

The Art of Slow

Yoga is not a religion.
It is a science,
A science of wellbeing,
A science of youthfulness,
A science of integrating,
Body mind and soul.

- *Amit Ray*

Restorative or therapeutic yoga is in my opinion the most delicious, calming, nurturing form of yoga and is definitely a lesson in 'less is more'. It can be practiced by everybody, and because of its calming effect on the nervous system I would recommend incorporating restorative postures into your yoga practice.

Restorative yoga is supportive and relaxing and includes the use of 'props' to enable your body to be totally supported. Any number of props can be used e.g bolsters, theraband, ball, blankets, a chair. Because you are supported by props the body and mind can truly 'let go', there is no 'doing' or 'action' required, you simply allow your body and mind to release and relax. The postures when supported feel, healing and nurturing, restoring your mind and body, physically and emotionally.

The postures are held for a period of time encouraging you to slow down, to relax, connect with your breath, to be introspective and reflective, to face your fears and those things that you may have an aversion to. To move away from over thinking and an overactive mind, to stay in a more neutral, open state, ready to receive and accept intuitive information.

Restorative yoga can be practiced any time of the year and with the Winter season fast approaching this is the perfect time to learn the art of slowing down your yoga practice. Honour yourself and the need to go within and to recharge your batteries, you are looking after your own health and wellbeing by taking down time in between work or social engagements and with a busy season upon us we all need that little bit of extra time out. Set an intention to allow intuitive information to reach you. Take the time to be with your emotions and open to your own wisdom. Focusing on the third eye (Ajna chakra) can help you to connect with your own intuitive wisdom.

As Winter approaches and the dark phase of the earth's cycle earth begins to withdraw inside herself, her energy changes, mother nature slows down. This is the cue for human beings to also slow down, conserve energy and withdraw within themselves, to dream, renew, reflect, listen to your inner voice, create affirmations, to rest and sleep (hence the need for yoga nidra) and to meditate. The seeds of our ideas and future direction can be incubated in our unconscious during the Winter months ready for rebirth during the Spring. Restorative yoga provides us with the opportunity to connect with our inner wisdom, nature and authentic Self.

How does Restorative / Therapeutic yoga work?

It works on the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the ANS is divided into two, and includes the 'parasympathetic nervous system' (PNS) and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), they control our basic physiological functions. In a perfectly healthy individual the two work together in a synergistic way. The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) does its job of slowing down the heartbeat and lowering blood pressure. In contrast to the (SNS), the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) which produces stress hormones as adrenaline and cortisol and initiates a series of changes in the body, including raising blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar levels. These changes help a person deal with a crisis situation. They mean more energy and more blood and oxygen flowing to the large muscles of the trunk, arms, and legs, allowing the person to run from danger (the so-called "fight-or-flight" response). In general when activity is high in the SNS, it is lower in the PNS and vice versa.

It is said that many digestive, respiratory and cardiovascular disorders are linked to the nervous system. If you lead a very busy and stressful life or your yoga practice and exercise regime is always very physically challenging the chances are, your PNS isn't getting the opportunity to do its job correctly. Hence, the need for balance and including therapeutic postures into your practice. Research suggests that the reason yoga helps increase resilience and wellbeing is because of its positive impact on the vagus nerve, often referred to as our "air-traffic controller". When the nervous system is in balance, the parasympathetic (PNS) and sympathetic system (SNS) work together in harmony creating calm.

Restorative yoga can assist in managing various aches, pains, niggles, debilitating conditions, pain depression, anxiety, insomnia, chronic fatigue and the list goes on. As a yoga teacher and health and wellbeing coach, I work with people who are living with or have survived cancer. I have found that complementary therapy such as restorative yoga can increase the quality of life for those directly affected by cancer and for those who care for them. Yoga can be crucial in helping those affected by cancer develop a solid physical, emotional and mental base as they make the sometimes difficult transition from being a person with cancer to living as a cancer survivor.

Viparita Karani (*inverted posture*) this restorative yoga posture is a modification of what is known in yoga as an 'inversion,' or upside-down pose where your heart is above your head.

Benefits of an inversion are seemingly countless and are thought to help blood circulation in your legs as well as lymph circulation. Inversions are also said to help thyroid function, counter insomnia, relieve back pain, naturally adjust the spine, improve digestion, and much more. It can be helpful for those with lymphedema and revitalising and relaxing for everybody. If you have had a busy day on your feet – this posture is heavenly.

What you will need (props)

A wall, (essential) to support the legs. Optional are; eye pillow, pillow for your head or a folded blanket, yoga mat, an adjustable yoga belt, a bolster. Ensure you have all of the props you need before settling into the posture.

Place a blanket or yoga mat on the floor close to the wall, if using a yoga belt, place the belt around the ankles. A belt can be very helpful in this posture in supporting the legs allowing you to relax without having to hold the legs together. You may also like a folded blanket or a soft pillow to support your head which will allow your chin to drop very slightly toward your chest.

To move into the posture, slowly and carefully manoeuvre your sit bones as close to the wall as possible, (you may need to shuffle your sit bones toward the wall). It is not the easiest of postures to move into but worth the effort. I find moving in slowly from a sideways position works well.

Arms can be out to the side, palms turned upward. Or palms on the abdomen resting over the naval. Feet can be together or legs can be wide (if legs are wide it is helpful to secure the ankles with a yoga strap). You can also widen the legs further if you feel more comfortable. You might like to place an eye pillow over your eyes or simply close your eyes. An eye pillow offers instant relaxation by providing a little bit of pressure on Ajna chakra point (that's the pressure point in the middle of the forehead). Give yourself time to sink into the posture, don't be in a hurry.

Once comfortable, begin to focus on your breath, the ebb and flow of the inhalation and exhalation, the breath is a great anchor for the mind.

Allow your body and your mind to rest and truly let go of whatever you may be holding on to, let go of whatever it is that no longer serves you. Become the witness, observe your thoughts without judgement or trying to make sense of them and do not let the thoughts control you. Allow your body to soften, the eyes, the forehead, the jaw, cheekbones, lips, mouth, throat and the whole face. Over time allow your body and mind to release and gravity and the earth to support you. You might like to use a personal affirmation or an intention, e.g. I am at peace, I am happy, I am relaxed, I am resting, I am content, etc....or just simply become the observer. If the mind becomes too busy, acknowledge the thoughts and gently escort your mind back to your breath. You can stay in this posture as long as you wish, e.g. 10, 15, 20 minutes. To exit the posture, take your time – you have been in an inversion so you may feel a little light headed, bend your knees toward your chest and roll to your side, stay there for a few minutes before gently coming up from the floor.

For more of an inversion, this posture can be practiced with a bolster or folded blankets. To begin, fold two thick blankets lengthwise and stack one neatly on top of the other to create a support that is at least six inches thick, about 10 inches wide, and long enough to prop up your hips in their entirety or use a yoga bolster. Place your support near a wall with the long edge running parallel to the baseboard, leaving a gap of just a few inches between the support and the wall.

This posture can also be modified and practiced lying on a bed if you are unable to get onto the floor. This is the wonderful thing about 'yoga', the postures can be modified to suit all.

Cautions: glaucoma, and high blood pressure (if you have high blood pressure I would not recommend using a bolster). As with any form of physical activity it is always wise to consult your GP.

In my last article I wrote about '*Cultivating Balance*' and once again you can learn to cultivate **Sthira** and **Sukham**, in restorative postures.

Namaste

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