

Yoga Nidra was my Life Raft: How the Practice of True Rest Helped Me Reclaim my Life

“When we allow ourselves to rest and relax, healing becomes possible. There is no true healing without true rest.” ---Thich Nhat Hanh

It's been over two years since a serious accident completely upended my life. In September, 2021, I was struck by a car while crossing in a cross walk. I sustained serious injuries to my left shoulder and left knee, requiring six hours of surgery, and two weeks in hospital. I was pretty well bedridden for most of the fall. Not able to use my left leg or my left arm, I learned what it's like to be completely dependent on the kindness of my family and friends to take care of all my needs.

Most important, I learned how to truly REST, and the power of deep REST to heal at many levels: physically, emotionally, mentally, and at a deeper soul level. It was a radical time of slowing down. I was really too tired and in too much pain to do much else. I spent lots of time just gazing out my bedroom window at the square patch of blue sky, and the tall poplar trees swaying in the wind. I watched as the leaves turned brilliant colors, then fluttered to the ground, leaving the trees naked against the blue of the sky.

I too felt naked against the larger background of my life. In one unexpected and traumatic moment, I felt myself stripped of a healthy body, and the joy of yoga and the movement I so loved. I felt stripped of a sense of safety and security. I was stripped of all the everyday familiar routines that keep us occupied, and even distracted. The age old question “Who am I?” kept niggling at the edges of my mind. Really, who am I? beyond my personality and all the outer roles I play?

My spiritual director told me that healing is a full-time job. That's literally all I could focus on. Everything else in my life had to fade into the background. It was a deep practice of surrender and letting go. That's not to say I didn't fight it. I ranted and raved at the injustice and pain. I had moments when I felt I was being erased from the life. Yet, always when that striving and grasping arose, so too did my stress and my pain. I learned that I simply needed to surrender over and over and over again.

Yoga Nidra was my life raft. My breath kept me afloat. As a lying down form of embodied meditation, Yoga Nidra was the one thing I could do while lying in bed, without having to over think or plan, or even move a single muscle. I'd been practicing and teaching Yoga Nidra for almost 15 years, but always with a healthy, and mostly pain-free body. Now, I learned what it's like to practice Yoga Nidra in a body that's been broken, a body that can't get comfortable, a body that didn't feel like my own any more.

Perhaps you've felt that way at times, whether through injury, or prolonged illness. It's a hard place to inhabit and live in. My dear Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh says *"When we allow ourselves to rest and relax, healing becomes possible. There is no true healing without true rest."*

What Exactly is True Rest?

"Rest" comes from the latin "restare", meaning "to remain in one place." We are asked to stop moving, to return back to stillness. For most of us that can feel quite challenging, and yet too, a huge relief. When I finally stopped fighting and simply surrendered to my new way of inhabiting my body, even though it was still painful, it was such a relief to put down my "to do" list and plans.

The art of true rest is a gift, especially with all the conflict and chaos in the world right now. In Yoga Nidra, we are invited to turn inwards, away from our constant need to do and achieve. We learn how to tend lovingly to our body, and pay attention to the deep sense of fatigue and exhaustion that accompanies our busyness and over-doing. We let go of pushing ourselves. We let go of our need to achieve. We let go of the struggle of holding up the face we show to the world.

In true rest, we begin to sense the silence that awaits us when we take time to "be still and know." *"Within each of us there is a silence, a silence as vast as the universe, and when we experience that silence, we remember who we are."*---Gunilla Norris

So Yoga Nidra is a practice that invites us to remember who we are. Yoga Nidra invites us to take time to "pause" between all the activities on our to-do list, to slow down and notice the space between breaths as a space of possibility, space for healing, and space for dreaming.

Postscript: It's been a long journey, but with gentle yoga and breathwork, and lots of physio, I have slowly recovered most of my strength and flexibility back. My doctors and surgeons are truly amazed at how well I have recovered. (so am I) I smile to them and say, "It's the miracle of Yoga Nidra, intentional rest, and sending my body loving, healing energy." They smile back, but I'm not sure they believe me. I don't think western medicine quite understands the true power of rest, and breath, and mindful attention to heal. For now, I'll keep teaching Yoga Nidra meditation as a healing practice to those who are open to its power to heal and transform at ever deepening levels.

