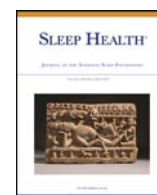




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# Sleep Health

Journal of the National Sleep Foundation

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Cover art

## Sacred sleep



*Vishnu in His Cosmic Sleep*, India, Uttar Pradesh, 11th century. Sandstone sculpture. 14 1/2 × 22 × 4 1/2 in (36.83 × 55.88 × 11.43 cm). Gift of Mr and Mrs Harry Lenart (M.79.111). Credit for the journal cover image and the image above: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

The meaning of this sandstone sculpture showing a sleeping deity is recognizable to those who are familiar with the Hindu religion. The oral traditions and holy texts of the many faiths of the world are often stories that explain man's and woman's role in the universe. There are narratives of how the universe (earth, heaven, and planets) came to be, how life in its many forms emerged, how humans appeared, and the arc of early history. The stories described the creation of the universe, people, battles, prophets, rulers, gods, goddesses, and God. Many stories involve sleep. Sleep and sometimes its disorders are mentioned in sacred texts of some religions, and these have been reviewed elsewhere.<sup>1,2</sup> Not all religions or civilizations had or have a tradition of artistic expression of the narratives that form the basis of their beliefs.

Hinduism is the religion and way of life of more than a billion people, living mostly in the Indian subcontinent. Its roots go back about 6000 years. There isn't a single founder, but rather a belief in many deities, the most important being the Trinity (*Trimurti* in Sanskrit) of Brahma (Creator of the Universe), Vishnu (Protector), and Shiva (Destroyer). The deities are believed to have more than one form. Sculpture and relief are the commonest art forms depicting the deities. Most of the art involves one or more deities. One of the most iconic images involving sleep is of the rebirth of the universe.<sup>3</sup>

This sandstone sculpture, created about a thousand years ago by an unknown artist, is intriguing to one not versed in Hinduism. To a practitioner of Hinduism, the style and content point toward an instantly recognizable scene.<sup>4</sup> Vishnu is sleeping, while his wife, Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity, is massaging his feet. Behind Vishnu's

head is the many-headed serpent, Shesha. A long vertical umbilical cord emerges from Vishnu's navel. Attached to the umbilical cord is a lotus flower on which sits a small Brahma. Brahma is usually depicted as having 4 heads, but the heads are missing from this work. This sculpture shows Brahma being created (reborn) from a sleeping Vishnu.

This story bears some similarity to the biblical description of Eve being created out of the side of a sleeping Adam. There are many other examples in the sacred texts of major religions in which sleep plays an important role: in Judaism, Jacob's dream and Joseph's dreams; in Christianity, St Joseph's dream and the Disciples of Jesus asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane; in Islam, The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; and in Buddhism, Maya's Dream. These sacred stories have been represented in magnificent works of art.<sup>5</sup>

Meditation, commonly practiced in Buddhism and by practitioners of other religions, is a state that bears similarities to sleep and perhaps overlaps with sleep. States of the brain (awake, asleep, in meditation) have always fascinated people.<sup>6–10</sup> What wonderful places do we visit when we sleep? The mysteries remain.

### Disclosures

The author has declared that he has nothing to disclose.

Meir H. Kryger, MD

Art Editor

Corresponding author

E-mail address: [meir.kryger@yale.edu](mailto:meir.kryger@yale.edu).

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