

# Possibilities of Implementation of »yoga-nidra« Relaxation Programme in the Minimum Security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula

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## Summary

*This paper reviews an attempt to propose a new addition to the existing methods and techniques used in penological treatment of convicted persons through theoretical and empirical arguments showing the usefulness of »yoga nidra« programme in conditions of penal institutions. It explains the basic characteristics and effects of »yoga nidra«, which prompted the minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula to approve the experimental relaxation programme for convicted persons based on technique of »yoga nidra«. This paper presents the basic elements of this programme, and also its theoretical and scientific justifiability.*

**Key words:** Minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula, adults, convicted persons, relaxation programme, »yoga nidra«

## 1. Introduction

In defectological practice, but also in the new science of penology, the term »rehabilitation« is often used to describe the process of recovering some lost or reduced functions or dealing with some functional disorder. The 20th century penological thought, in its complete turn toward modernization of penitentiary system, centers its philosophy on rehabilitation of delinquent behaviour and delinquent person's readaptation. In the course of history, the forms of society's reactions in regard to the perpetrators of criminal acts have been changing progressively from banishment and exclusion from the community, from the blood feud and vengeance, over the period of expiation, daunting measures and deportation, to evolve gradually toward humanized treatment and individualization, which puts the accent on question of treatment of an individual offender. It is not always easy or simple to determine the process of penological rehabilitation, since it is constantly on a dividing line between rehabilitation and repression, i.e. exclusion of the delinquent from the wider social environment for the purpose of elimination of danger to the society.

Still, the most important characteristics of the ideal penological rehabilitative system are based on following elements (Mladenović-Kupčević, 1981):

1. *Individualization* - offender's treatment is adjusted to the particular traits of offender's personality, which means that it is necessary, first, to establish the offender's biopsychosocial structure, then to define the »pathological disposition« in relation to offender's deviant behaviour and finally, to decide on the most adequate »cure« according to that individual's specific needs.
2. *Transformation of delinquent behaviour* - targeting of rehabilitative measures, with the offender's acceptance of social norms as the final goal (establishing of psychosocial balance).
3. *Post-penal protection* - the concluding part of the rehabilitation process aimed at prevention of offender's future criminal activity. In an integral approach to the process of transformation of offender's behaviour, the process includes various procedures, methods and techniques of institutional treatment.

Penological treatment within penal institutions consists of various forms of training or education courses; working activities; leisure time functions,

rewards and discipline; the advantages of minimum security institutions (social readaptation); forms of group work and individual treatment (sociometry, psychotherapy).

The study of a person's behaviour is a complex and complicated process and for those involved in the treatment of convicted persons it has an additional difficulty, since apart from the expert knowledge, it also demands the interdisciplinary approach. Majority of authors dealing with the treatment of convicted persons (persons with behavioural disorders), indicate the need to develop and evaluate the new methods of work within the penal institutions, aimed at the realization of the individualization principle and more effective transformation of convicted person's behaviour.

As the human need and desire to change the psychophysiological states in order to achieve the state of equilibrium, as well as the constant striving for harmonious life, has led people through all the history to practice various methods of relaxation (*Self-relaxation through Concentration*, J.H. Schul; *Autosuggestion*, E. Coue; *Progressive Relaxation*, E. Jakobson, etc.), we believe that the introduction of relaxation techniques into rehabilitation programmes of penal institutions could contribute to the effectiveness of efforts to transform the convicted person's behaviour.

Although it is difficult to define the relaxation methods, it is a well-known fact that their basic purpose is to establish the complete balance of all structures within the body, which means: »...integration through the harmony of thought, word and deed, or integration of the head, heart and hands« (*Sivananda Saraswati*). If we regard a convicted person as a biopsychosocial system (Kovačević, Stančić, Mejovšek, 1988), it can be justifiably expected that the aforementioned establishing of balance of all structures within the body will contribute to the transformation of person's behaviour.

Starting from the basic concept of Oriental philosophy that microcosmos (human being) is the part of macrocosmos (universe), the ancient philosophers have, through their own experience, developed *yoga*<sup>1</sup> as *divine science of life*. *Teaching yoga as the system which gives an integral support to the synthesis of body, mind and soul*, Patanjaly (1977) in his »Yogasutra-ma« takes *yoga through eight stages of change* (»raja yoga«) which consists of a progressive series of procedures. These eight stages are:

1. *Yama* (restraint) – non-violence, truthfulness of words, thoughts, actions;

2. *Nyama* (duties and obligations) – purity, satisfaction, self-study;
3. *Asanas* (postures);
4. *Pranayama* (breathing control);
5. *Pratyahara* (inner withdrawal of the mind for the purpose of calming the mind in preparation for concentration);
6. *Dharana* (concentration);
7. *Dhyana* (meditation);
8. *Samadhi* (self-realization).

