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# PERMISSION TO STOP

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I looked out at the world and felt overwhelmed and confused.

So, I looked within, and a quiet voice said

“I’m tired”.

I felt Mother Earth at my back, and she asked me to stop.

# Contents

Doing and Being .....	4
Creating a Nest.....	5
The Twenty Minute Rule.....	6
A Recipe for Relaxation.....	7
Find Out What Works for You .....	10
Resting is Good.....	11
Action and Reflection .....	12
A Warm, Fuzzy Miracle.....	13
Restriction Can Be A Support.....	14
Travelling Without Moving .....	15
Yoga Nidra.....	17
Letting Go Is Not The Same As Giving Up.....	19
Mother Earth Has Got Your Back.....	21
Practice Saying ‘No’ .....	23
Prioritise Wellbeing Over Productivity.....	24
Turn To The Side .....	26
Breathing Space .....	27
Dwelling in a Warm Heart.....	29
Opening The Back Of The Lungs .....	30
The Uninvited Guests.....	33
Weight Yourself Down .....	35
Build A Dam Against Busy-ness .....	36
Separate Together .....	37
Further Reading .....	38

## Doing and Being

There are many simple things we can all DO for our good health – eat well, drink plenty, go to bed early, get fresh air, take vitamins, play music, exercise – you know all this.

This little booklet is here to remind you just to BE.

I am inviting you to commit to a personal discipline of twenty minutes TOTAL RELAXATION each and every day. I've used capslock because this is not just about pausing for a cuppa or watching your favourite TV show, it's a total stop which will re-set your nervous system and massively boost your immune system.

We can define relaxation as “the state of being free from tension and anxiety”. Entry into this state can be measured physiologically by a lowering of our heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate.

Relaxation also has an effect on our brain waves and on our nervous system. The relaxation response is the opposite of our body's stress response - a tendency toward fight-or-flight.

However, in a modern world where we never truly have nothing to do or nowhere to go, making time for ‘just being’ requires discipline just like any other yoga practice.

This booklet is less an instruction manual and more a companion. In its pages you will find practice ideas and words of encouragement.

For more detailed guidance on specific posture set-ups or for guided relaxation practices, please take a look at the audio and video resources at

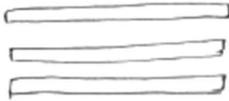
[www.aspacetobe.co.uk/permissiontostop](http://www.aspacetobe.co.uk/permissiontostop).

# Creating a Nest

Although the benefits are numerous and the experience (usually) pleasant, making a daily habit of relaxation is not always easy. Conscious rest is a personal discipline which takes effort initially to establish.

Creating a space to practice in is the first step – I’m calling this your ‘nest’. The more appealing you make your practice nest, the easier this daily discipline will be.

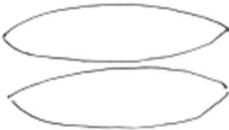
Ideally your nest needs to be somewhere you can go where you won’t be disturbed. My yoga nest fits in at the end of my bed. A yoga mat is about the minimum size you want your nest to be, but you could also use a rug, towel or blanket instead. Eventually you may wish to invest in some specialist yoga props but there are many items from around the home you can gather to get you started.



*Folded blankets*



*Rolled blankets*



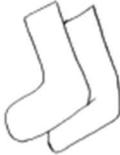
*Pillows*



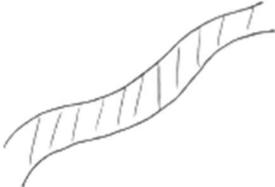
*Bolster, or two pillows together*



*Cushions*



*Cosy socks*



*Scarf*



*Eye pillow*

## The Twenty Minute Rule

When you try to practice relaxation, or meditation, you may find that although it looks easy, it is actually quite difficult. There could be a lot of agitation in your mind, or in your body. It may feel very hard indeed to become still.

In spite of this, our bodies (and minds) do crave relaxation and our nervous system is predisposed to switch into its parasympathetic ‘rest and digest’ mode whenever the conditions are right. However, it does not happen instantly.

It is crucial that you allow enough time for the magic to work, and for most people this is 15-20 minutes.

Allowing enough time for relaxation to happen is really important.

