

Mel Skinner



Rest *is* Radical

A Guide to Deep Relaxation through Yoga

REST IS RADICAL

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A guide to deep relaxation
through yoga

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*To all the teachers I have known, including those
who did not know they were teachers.
Thank you.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Welcome

Rest (verb and noun):

cease, abstain, or be relieved from exertion, action, movement, or employment; freedom from or the cessation of exertion, worry, activity, etc.

Radical (adjective and noun):

of the root or roots; far reaching, thorough

Welcome to this book, and welcome to Radical Rest. Learning how to radically rest can help you boost your physical health, develop stronger emotional resilience, and even change the way you perceive yourself and the world around you. This is lying down to wake up, and will help you experience deep relaxation like never before. In this book I will introduce the nine principles and the yoga practices which form Radical Rest, as well as exploring how symptoms of depression, anxiety, addiction, and more can be supported with the practices I share. The principles provide the foundation and guidelines of Radical Rest while the practices give us an embodied way of understanding and exploring the principles through the felt experience of slowing down. This is an invitation to move towards stillness, and in doing so discover a life more peaceful, contented, and joyful.

Radical Rest shows us how a more restful approach to life can ultimately create a more fulfilling life. By creating more time and space in your diary to rest in a way which nourishes the body and mind, you could improve your physical, mental, and emotional health and begin to find ways to live your life with greater ease and satisfaction. When we accept and respond to our need to rest in a relentless world, we show a sense of compassion to ourselves and we treat ourselves and our energy with respect. This kindness expands our capacity for understanding not only our own needs to rest, but the needs of our family, colleagues, and even of the environment to regularly rest.

Radical Rest is not about self-improvement (although aspects of your life may improve), but rather an invitation to rest in the person you currently are in order to become the person you could be. As the psychologist Carl Rogers once said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."¹ Radical Rest is a practice of self-acceptance, of seeing our natural flows of energy and enthusiasm alongside our natural ebb towards introspection and quietness, and not favouring one over the other. The more we can find spaciousness in our body, mind, and breath, the more we will find life starts to flow a little more freely for us. Not only that but we will be able to respond to anything tough that life throws at us, rather than falling apart because we are already overwhelmed. We avoid the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Despite the lure of social media and modern advertising to convince us otherwise, we are not designed to be living "our best life" 24/7, but the pressure to be achieving and active at all times is very powerful. We might long for deep and nourishing rest but be unable to give ourselves permission to take it. I felt like this for a long time, and told myself I was happy being busy all the time, even when I was exhausted. In my twenties I even got away with it for a while! Radical Rest really has radically changed my life, but it wasn't always easy to let those changes happen. I congratulate you for picking up this book, because the culture you are most likely embedded in does not advocate doing less: rather you are probably surrounded by billboards of unattainable body images to aspire to, consumerist desires over spiritual wealth, and endless inspirational memes popping up on social media encouraging you to push harder and "resist" tiredness.

Like I once was, perhaps you are burnt out, numb, and disconnected. Perhaps you are ready for another way, but you don't know where to

begin. The time to rest really is now, not only for our own health and well-being but for the survival of our soil, endangered species, and the generations to come. It took David Attenborough to draw the attention of the world to the plastic in the sea, but these problems aren't new and while technology may have enabled us to ignore the cycles of the sun and moon, of summer and winter, our Earth has not forgotten that there are times of blossom and plenitude, and times of quiet and dark.

We live in complicated environmental times, and *Rest Is Radical* is my humble contribution towards encouraging you to embody what it is to slow down, pause, cease activity, and rest. If we can experience in our own bodies what nature around us demonstrates each winter (hibernation, dear ones), then we may be able to truly feel how compelling the need to rest really is. When we allow ourselves to step out of busy mode, and instead take deep rest (which incidentally won't cost you a penny, once you know how), then we might also be able to wake up to the idea that we are more than consumers, more than bodies and minds, and more than the beliefs and ideas that we carry. This realisation is a wake-up call that we urgently need, and Radical Rest is one way to slow down the lifestyles and change the systems which are burning out our bodies, and our Earth.

Just before we leap into saving the planet, you may find yourself wondering, *how can rest be radical?* Surely this is a contradiction—how could the state of rest possibly bring about any change, least of all something radical? You may even think that resting is unproductive, lazy, pointless or just unnecessary (although if you're reading this I am guessing you already think slightly differently), or you may completely understand why resting would be good for your health but can't understand how it could possibly make any real impact in the world. Pause for a moment. We will come to that, I promise, but pause for a moment. Let the idea roll around on the tongue, *rest is radical*. Does part of you want it to be true? Is there a part of you which longs for deep and nourishing rest which benefits yourself and your world? And now ask yourself:

- When was the last time you were truly relaxed?
- Is rest something you save up for weekends or holidays?
- Have you bought into the idea that resting is something you do when sick, or something only lazy people do?
- When did you last feel really well?