The first four stages of Patanjaly's »raja yoga« are performed with a help of the conscious mind, which is active in the waking state. The higher stages of »raja yoga« include the unconscious mind, which is the reservoir of all experiences and the ego, which regulates entering of information into the conscious mind. »*Yoga nidra*«<sup>2</sup> unites in its theory and practice the six stages (*yama, nyama, asanas, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana*) which transform through a person into higher levels (structures) of person's existence as an integral being. »*Yoga nidra*« is a relaxation technique, which permeates in its effect through three dimensions of our mind (conscious, subconscious, unconscious). In Vedanta and in philosophy of yoga these three dimensions are called crude, subtle and causal dimension of human personality (Satyananda Sarasvati, 1982). They are divided in five koshas or bodies:

1. *Anamaya kosha* – physical body;
2. *Pranamaya kosha* – pranic body;
3. *Manomaya kosha* – mental body;
4. *Vigyamaya kosha* – psychic body;
5. *Anandamaya kosha* – transcendence.

Brain is the physical mediator of awareness that joins together the mind, the body and emotions into an harmonious whole. By stimulating the brain, »*yoga nidra*« induces a progressive heightening of body awareness. On psychological level, the practicing of »*yoga nidra*« results in control of emotional reactions and autonomic responses, as also in an evolutionary progress through keener perception. Relaxation technique »*yoga nidra*« is also called »a dreamless sleep«, since it enables us to enter into the intermediate state between the waking state and the sleeping state, without losing consciousness. Human beings are constantly dreaming, even while they are awake, without being aware of that, because their functions are extro-

1 Word *yoga* comes from Sanskrit – union, link, a yoking (lat. *jangum*)

2 *Yoga nidra* – technique which helps achieve the state of so called psychic, i.e. conscious dreaming

verted. Therefore, this technique is also called the relaxation of the presence of mind.

In the process of separation of consciousness from the sensory functions starts the process of neutrality (observation), without analysis, criticism or judgement. This objective observation inactivates the ego, so that there is no identification with inhibitions. In this way the ego is not accepting the matters that are in conflict with its attitudes (irrational attitudes); instead, they are entering the conscious and observed objectively, disappear or become transformed.

The instructions for »yoga nidra« relaxation practice can be provided in three ways: directly by yoga teacher; in a form of audio-recording; and through self-instruction. It can be practiced any time during a day or night, but not directly after meals. One session can last from twenty to forty minutes. The practice is structured as a series of eight phases:

1. *preparation* – performed in the position *shavasana* with the body fully stretched out on the floor; *the clothes* should be light and comfortable; *the room* should be quiet and airy, and pleasantly warm;
2. *decision (sankalpa)* – short mental posture;
3. *circulation of consciousness* – this is not the concentration practice and does not include bodily movements. The trainee needs to be conscious and follow the instructions with quick movements of the mind. Circulation of consciousness follows the strictly determined sequence – it starts with the thumb of the right hand and ends with the little toe on the right foot, then the circulation proceeds in the same way over the left side of the body and continues from the heel to the back of the head and over the head, face and the front part of the body to the feet;
4. *conscious breathing* – relaxation of the body is complemented by channelling of the attention on going through complete yoga breathing (abdominal, pectoral and high-pectoral at the same time), in order to achieve quantitatively and qualitatively more complete respiration of the entire organism;
5. *visualization of sensations and feelings* – relaxation and separation from emotions achieved through experiencing intensive feelings (grief/joy; love/hate; etc.);
6. *visualization* – the last stage of »yoga nidra« leads to the mental relaxation, the trainee visualizes the images of universal meaning (landscapes, ocean, mountains, flowers, people, etc.);
7. *conclusion* – the mind is slowly returning back from the state of psychic sleep into the waking state through movements of parts of the body.

Practicing of »yoga nidra« releases the muscular tensions, the nervous system becomes less obstructed, which improves the endocrine balance, while at the same time, the various dichotomies of emotional states (success/failure; sorrow/joy; violence/non-violence; etc.) transform and help the trainee in solving his or her existential problems. Furthermore, R.C. Shealy points out the effectiveness of »yoga nidra« treatment in cases of insomnia and this is very useful, because the problem of insomnia plays an important role within the convicted persons population.