Think of it like baking a sponge cake – you can mix together all the delicious ingredients and whisk it all up so its light and fluffy, but then you must bake it – and anyone who has ever baked a sponge cake knows this golden rule:

You must never open the oven door before it’s ready!

The same is true for the practice of deep relaxation, which is why I urge you to commit to the full twenty minutes.

If your agitation is just too great for you to settle, then before you begin go out for a brisk walk, do some active yoga postures, or try the labyrinth doodle meditation.

Then, follow the recipe on the next page for the perfect relaxation cake!

# A Recipe for Relaxation

Here are the five ingredients of a great relaxation practice:

## 1. Safety

Create a feeling of safety by telling yourself ‘it’s ok’ to let go. Ideally go in a room where you won’t be disturbed and can close the door. Turn off your phone/emails. If necessary, tell your family/friends you are ‘busy’ on some important work/appointment. Having a clear time boundary can also help us feel ‘safe’ in a modern context. It’s just twenty minutes – use a timer, or listen to a guided relaxation.

## 2. Stillness

Make a nest for your daily relaxation retreat and lie down in any position that you find comfortable. When you are truly comfortable, you will be able to stay still for twenty minutes with ease.

## 3. Quiet

If you can’t find a quiet place to relax, use earplugs or listen to a guided relaxation.

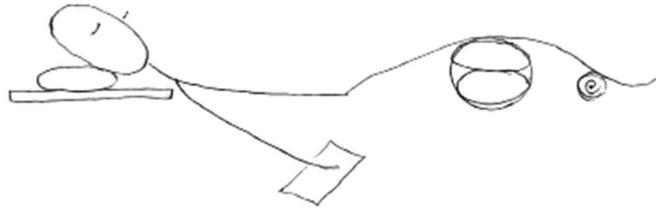
## 4. Darkness

Light entering our eyes stimulates the nervous system. Ideally, dim your lights, turn them off altogether and/or cover your eyes with a scarf, towel or eye pillow.

## 5. Warmth

Relaxation won’t work if you are cold – especially your feet – put on some warm socks and cover up with a blanket.

‘Bake’ for twenty minutes – or more – here is where my analogy falls apart – unlike a cake that can bake for too long and get burnt or crispy, there are no contraindications to staying in relaxation – only benefits.



CAUTION!

*“Only do this on days that you want to feel better.”*

– Judith Hanson Lasater

*Let Yourself Rest*

*If you're exhausted, rest.*

*If you don't feel like starting a new project, don't.*

*If you don't feel the urge to make something new,  
just rest in the beauty of the old, the familiar, the known.*

*If you don't feel like talking, stay silent.*

*If you're fed up with the news, turn it off.*

*If you want to postpone something until tomorrow, do it.*

*If you want to do nothing, let yourself do nothing today.*

*Feel the fullness of the emptiness, the vastness of the silence, the sheer life in  
your unproductive moments.*

*Time does not always need to be filled.*

*You are enough, simply in your being.*

– Jeff Foster (<https://www.lifewithoutacentre.com/>)

## Find Out What Works for You

The techniques that I use for relaxation are:

1. Restorative Yoga (using props to support the body in a position so comfortable relaxation is inevitable, after 15 minutes or so)
2. Yoga Nidra (using a specific series of words and images to induce a state of relaxation via the mind)
3. Breathing Techniques (in particular lengthening of the exhalation to induce a state of relaxation via the breath)

These three techniques are not mutually exclusive (you can set up a restorative pose and practice yoga nidra which focuses on long exhalations) but I think it is worth noting that relaxation can be induced in different ways and different methods will suit different people at different times.

Remember, we can define relaxation as “the state of being free from tension and anxiety”. Entry into this state can be measured physiologically by a lowering of our heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. It also involves a change in the nervous system from sympathetic dominant (‘fight or flight’), to parasympathetic dominant (‘rest and digest’).

# Resting is Good

Here are six things we have known about relaxation since at least 1986 (which is when Daniel Goleman wrote a great article<sup>1</sup> summarising the benefits).

