



Yoga and Trauma

As many of you know, or are in the process of discovering, yoga and deep rest meditation can unfreeze and loosen even the most frozen and stuck places within us and bring us into our bodies in a way that feels held and safe. It really is possible to discover a new relationship to ourselves and our aliveness, to meet even the very deep traumas that can get lodged in our system and to heal.

The following very personal poem was written by a student whilst on retreat and is accompanied by her reflections on her own experience of how trauma expresses itself through her body mind heart and how yoga and deep rest supports.

My Life, My body, Cast

Trauma, contraction, holding, gluing, cementing, hardening my body into a frozen block. My feet leave the ground, contract in upon themselves and hover above my ankles in a desperate attempt to remove myself from the situation: Make myself invisible, disappear.

The contraction rises through my body. My waist compacting, gluing my feet, legs and pelvis into one solid block of a torso. Becoming smaller, to disappear like a tortoise into its shell. My throat clenches, constricts and turns into a cold metal rod, freezing my held breath.

My Lungs try to secure themselves, stifle their movement into oppressive stillness - no movement. But alert, attentive, my body is totally activated, ready to move, react and respond with animal acuity . In the compacted frozenness is a torrent of fight/flight energy contained, pounding in on itself, trying desperately to be set free. But there is nowhere for it to run for the body has already hardened, already frozen.

Jaw locked, eyes held and narrowed, focusing in on the danger. My head, oh my head - that fled long ago - there is nothing much left other than its shell. For the way out of my body, my feeling, was the head - my only escape route. The impact of the deadly collision knocked my poor head backwards and upwards - oh how long ago it left! My chin was slapped up, my forehead back, my neck impacted and contracted. Brutal it was, for sure.

But beyond the collision between me and 'trauma', my body left my head and drifted peacefully into a hazy trance. A good place to exit for a bit. Off I float, up and away, surreal peace. I have now left my body, left my feeling, left my head. I float above.

Yoga. Embodiment. Substance. It's the opposite of how I have lived my life. Come back into body, feel OK, contained, safe and grounded. My body is not a threat, it is not just a conductor of danger and fear. My breath can free itself, my jaw can unlock. With time and patience my waist can un-glue itself. There can be space, freedom and movement in my body. My pelvis, legs and feet can drop to feel the ground. To feel the support of the earth. Feel substantial yet moveable. My whole body can be real, present and tangible. I can make my home back in my body - where it belongs.

My eyes can soften and rest back, with support and guidance my neck can unlock itself, feel it's freedom into the base of the skull. My forehead can rest back into itself and for the first time in my life my throat can soften, I can feel how my throat connects to my chest. My chest can settle and relax). I can feel my softness, my vulnerability.

A moment of being. A moment of freedom. For a moment a different story, cast onto my body. Something is ignited. The flicker of a flame, moveable and with potential. For these small moments something profound is happening. For these few moments my body can thaw and the grasp of history can let go, a new person can flower.

My yoga practice helps me to live in my body and feel sensations and emotions. This is a huge shift for me. When I was a teenager I used to hate my body - deny it of food, cut, burn and hurt it. I tried to live solely in my mind because the feelings in my body were overwhelming and intolerable. Over the years the practice of yoga has been teaching me that my body is a safe place to be and can bring great joy too.

There are still times when the feelings in my body become overwhelming and I get stuck and cannot inhabit my body. During class, already overloaded, when thinking of a word for what we wanted from the class, I thought of 'stop.' Without realising it, this was particularly triggering for me because when I was a teenager (and living in a traumatic environment) I also felt overwhelmed and chaotic and wanted everything to 'stop' inside and outside of myself. At this point in my life I felt suicidal and had to use all the effort in my mind to keep living in an intolerable situation. I think the similarity between how I was currently feeling/thinking took me back into the past body memory of the trauma when I was a teenager. My body reacts by becoming frozen and extremely fearful.

During the class it helped me lying on my side so I could feel the contact between my ribs and the floor. Something tangible and felt, was anchoring me back to the here and now so I could begin to feel a bit of safety. I also very much appreciated you coming over to me and helping me to feel the back of my body and showing such care and compassion. When I was in the traumatic environment before, I was completely alone and was completely silenced so could not tell anyone what was happening to me or get any support.

Another conditioning from my past was appearing to be always ok and in 'doing' mode. I had no understanding of how to relax, 'do nothing' or bring any care or kindness to myself. Through practicing yoga I can now listen to my body and have a way to bring calm and ease to my being. Through yoga, for the first time in my life, I have a real, tangible way of soothing and bringing support to myself. I can now feel the support of the ground whenever I need it, rest and inhabit my body.

My life at the moment is 100% full. Between children, work and a massive house renovation project in a short space of time. I never have a spare moment to do anything restoring for myself. The only space in the week that I have which offers me some support and rest is the yoga class. I am so thankful to have this space. It is the only space in my life where I feel I can totally relax and be myself, however I am. I feel fully welcome.