The transformation described above is an integral part of the rehabilitation goal in the case of convicted persons. Namely, we believe that implementation of »yoga nidra« in conditions of the minimum security penal institutions can – just as in the case of so called non-convicted population – contribute to the establishing of structure balance and thus, indirectly, contribute to the convicted persons' successful rehabilitation. The results of numerous researches investigating the effectiveness of penological treatment indicate the problem of insufficient differentiation and individualization of convicted persons' treatment (Mejovšek, 1992; Mikšaj-Todorović, Leko, Buđanovac, 1995).

This paper describes an attempt to introduce »yoga nidra« as an addition to the existing methods and techniques used in penological treatment and discusses theoretical and empirical grounds for the use of »yoga nidra« in the conditions of penal institutions.

## 2. Problem

With regard to the characteristics of »yoga nidra« explained above and particularly because of its contribution to the change of behaviour, proved by experience, the relaxation programme based on technique of »yoga nidra« has been carried out in the minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula, in order to evaluate the possibility of inclusion of psycho-physical programmes of relaxation (contained within the »yoga nidra« programme) into penological treatment of the adult convicted persons.

Paralelly with the realization of the programme, the scientific research was also conducted, based on a general hypothesis that participation in the »yoga nidra« programme contributes to the positive transformation of convicted person's biopsychosocial structure. The research was conducted on a sample of adult convicted males serving their sentences in the minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula during the year 1996, who voluntarily took part in the three-months programme of »yoga nidra«. They represented the experimen-

tal group (n=20) and the convicted persons who were serving their sentences at that same time in the same institution, but did not take part in this programme, represented the control group (n=33).

The information about changes in the physiological space of examinees include measurements of blood and heart pressures, and also the psychogalvanic reflex (information about sweaty palms). Psychological space was examined by measurements of aggressiveness, anxiety, impulsiveness and other conative personality dimensions, while the sociological space was described by variables measuring examinee's perception of conditions inside the penal institution, his relationship with other convicts, as well as with the penal institution's staff and the family members. All of these data were collected at regular intervals, including the beginning and the end of »yoga nidra« relaxation programme.

The proposition for this research was the conceptualization and application of »yoga nidra« relaxation programme in conditions of the minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula. The author of this paper was also the leader of this programme and the trainer.

### 3. Description of the »Yoga nidra« Relaxation Programme in the MSI Valtura – Pula

One of the purposes of sending convicted persons to a penal institution and of their serving the prison term is, among other things, also their rehabilitation, which is, in turn, based on transformation of their behaviour. *Francis Allen* (1971:318) gave one of the best definition of rehabilitative model of punishment: »The proposition is: first, that human behaviour is the result of previous patterns. They could be identified as part of the physical universe and the obligation of scientist is to discover them and describe them as accurately as possible. The knowledge about what has preceded the present behaviour enables the approach founded on scientific control of human behaviour. And finally, and of primary importance for practical purposes, it is supposed that the measures used in the convicted offender's treatment should have a therapeutical function and induce the changes in his behaviour in interest of his own happiness, well being and contentment, as also in the interest of his social defense«. This opinion presumes the possibility of offender's change through penological treatment and his return to the community as a physically, mentally and morally rehabilitated person.

In connection with this, it should be pointed out that rehabilitation is the result of various targeted interventions aimed to reduce the offender's criminal activity through a change of his personality and behaviour, that is, through development of certain abilities. In that sense, although the programmes of treatment are not obligatory, their conceptualization and implementation can certainly help the realization of the aforementioned purpose of the prison sentence. Apart from that, the Law regards the rehabilitation as necessary function of the punishment and along with the court sentence it secures the right of the convicted person to have the access to the treatment which could help his rehabilitation.

These were the reasons which led to the realization of relaxation programme based on »yoga nidra« technique in the minimum security Penal Institution Valtura – Pula. This programme generally coincides with already existing relaxation programmes of this type, applied on the so called »unconvicted« population (Nespor, 1991).