1. Relaxation may help ward off disease by making people less susceptible to viruses
2. Relaxation training has been found to widen restricted respiratory passages for asthmatics
3. Relaxation can reduce the need for insulin in some diabetics
4. Relaxation can lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels
5. ANY form of deep relaxation seems to bring these benefits
6. The degree of benefits depends on the rigor with which people use the relaxation techniques

Crucially, Goleman writes in his article,

“The medical advantages are not from ordinary relaxing activities, such as catnaps or gardening, but from intensive techniques that allow people to evoke a specific physiological state.”

To get the benefits you do actually have to do your chosen practice, and the more often you do it, the more benefit you will receive.

So, however you do it, keep doing it!

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<sup>1</sup> “Relaxation: Surprising Benefits Detected”, by Daniel Goleman *New York Times* May 13, 1986

## Action and Reflection

Implicit in yoga is a distinction between moments of action, and moments of reflection. Some of our practices are more about ‘doing’ or changing something about ourselves. Some of our practices are more about ‘being’ and finding ease with where we are at or who we already are.

Sometimes we may be taking a stance, making an action or deliberately changing something about our body or our breath.

At other times we allow ourselves to step back and to reflect, to remain curious and to witness ourselves from a wider perspective.

Both of these things are skills we can practice on our yoga mats, and both require discipline, attention to detail and consistency in practice.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras contains a verse on abhyāsa and vairāgya (chapter 1, verse 12). The first is a commitment to practice - to do something, or change something. The second is a commitment to find perspective, to reflect, and to be open to life. In their book, *Embodying the Yoga Sutra*, my teacher Ranju Roy and his co-author Dave Charlton describe them as being like the two wings of a bird – both needed to fly.

Imagine the perspective of a soaring buzzard as it circles high above - how necessary this is for the fast, efficient, diving a bird of prey is capable of. In the same way, when we practice stepping back, zooming out, or gaining perspective in our yoga practice (and our lives) it allows us to be more focused, efficient and targeted in our efforts.

## A Warm, Fuzzy Miracle

A regular and consistent practice of deep relaxation can have a profound effect each and every one of our body's systems (e.g. digestive, immune, endocrine, reproductive, nervous etc).

When you lie down to rest you switch from 'fight or flight' into 'rest and digest', from 'urgent business' to 'growth and repair'.

It may sound too simple to be true, but I really believe lying down and 'just being' is almost miraculous in what it can achieve.

For example, I was once allergic to my favourite pets – cats – but after my first introduction to restorative yoga I found the allergy to be completely gone. My immune system had been over-reacting to something which it is now able to handle with ease.

This was good news for me as I really enjoy spending time with my cat, and there is a good reason for that. Even just looking at pictures of cute animals can make you feel warm and fuzzy inside, which produces the hormone oxytocin, which helps you to relax (it's also known as the love hormone or the cuddle hormone). Our pets also show us very naturally how 'letting go' is done.

When our body has lots of oxytocin we feel safe, relaxed, cosy, romantic and happy. When we feel all those things, we produce more oxytocin – it is a positive feedback loop.

There are no contraindications to relaxation

## Restriction Can Be A Support.

None of us like the idea of ‘restrictions’ but sometimes restrictions (also known as ‘boundaries’) can be a support.

For example, I restrict the amount of chocolate biscuits my daughter consumes – she doesn’t like this but it supports her healthy diet and I do hope one day she’ll agree...

In ujjayi breathing we slightly restrict the breath so as to channel it. As a result it feels somehow more potent or powerful, like water channeled into a turbine – ujjayi breathing seems to generate energy!

Tying our legs together with a yoga belt or scarf would be horribly restricting if we were trying to walk or run, but it can also provide an incredible support when practicing supported bridge pose - it is as if with the legs held closed, the chest can more easily open.

Staying still in savasana (or any relaxation pose) we restrict our movement, but deep within we may be deeply moved.

## Travelling Without Moving

Every time I step on my yoga mat there is an adventure waiting. Even if I simply lay down and take my curiosity within, there are experiences to be had, and lessons to be learned.