We are told that we are wealthier and healthier than ever before with increasingly advanced technology at our fingertips. When I started researching this book, the hashtag #wellness was featured on over 18 million Instagram posts. In the final edits three years later, that had gone up to almost 30 million and is probably way over that as you read this.² Wellness is trending, yet burnout, stress, and exhaustion are no longer terms saved for A-list celebrities and high-powered CEOs, but everyday words bandied around the office and across coffee shop tables as epidemics of tiredness sweep our lands. We are busy and exhausted but we rarely stop. Our diaries are crammed full with appointments, deadlines, and things to do and the notion of “downtime” has become so precious and rare that when we do stop, we can feel depressed, empty, or anxious.

The combination of adrenaline, sugar, and caffeine sets us up in a state of overstimulation which we can confuse as energy. We often associate this feeling with success and vitality, and so when we give ourselves that long-awaited day off, we can feel as though we have crash-landed, feeling worse than we did when we were tired but wired. This is a cycle which tempts us to stay in the overstimulation zone, and results in the disturbing sensation of living life on a treadmill, a life with no rest. Struggling to keep up *and* keep going, the need to *do* is driven by an overwhelming sense that if we *were* to stop, everything would somehow fall apart, and that we would have failed, somehow, in life.

In those moments before we do finally collapse into bed, we often use TV, food, and alcohol to help us unwind while we keep our fingers crossed that *this* is the week our lottery numbers will come up and we’ll finally get that dream holiday (and with it the chance to relax). Until that happens, if our relaxation depends on watching violent or psychological thrillers before bed or endless Netflix with its seductive “one more episode ...” teaser, than rather than relax we continue to stimulate the brain further. Likewise if late night snacking is our comfort, we ask the digestive system to keep working, and if alcohol is our go-to, we may find that those few glasses of red before bed disrupts our sleeping patterns. It’s not that you have to give up these pleasures, but instead realise that eating, drinking, and watching TV stimulates our system, and so while fine in their own space, they do not actually count as forms of rest.

The reward we are offered in return for our constant activity is the badge of busyness. Despite the fact that we live in an age of technology

promising to help us to get more done in less time, it seems that we are trying to use all our time to do more. We still dash around trying to fit in an extra coffee, an extra meeting, an extra gym class—and often find ourselves validated for it. Our society celebrates the “work hard, play hard” attitude that dominates our politics, media, and culture, but an overload of activity often leads to burnout as our bodies and brains try to keep up with a pace of life which we simply weren’t built for. Instead of thriving in the advance of technology, many of us feel that we are (barely) surviving, and that somehow, we’re to blame.

Many of us have woken up to the detriment that our continuous activity has on our health and well-being, and the surge of popularity in yoga is no doubt due to more and more people looking for ways to de-stress and relax. As we increase our understanding of the mind-body connection, the need for “another way” becomes greater and this is where yoga comes in. Yoga, known for its relaxing and stress-relieving benefits, is now a billion dollar industry. In 2017 the yoga market was reckoned to be worth \$16bn (£12bn) in the US and \$80bn (£74bn) globally,³ and in the UK, “yoga” was one of Google’s most searched-for words in 2016. But despite spending millions on “super” foods, expensive gym memberships, and pretty yoga clothes, our tiredness just isn’t going away.

It is my hope that this book will help you to understand not only why rest is radical, but how to reclaim your right to rest. When the societal values of constant striving and pushing are widely applauded as symbols of success, it takes courage to slow down and honour our need to rest, but it’s not a dramatisation to say that our health, happiness, and future may depend on it. Not only do many of us long for change in our personal lives, but collectively there is growing desire to change the way we treat our Earth. Ugly buildings, lack of green space, cruelty to animals, polluted air, and plastic in our seas—the time has come for us to realise that this chapter in history is coming to an end. What will we discover when we turn the page? I don’t have the answer to that, but I do know that when we feel tired, numb, and powerless, the thought of tackling the washing-up can feel too much, let alone the problems of the world.

All of that is about to change. By learning how to nurture and nourish your body and mind through the simple act of rest, you will begin to see just how you can change your life, and the world around you, for the better. We are in this together. Your energy matters, you matter.

You *can* be the change you want to see in the world by making that change in your own life. The best thing of all about Radical Rest is that it mostly involves lying down, but before that, let me tell you more about this book.

About this book

This is a book which highlights the power of Radical Rest as a tool for better health but also as a way to see yourself and the world beyond the physical and material. It introduces the concept of resting as a radical act to all those who are ready for another way, to those who are looking to find a little more harmony in their daily lives and rediscover a love and joy for the life they have right now (not the life they hope for in ten years' time). This book is for those looking to make long-lasting change to the way that they live, but want it in bite-size pieces.