In short, the programme outline would be as follows:

#### 1. Problem Analysis:

- what makes this programme necessary is the insufficient number of usable methods and techniques which are directly oriented on transformation of convicted person's behaviour (biopsychosocial structure)

#### 2. Programme Objectives (long-term):

- change of the psychophysiological states of convicted persons
- help in establishing of equilibrium and in achieving more harmonious life
- progressive hightening of body awareness and through this, the hightening of the awareness of oneself as a biopsychosocial structure

#### 3. Programme Objectives (short-term):

- positive changes in convicted persons' behaviour
- stabilizing of blood/heart pressure
- lower level of aggressiveness, anxiety and impulsiveness
- improved relations with other convicts, the members of PI staff and the family members

#### 4. Strategy:

- 20 – 40 min long relaxation programmes based on the principles of »yoga nidra«, 3 times a week, during the period of 3 months (from March 1st to June 1st, 1996)
- with regard to the effect of the experimental programme, it has been proposed to continue with this programme within the frame of convicted person's treatment in MSI Valtura – Pula

#### 5. Target Group, Locations and Participants:

- the group of convicted persons in MSI Valtura – Pula, formed on the principle of voluntary participation (n=20)

#### 6. Activities:

- selection of programme participants and the control group
- initial testing of both, experimental and control group (physiological, psychological and sociological space)
- realization of relaxation programme
- transitionary testing of both groups (physiological, psychological and sociological space)
- final testing of both groups (physiological, psychological and sociological space)
- processing of collected information
- audio-video recording of all activities
- preparation of the scientific study

Since none of the relaxation programmes can be realized outside of the context of the penal institution in which they are taking place (coordination with house order, regulations, the usual work activities, etc.), before the start of the programme, it is necessary to secure the support of the director and the expert team of the penal institution, as also the consent of the competent authorities (Department of execution of penal sanctions, Ministry of Judiciaries RC), and the course of the programme needs to be coordinated with the daily activities within the penal institution. In the case of this one, already realized relaxation programme, upon its final formulation, the programme leader has discussed the possibility of its realization with the members of the penal institution staff and it was decided that the programme has to be partly scheduled during the convicted persons' working hours and partly during their leisure time. Apart from fitting in with other daily activities of convicted persons, such scheduling also offered the participants an additional motivation, what was also important for the successful realization of the programme.

The preparation and planning of this programme, and also the interest and support of the penal institution's expert team, facilitated the obtaining of necessary permits.

In the next preparatory phase, all convicted persons who were serving their sentences in MSI Valtura – Pula during the month of April 1996 were acquainted with the elements of »yoga nidra« relaxation programme. This phase included also initial examination and selection of the experimental group. The selection was based on voluntary participation and the motivation level of convicted persons, expressed in the answers given on the Initial Questionnaire. As a result, the group of 25 par-

ticipants was formed from those convicted persons who expressed positive attitude on following variables: »Do you consider the introduction of relaxation programme in the MSI Valtura as justifiable«, and »Do you think that you would wish to take part in this programme«, and »Are you ready to persist in attending the training three times a week«.

The relaxation training took place as planned, 3 times a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, during the three months period. Each session lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. The measurements (necessary for a scientific evaluation of the training effects) were taken parallelly, in such intervals as the particular tests and measurings required. So, the changes within physiological space were measured once a week and the changes within psychological and sociological space at the beginning and at the end of programme. Apart from that, there were several individual and group discussions about the programme, sometimes suggested by the programme leader and sometimes requested by the convicts, i.e. participants.

#### 4. The Review of the Completed »Yoga nidra« Relaxation Programme in the MSI »Valtura« – Pula

The difficulties in evaluation of any, and consequently also of a penological treatment result from the complex nature of problems which are being examined. Quite often, the factors contributing to the treatment's effectiveness or obstructing its successful course cannot be distinguished.

When searching for the factors causing the failure of a treatment, as a rule, the resulting list is relatively very long (Mejovšek, 1986). The condensed list of these factors would be as follows:

- the treatment procedure is not sufficiently standardized;
- insufficient differentiation in regard to psychosocial characteristics of convicted persons;
- insufficient choice of methods and procedures that can be used; in working with convicted persons;
- incomplete or inadequate instruments for observation of changes occurring during the course of the treatment;
- difficulties in following the effects of the treatment, and in connection with this, difficulties in deciding about the course of the treatment;
- from the point of view of convicted persons, the treatment is being experienced as something imposed on them;

- convicted person's active participation in the treatment is extrinsically motivated;
- the treatment is taking place in abnormal conditions;
- convicted persons are exposed to various deprivations;
- conflict between punishment and resocialization;
- adverse social climate within the penal institution;
- the phenomenon of prisonization;
- criminal infection;
- errors in the choice of sanctions or convicted persons' classification;
- insufficient expertise and motivation of the staff;
- lack of experts of certain profile;
- inadequacy of the spatial and material circumstances within the penal institution;
- insufficient efforts of specialized agencies and the society in general to improve the adverse circumstances in the immediate and extended social environment to which the convicted person returns after the treatment;
- lack or inadequacy of the postpenal treatment.