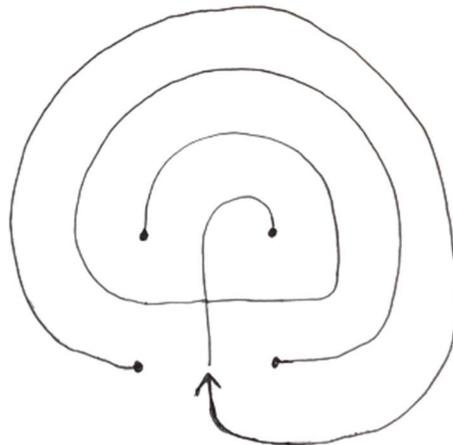
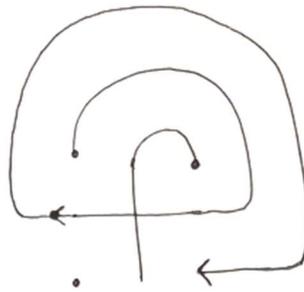
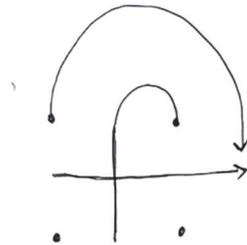
The unicursal (one path) labyrinth is another perfect way to go travelling when all other plans are cancelled!

You just put one foot in front of the other and follow the path. It twists and turns in a disconcerting way, but you will always arrive at the centre. The same path will wind you back out – “like one long breath”.

I often go the beach to create a path in the sand which I can walk in, but you can also ‘walk’ in the labyrinth with your fingers, or just enjoy doodling the pattern.

Drawing a labyrinth is not as tricky as it looks – use the next page to copy my drawings and soon you will be able to draw your own three circuit labyrinth.

Once you can draw a labyrinth on paper, it’s only a small step to create an indoor path on a bedsheet. It is a surprisingly long walk round your living room for anyone cooped up inside!



# Yoga Nidra

Yoga nidra is a state of consciousness in which we are aware of ourselves at rest and at ease ('nidra' is a Sanskrit word meaning sleep).

There are many routes that one can take to arrive at this state of consciousness, and one is to follow specific pathways of awareness around your body - like a labyrinth walk inside your brain.

Indeed, one way these guided practices work is by alternating awareness in the left and right sides of the body – a classic technique for balance and equilibrium.

Yoga nidra can also be a journey through the five 'bodies' or layers of our being – body, breath, mind, heart and soul. This model - the 'panca maya' can be found in the Taittiriya Upanisad, chapter 2, verses 1-6.

A typical yoga nidra practice will begin with awareness of more gross or physical sensations, and move towards awareness of more subtle experiences or sensations.

We can think of yoga nidra practices as a journey from the periphery to the centre, and back out again, just like a labyrinth journey.

A number of different guided practices are available on my soundcloud:

[www.soundcloud.com/aspacetobe](http://www.soundcloud.com/aspacetobe)

*There is no need for you to leave the house*

*Stay at your table and listen.*

*Don't even listen, just wait.*

*Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone.*

*The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked;*

*it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you.*

– Franz Kafka, The Zürau Aphorisms

## Letting Go Is Not The Same As Giving Up

There is an oak tree which I observe from my window all year round.

In the Spring, her sap is rising, leaves are budding and she is coloured with dense green leaves.

In Summer children gather around her, climbing into her boughs and leaping off into piles of straw.

In Autumn she starts to let go, her leaves drying up and falling away. She still stands proudly and her form is more clearly revealed.

Over the winter time the tree looks bare and quiet but I know that hidden out of sight are deep roots of belonging and the work of preparation for the Spring which is around the corner.

What I learn from the tree is that growth does not occur in straight lines. After every Summer there is Winter. At the end of each day there is a night, and after every inhalation there is an exhalation.

When I lie down to rest I am not being unproductive or lazy. I am not worth any more or any less. It does not prevent me from rising up and taking action, or enjoying and sharing the various fruits of my labour. It is simply a part of the natural rhythm of life of which we are all inextricably part of, not separate from.

To rest is to be fully alive, and I like to think that Mother Earth breathes a small sigh of relief each and every time one of us stops to do so.