This book offers a practical guide to rest. It is written for busy people with busy lives, people with families and jobs and other responsibilities. It doesn't demand unrealistic changes on your part, or suggest a ten-step plan to success; rather it tempts you into finding ways to rest more in your day-to-day life, to make life feel more easeful and peaceful without drastic effort on your part. No need to lose weight, no need to twist yourself into a pretzel-like position or stand on your head, no: this book is for real people with real lives, who could see their health, relationships, and work improve radically by taking more rest. This book frames practical suggestions with research and insight, it combines stories of triumph over adversity with a sprinkle of philosophical yogic ponderings, and most of all it aims to encourage you, the reader, to consider if Radical Rest could improve your life.

This is not a textbook, an instruction manual, or a scientific paper. It is a book of stories, of sharing, of hope and (hopefully) some humour. I share my own personal experiences as well as sharing the stories of those I have worked with in my role as a yoga teacher. I define any suffering from stress, anxiety, addiction, depression, grief, trauma, or menstrual health as "calls to rest," the symptoms of an overworked mind, stressed-out body, and neglected soul, and explore these complex issues from the viewpoint of Radical Rest. I don't believe in a one-size-fits-all answer, so while my intention is to highlight and celebrate the power of resting with you, I also draw upon the research and teachings of others to add new perspectives and insights. My deepest gratitude

goes to some of my favourite authors and teachers, who are listed in the reading list at the end of this book.

I invite you to take what you need from this book, be it practical tips and ideas for reducing stress or the more radical notion that we are spiritual creatures and this system in which we find ourselves was built for machines, not beautiful creative human beings. I support the idea that we are souls and within our tired and achy bodies and our frazzled minds there is something whole, complete, and perfect, but if this idea seems a bit too extreme or airy-fairy for you, you can put it to one side and focus purely on the practical.

What is Radical Rest?

Radical Rest is a form of active, conscious rest achieved primarily through the practices of restorative yoga and yoga nidra and the application of the principles that define it. This is yoga but not as you know it. Radical Rest requires no expensive equipment, no 4am starts and no pilgrimages to India. It is for all genders, all ages, all shapes, colours, and sizes. It simply requires you to make the time and space to reconnect with your deepest, wisest self—all through resting. There are nine principles to Radical Rest: compassion, curiosity, creativity, caution, courage, community, connection, consciousness, and finally, contemplation. All of these principles are designed to help you bring more aspects of Radical Rest into your daily life, and we will delve more deeply into those principles in the next chapter.

Where did it come from?

The inspiration for this book came when I was attending a unique and intensive yoga nidra course on the wild Aran Islands, on the west coast of Ireland in 2016; more on this in the next chapter. In Chapter 4 I also share a brief history and background of restorative yoga and yoga nidra, which make the bedrock of Radical Rest, and how I came to be writing this book.

What are restorative yoga and yoga nidra?

Restorative yoga is a deeply relaxing form of yoga practice. In restorative yoga, we use soothing “asana” (postures) in which the body is

fully supported by props like yoga bolsters and blankets. Many of the poses are performed lying still. This means that rather than having to make an effort, you can sink into the postures to release tension and achieve deep relaxation.

Yoga nidra is a guided meditation practice that is simple yet often profoundly beneficial. It involves lying down in a comfortable position, and being guided through a meditation which deeply relaxes the body, and unlike other meditation, there's no effort needed—you can't get it wrong! By combining both restorative yoga and yoga nidra, we bring great relaxation to the body and mind. Chapter 4 is dedicated to exploring restorative yoga and yoga nidra in more depth.

Why yoga?

Yoga is a philosophy which uses physical practices such as postures, breathing, and meditation as ways to wake up our individual and universal consciousness. Through yoga we become more “awake” and are able to take more responsibility over our lives, as well as to develop greater sensitivity and understanding. Yoga is also a fully integrated system, involving mind, body, and soul, and feeds each layer of our being whenever we practise. There are many types of yoga and many ways to practise, from the more common hatha yoga which uses posture work, breathing techniques, and meditation as a way to purify the body, to bhakti yoga which uses chanting and devotional singing techniques.

What about other types of yoga?

Although I love all the many diverse ways to practise yoga, this book aims to highlight these gentle and compassionate yoga practices as pathways towards deep acceptance and love. It showcases the softer side to yoga, the restorative and contemplative side which sometimes gets shunned in favour of “workout” yoga. Although not physically demanding, the practices of restorative yoga and yoga nidra offer the power to transform our well-being and our lives precisely by doing less, not more. It is for all those who feel lost on the path of yoga, as well as all those who have been put off from trying yoga out of fears of not being good/slim/young/flexible enough. You do not need to be a yogi in order to benefit from this book—in fact you don't need to have ever

practised yoga. You may however wish to get advice from your doctor before taking on any of the practices that I mention, particularly if you have any physical or mental health conditions, past or present.