Relatively small number of researches was devoted to the study of the actual process of treatment. There are several reasons for that; first of all, there are difficulties in defining the treatment, i.e. in describing everything pertaining to the treatment. Then there are difficulties with registration of everything that is happening in such a complex process, especially of changes occurring within a convicted person's mind under the influence of treatment. Finally, there are difficulties that can appear during the processing of collected information and during the analysis of the obtained results. Majority of these latter difficulties are caused by the fact that penological treatment is still not standardized and for the good part, it still represents an unsystematic process which is, consequently, difficult to keep under control. In any case, it is a very discouraging task to undertake the research of the process of a penological treatment, due to the great number of factors which are mostly unsystematic and as such, make a scientifically valid evaluation extremely difficult.

This is the context which should be regarded as relevant also to the realization of »yoga nidra« rehabilitation programme that was carried out in conditions of MSI Valtura - Pula.

First of all, the evaluation of the treatment effectiveness presented some problems, since due to the usual changes in the convicts' population (end

of a prison sentence, pardons, special remissions, paroles, regular privileges, work treatment, etc.) it was impossible to maintain the constant number of participants. This circumstance influenced also the structure of both, experimental and control group, because it made it difficult to maintain any group over a longer period of time. During the three months of scientifically evaluated experimental programme, the number of examinees in the research sample, that is, in both, experimental and control group, remained relatively unchanged. However, due to the above mentioned fluctuation of convicts, there have been some changes regarding the members of both groups. Those convicts who were released from the institution were replaced by newcomers who were given the possibility to choose into which group they want to be included. This means, that the initial points of some participants differ from the others, which fact will undoubtedly be reflected in the results obtained by final measuring. Collecting of data relevant to the subject of this research presented another difficulty in realization of this programme, because it required frequent tests, something that the convicts generally disliked and regarded as »tedious«.

Manifest and multivariant analysis of collected information is in process, so for the time being we cannot talk about statistically proved effectiveness of this programme. Still, we can say something about observed changes in the convicts' behaviour and the general social climate within MSI which can be attributed to the influence of this relaxation programme. In that sense, during the realization of this programme there was an evident improvement in the social climate, in mutual relationships and communication among convicts, as also in solving of momentary problems caused by the life in prison, such as insomnia, weariness and inability to rest, restlessness, etc.

The following excerpts from the participants' audio-recordings confirm the above observations:

*S.S. - »After practicing yoga nidra I notice that I am calmer than before, I am acting more positively and feeling more relaxed, usually I am constantly very tense; I am noticing the change in communication, but the greatest change is that now I am able to sleep, so I'd like this relaxation treatment to continue.«*

*C.T. - »I joined the programme somewhat later, before I came to this yoga nidra treatment, I had a headache, after we finished, the headache was gone and I feel rested, as if I had had a good night sleep, last few years I have problems with sleeping, but now, after this training, I feel fresh and rested, something is happening with me...« (puzzled)*

M.R. – *»After every training of yoga nidra I feel fine, it calms down my anxieties. I have the feeling that all my problems have disappeared and I sleep well.«*

S.B. – *(Upon arrival he had difficulties in adjusting to any aspect of the prison environment) »I don't feel the pressure any more, it's as if I'm not in prison, I changed 180 degrees, before I was withdrawn, I didn't talk much, now it's a different picture, it's enormous difference; when I am unable to come to the training because of work duty or weekend, I miss it very much, before I always thought of prison as an awful place.«*

Š.D. – *»I don't feel any great changes, but I do feel somewhat calmer and more relaxed, last two months my communication with parents was very good, the communication with other convicts in the institution is unchanged.«*

The preliminary results according to self-evaluation of the convicts indicate their interest in the new treatment programmes in penal institutions and in establishing the balance of certain physiological factors, as also their wish to continue with practicing yoga nidra. During the course of yoga nidra relaxation programme the interest of the prisoners was greater than we expected. We have foreseen the fluctuation of participants with regard to the system of privileges in an minimum security penal institution, the sick leaves, insufficient understanding and cooperation with instructors, etc.

»Yoga nidra« is an effective addition to the traditional forms of treatment, particularly in cases resistant to the psychotherapeutical treatment, because the participant of »yoga nidra« treatment becomes his own therapist in solving his interpersonal difficulties (Gersten, 1978). All this has led to the continuation of this programme in MSI Valtura, although we have temporarily suspended its scientific evaluation. It can be expected that the implementation of this programme over a longer period of time will have differing effects on convicted persons' behaviour, which would certainly deserve a scientific analysis. That means that the research will be renewed at some later date.

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