*Today I'm flying low and I'm not saying a word.*

*I'm letting all the voodooos of ambition sleep.*

*The world goes on as it must, the bees in the garden rumbling a little, the fish leaping, the gnats getting eaten.*

*And so forth.*

*But I'm taking the day off.*

*Quiet as a feather.*

*I hardly move though really I'm traveling a terrific distance.*

*Stillness.*

*One of the doors into the temple.*

— Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings*

## Mother Earth Has Got Your Back

In my opinion 'mothering' is not just something done by women with children. To a certain extent I believe we are all mothers some of the time (yep, men too). And while our birth mothers may or may not be present for us now, we all share a common Mother Earth.

I am gladdened that the people in our society who work hard in caring and nurturing roles have been recognized as 'key' to our society (e.g. nurses, teachers, child care specialists).

The role of the mother is not only to be calm, and kind and nurturing, but also to be fierce, and clear and set boundaries. To mother well you must be able to say "No!", or "Please Stop That".

When Mum says no it can be frustrating and disappointing, we may even wish to rebel.

As we continue to face the 'stay at home' orders of the corona virus pandemic, it is as if our Mother Earth has had enough and sent us all to our rooms to reflect on our behaviour!

However, she has our best interests at heart, and has always got our back.

*And the Great Mother said:*

*Come my child and give me all that you are.*

*I am not afraid of your strength and darkness, of your fear and pain.*

*Give me your tears. They will be my rushing rivers and roaring oceans.*

*Give me your rage. It will erupt into my molten volcanoes and rolling thunder.*

*Give me your tired spirit. I will lay it to rest in my soft meadows.*

*Give me your hopes and dreams. I will plant a field of sunflowers and arch rainbows in the sky.*

*You are not too much for me. My arms and heart welcome your true fullness.*

*There is room in my world for all of you, all that you are.*

*I will cradle you in the boughs of my ancient redwoods and the valleys of my gentle rolling hills.*

*My soft winds will sing you lullabies and soothe your burdened heart.*

*Release your deep pain.*

*You are not alone and you have never been alone.*

– Linda Reuther, Homecoming

## Practice Saying 'No'

We can say 'no' to postures, movements or breathing techniques that we know in our hearts do not really serve us.

Off the mat, we can say 'no' to all sorts of offers, invitations or old habits so that we might say 'yes' to something else.

That something else might be the twenty minutes you need today to rest and re-set, to feel fully human and alive.

Can you say 'Yes' to yourself today? Is there anything you need to say 'No' to first?

## Prioritise Wellbeing Over Productivity

In 2019 Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, announced that her government would “prioritise wellbeing over economic growth”<sup>2</sup>.

Economic growth or Gross Domestic Productivity (GDP) is how countries are measured and compared against each other – by their productivity. So, I literally stopped and said “Wow” when I heard that New Zealand was taking a different and an extremely radical approach to their economy.

A year later, Jacinda Arden was widely acclaimed for her government’s response to the corona virus pandemic.

*“We must go hard, and go early, and do everything we can to protect New Zealanders' health. “*

—Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, March 14, 2020

She knew when and how to say ‘No’ and was not afraid to sacrifice her country’s short-term productivity. She had already made the choice to prioritise wellbeing over economic growth in New Zealand.

They had already given themselves permission to stop.

What might it look like in our own personal lives, to prioritise wellbeing over productivity?

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<sup>2</sup> ‘New Zealand's world-first ‘wellbeing’ budget to focus on poverty and mental health’ Eleanor Ainge Roy, *The Guardian* 14 May 2019

*And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.*

*And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.*

— Kitty O'Meara, March 2020

## Turn To The Side

There are lots of reasons you might not want to lie down on your back for relaxation. Sometimes lying on your back can just feel too exposed or vulnerable, sometimes it might be contra-indicated (like in third trimester of pregnancy), you may find it makes you cough or have difficulty breathing.

Turn to the side!

Lying on your left side (the home of the heart and the stomach) is said to support the digestive and circulatory systems, but either side is fine. The pose has echoes of the foetal position and can feel very cosy and safe -it may help with anxiety or insomnia.



Place plenty of padding under your head, between your knees and under your top arm (to 'hug'). If possible, rest with a pillow or bolster at your back and/or with your back against a wall or settee.

