained in the right amount and with good quality, it promotes *Sukha* (comfort and happiness), *Pushti* (nourishment and healthy growth), *Bala* (physical strength and immunity), *Vrishata* (vitality and reproductive strength), *Gyana* (clarity of knowledge and intellect), and *Jeevita* (a healthy and long life). Adequate sleep revitalizes both the body and mind, enhances the feeling of well-being, and helps maintain the natural balance of bodily tissues (*Dhatus*).

Effect of Improper *Nidra*^[18]

In *Sushruta Samhita*, improper or disturbed sleep is considered harmful to overall health. When *Nidra* is inadequate, excessive, or irregular in pattern, it produces several adverse effects on the body and mind. Such faulty sleep may lead to *Dukha* (suffering), *Karshya* (emaciation or weakness of the body), *Abala* (reduced strength and immunity), *Kleebata* (loss of reproductive vigor), and *Ajnana* (decline in intellectual clarity). In extreme situations, persistent disturbance of sleep can even shorten the lifespan. Individuals with improper sleep may experience symptoms such as burning sensation in the eyes, headache, and generalized body pain. Disturbed *Nidra* can also interfere with appetite and digestion, which may lead to

irregular bowel habits. Because of its destructive impact on health and well-being, such unhealthy sleep is metaphorically described as “*Kala Ratri*,” a condition that gradually deprives a person of happiness and longevity.

Duration of Sleep

Prolonged or excessive sleep is not considered beneficial for maintaining good health. Sleeping for an unusually long duration may disturb the normal functioning of various physiological systems in the body. The amount of sleep required is not the same for every individual, as it varies from person to person and also changes with age. Therefore, the need for sleep differs at different stages of life. The following data present the average number of hours of sleep generally recommended during various periods of life.^[19]

| Ages | Hours of Sleep required |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Birth – 1 month | 18 – 20 hours |
| 1 to 6 month | 15 – 18 hours |
| 6 months – 1 years | 14 – 16 hours |
| 1 – 2 years | 12 – 14 hours |
| 2 – 5 years | 10 – 12 hours |
| 5 – 16 years | 9 – 10 hours |
| Adults | 8 hours |
| Old Aged Persons | 4 – 6 hours |

Divaswapna

Benefits

In *Ayurveda*, *Divaswapna* (day sleep) is beneficial when practiced properly and harmful when misused. It helps in maintaining the balance of *Dhatus*, increases strength, and nourishes the body through the stabilizing action of *Kapha Dosha*.

Day sleep is especially recommended during *Grishma Ritu* (summer), as the dryness of the season aggravates *Vata* and reduces body strength. In such conditions, *Divaswapna* restores energy and maintains equilibrium.

However, in other seasons, regular day sleep may aggravate *Kapha* and *Pitta*, leading to heaviness, poor digestion, and disease.

As explained by *Chakrapani Datta* in *Ayurveda Dipika*, if night sleep is inadequate, one may compensate by sleeping for half of the missed duration during the day. Day sleep should be

taken on an empty stomach, as sleeping after meals disturbs digestion and may cause illness.^[20]

Divaswapna (Indications)

In *Ayurveda*, *Divaswapna* (day sleep) is advised only in specific conditions. It is beneficial for individuals who are exhausted due to excessive singing, studying, alcohol intake, sexual activity, *Panchakarma* therapies, carrying heavy loads, or long-distance walking and travel. It is also recommended for those suffering from indigestion, injuries, debility, old age, childhood, general weakness, excessive thirst, diarrhea, colic pain, breathlessness, hiccups, emaciation, trauma from falls or assault, mental instability, anger, grief, fear, night awakening (insomnia), and fatigue from journeys. People habituated to daytime sleep may also continue it in moderation.

However, day sleep is generally contraindicated in all seasons except *Grishma Ritu* (summer). During summer, body strength decreases and *Vata Dosha* accumulates, so moderate daytime sleep helps restore energy and maintain balance.^[21]

Divaswapna (Contraindication)

Ayurveda warns that sleeping during the day except in the summer season—disturbs the natural balance of *Kapha* and *Pitta Dosha*. This imbalance may lead to heaviness of the body, dullness of mind, poor digestion, and increased disease susceptibility.

Day sleep is particularly unsuitable for individuals with obesity (*Meda*), those habituated to rich and oily foods (*Sneha Nitya*), and people with a *Kapha*-predominant constitution (*Shleshmala*). It should also be avoided in *Kapha*-related disorders (*Shleshma Roga*) and in conditions of chronic or residual toxicity (*Dushi Visha*), as it can aggravate symptoms and intensify the disease process.^[22]

DISCUSSION

In *Ayurveda*, *Nidra* (sleep) is considered both a natural restorative process and, when disturbed, a cause of disease, as described in classical texts like *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*. It allows the body and mind to withdraw from external stimuli, restoring *Ojas* (vital energy) and nourishing *Dhatu*s (tissues).

Proper timing, quality, and duration of sleep are essential. Sleeping immediately after meals, staying awake late at night, or oversleeping can disturb *Doshas* especially *Vata* and *Kapha*

leading to indigestion, toxin formation (*Ama*), and metabolic disorders like obesity and diabetes.

Aligning sleep with the natural rhythm of sunset and sunrise supports digestion, immunity, mental balance, and hormonal regulation. Thus, *Nidra* is a key pillar of holistic health in *Ayurveda*.

CONCLUSION

From an *Ayurvedic* perspective, *Nidra* (sleep) holds a central place in maintaining holistic health. The *Charaka Samhita* describes *Ratriswabhavaprabhava Nidra* as “*Bhutdhatri*,” the nourisher and sustainer of living beings, while the *Sushruta Samhita* refers to it as “*Vaishnavi*,” emphasizing its protective and life-supporting nature. These descriptions establish *Nidra* as one of the *Trayopastambha*, the three pillars that uphold the body.

Ayurveda stresses that both the quality and quantity of sleep, along with proper timing, are essential for health. True *Nidra* occurs when body and mind are relaxed and free from strain. Adequate sleep promotes strength (*Bala*), nourishment (*Pushti*), satisfaction (*Tusti*), vitality, longevity, and clarity of intellect.

Disturbed sleep, known as *Nidranasha* or *Alpanidra*, arises due to imbalance of *Doshas* especially aggravated *Vata*, increased *Pitta*, or depleted *Kapha* and may also appear as a complication of disease (*Upadrava*). Insufficient sleep weakens physical and emotional well-being.

Spiritual texts such as the *Upanishads* further highlight the deeper dimension of sleep, associating it with inner awareness and peace. Thus, obtaining proper sleep in the right measure and at the appropriate time is fundamental for preserving health, preventing illness, and sustaining overall well-being.

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