Who is this book for?

This is a book for anyone who has felt sick and tired of feeling sick and tired; anyone who longs for another way beyond deadlines and to-do lists; anyone who is ready for an easy way to feel better—anyone who is ready to make simple changes to their life to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It is for men and women, although there is a section specifically on the menstrual cycle due to the increasing number of women experiencing difficulties in this area and the link between women's health and the cycles of the Earth.

This book is for you if you are:

- Feeling exhausted, disconnected, or numb
- Burnt out
- Feeling overwhelmed by environmental/political/social situations
- Suffering with menstrual/fertility health problems (or living with someone who is)
- Out of contact with your creativity and joy for living
- Looking for a refreshing approach to spirituality and yoga
- Anyone who has simply forgotten how to rest
- And any or all of the above!

How to use this book

You might want to read this book in a good old-fashioned way from beginning to end, or you may feel inclined to delve into a chapter which feels relevant for you right now.

In Chapters 6 to 12, I will look at stress, anxiety, addiction, depression, grief, trauma, and menstrual health under the headline “calls to rest,” sharing stories from my own personal experiences as well as those from students I work with, some contemporary and philosophical thoughts, and practical advice on how to practise restorative yoga postures at home, as well as information on where to find yoga nidra recordings. I also share breathing exercises that may help you, so if you're experiencing one of these conditions and want to get started then you might

want to skip straight to the relevant section—please do read the chapter preceding the “calls to rest,” entitled “You have been called to rest” as this chapter offers some useful preparatory advice as well as some precautions. I choose these topics as they are all areas in which I have had personal and professional experience, and so my study and practice have evolved around my attempts to heal myself, and also to support clients on their own healing journeys.

If you’re looking for more practical things to get you started straight away, check out the Radical Rest toolbox at the end of the book, where you can explore tools beyond restorative yoga, breathing practices, and yoga nidra to become a Radical Restivist. Towards the end of the book I go back to my own story and journey into Radical Rest, as well as recommend resources for a more restful life.

If you need more convincing about the importance of rest in our lives, check out Chapter 3, where I share some facts about the changes in our sleep and napping culture, and the impact this is having. In the next chapter, I introduce restorative yoga and yoga nidra, and why they are such an asset to the stressed-out, tired-out person. I also explain why resting can be a spiritual practice—if approached in the right way. If you prefer to continue straight from here you will find a very different story of my life ten years ago, as well as the story of how Radical Rest was born, and read more about the nine principles of Radical Rest. There is no right or wrong way to read or explore this book so sit back and dive in.

About me

I am a yoga teacher, reflexologist, writer (this book, blogs, and occasional poetry), and a lover of yoga, particularly restorative yoga and yoga nidra. I became a qualified yoga teacher in 2014, and launched into intensive study, both with a number of skilled and inspirational teachers and alone with a yoga mat and plenty of books. In that time I discovered more about myself than I would have thought possible. I became aware of the link between my mental and physical well-being and the unresolved grief of losing my caregivers and home (all before the age of eighteen) that I had been carrying for my entire adult life. I woke up to the fact that my oh-so-important career was burning me out. I learnt a new way to listen to my body and I started to explore new ways to live my life, and I began to think about what it means to trust

in a higher power. Along the way I realised the importance of learning to trust myself, which required respecting and loving myself first. This will probably be my lifelong practice.

In recent years my understanding and awareness has been deepened by attempting to live the ideology behind *Rest Is Radical* and I am honoured to teach classes, workshops, and retreats to groups and to work one-to-one with a variety of clients suffering with anxiety, PTSD, depression, stress, low self-esteem, and more. I have specialised my training in restorative yoga, yoga nidra, and yoga for women's well-being (although I love to practise all forms of yoga), and I am fascinated by the body's capacity to heal itself, and the potential held within the mind. I have read a lot of books, I track my menstrual cycle, I journal, and most of what I have learnt has come from my own lived experience.

I love to study and am looking forward to where my studies take me next—currently astrology and philosophy. I live in Bristol with my husband who is an artist and despite the unpredictability of our being yogis and artists, I am grateful for the creativity in our lives. I am also deeply grateful to yoga for leading me to the pathway of Radical Rest, which undoubtedly has radically changed my life, and I am excited to pass on what I have so far learnt to you in this book. I am most grateful to the people who show up to class, to a one-to-one session, or a workshop or retreat. I learn so much from them, and they are my biggest motivation.