# Breathing Space

The breath flows in and out of the body like a series of waves rolling up and down a beach.

Sometimes the waves are big and fierce, other times barely perceptible.

The mind's attention can simply rest on the beach and watch the waves.

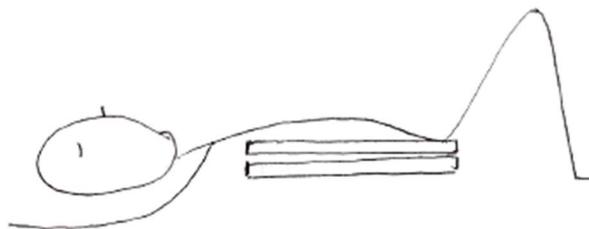
There is nothing to do and nothing to change.

Each breath just rolls in all by itself, like a gift.



And when the tide has gone fully out, the sand is left clear and smooth.

My breath is a bridge between my body and my mind.



My body takes support on the earth and my mind rests on the rhythm of my breath, the rhythm of life itself.

I trust in this process and arrive back home, again and again.

# Dwelling in a Warm Heart

*Fish live in streams*

*Birds nest in trees*

*Human beings dwell*

*In warm hearts*

Japanese Folk Saying from 'A Zen Harvest' by Soiku Shigematsu

Can you imagine your lungs like a fabulous mansion, with a deep basement, an East Wing and a West Wing, a beautiful front balcony, an attic, and oodles of space out the back?

Can you think of your ribs, not so much as a rigid cage but more like a strong wicker basket, with a bit of give in it?

Can you cultivate softness in the space behind your breastbone, the centre of your chest?

Call to mind something which "melts your heart" – ahhhhhh – and breathe deeply into that soft, warm heart

Dwelling in our own warm heart, we soften and we open.

## Opening The Back Of The Lungs

We have more lung tissue in the back of the body, and yoga postures like prone savasana (lying on your belly) or child's pose can help us to open and access that.

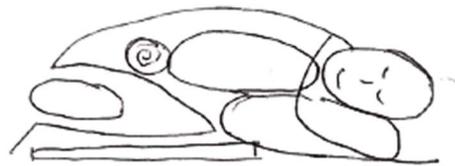
The same postures can also feel uncomfortable or claustrophobic, which creates anxiety, having the opposite effect on breathing – so always be guided by your felt sense of what is right for you.

If you find it uncomfortable to lie on your front, either because it hurts your lower back, or your neck doesn't like to be twisted to one side, then lying over a bolster, or a pillow (or both) can be very satisfying.

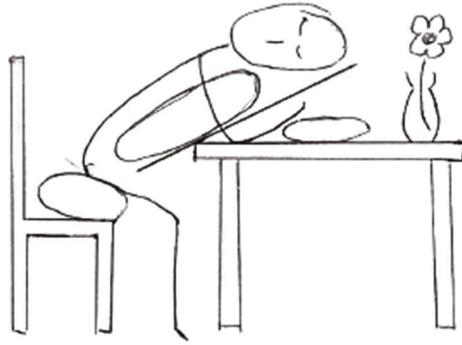
If you don't like to turn your neck, have your head far enough off the support that you can tuck your chin and rest your forehead on the floor or on a block.



In supported child's pose, your abdomen will be very slightly compressed, resting on a bolster or cushion. The idea is that your breath will find other parts of your lungs to move in, and not just the bottom portion. If you are a regular yoga practitioner you will probably have developed a wonderful abdominal breath, but in this instance, we actually want to 'quiet' that, and direct the breath instead into the back lung area.



There are lots of other benefits from supported forward bends like this one, including relief from lower back pain, constipation and other digestive issues. You may not feel you can stay for twenty minutes in these poses – up to five minutes would be enough – and then choose another position for the remainder of your practice.



Here are some pointers for getting settled in this wonderful chair and table variation of a seated forward bend which is accessible for most people:

- hips higher than knees (sit on a cushion)
- ankles and knees same width
- abdomen supported (e.g. by a pillow supported by a large book or tray)
- head turned to either side, or resting forehead on cushion/hands.

## The Uninvited Guests

“Never in the history of ‘Calm Down’ did anybody calm down from being told to calm down.”

I saw the above statement in an internet meme and it made me smile.

Even at the best of times, when I lie down for my daily practice of rest, I notice that I am not calm at all. I become aware of agitation, of fear, of sadness, of frustration, of many racing thoughts.

The practice of stillness does not provide instant calm, rather it creates a space in which I can pay attention to all of these things, and allow them to ‘bubble up’ to the surface.

I move away from

*“ARGH I am so agitated”*

to

*“When I stop, I notice a lot of agitation”*

This separation of ‘I’ from whatever is arising in me, creates freedom.

Practicing yoga, relaxation or meditation is not about being always calm. It is more as if my practice somehow enabled me to make myself BIGGER, so that I might hold all these different and often conflicting thoughts and feelings without being toppled off balance.

*This being human is a guest house.*

*Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

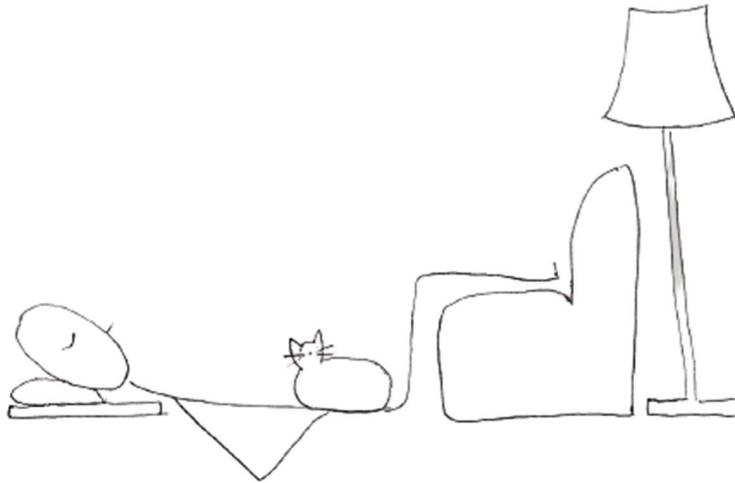
– Jalaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

## Weight Yourself Down

In Ayurvedic terms, agitation is related to too much ‘vata’ or wind energy (movement, lightness, coolness).

We can address this with stillness, heaviness and warmth. To add weight in your relaxation practice, try placing something slightly heavy on your forehead, on your abdomen, or on your top thighs.

You could use heavy blankets, wheat packs, hot water bottles (not too hot) or even a pet!



## Build A Dam Against Busy-ness

Busy-ness is like water – it will flow into anywhere there is a gap for it.

Our empty spaces need protection so we must create dams around our free time, our family time, our sabbaths – and our yoga practice.

When we don't protect these spaces they soon become flooded with many other things.

## Separate Together

A tree that stands tall with branches reaching upwards has an equal or even greater number of roots that are hidden below ground. These hidden roots reach down into the earth and are vital for the plant's nourishment and ability to continue growing upwards and outwards.

The hidden roots of apparently quite separate trees are, in many cases actually connected underground. They form what has become known as a “wood wide web”<sup>3</sup> – and their symbiotic relationships strengthen the forest as a whole.

I like to imagine that throughout this strange time of enforced ‘retreat’, separately in our own homes, we have been like the trees, connecting through the hidden roots of our yoga practice.

I hope as we begin to re-emerge that these connections can be maintained, and that our permission to stop (if only for just 20 minutes each day) can be remembered and protected.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Wood wide web: Trees' social networks are mapped’, Claire Marshall

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-48257315>, 15 May 2019

## Further Reading

Judith Hanson Lasater

*Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times (2016)*

*Restore and Rebalance: Yoga for Deep Relaxation (2019)*

*Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life (2016, second edition)*

Ranju Roy and David Charlton

*Embodying the Yoga Sutra: Support, Direction, Space (2019)*

Richard Miller

*Yoga Nidra: A Meditative Practice for Deep Relaxation and Healing (2010)*

### Online Resources

For updates to this document and audio/video material to support your practice please visit:

[www.aspacetobe.co.uk/permissiontostop](http://www.aspacetobe.co.uk/permissiontostop)