

what I stand for

The yoga activist

Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, teacher and educator

We talk to the renowned yoga teacher and author of *Yoni Shakti*, whose awareness-raising work is making the wellbeing world a safer and more inclusive place for women

photo Leticia Valverdes

Yoni literally means 'source', and shakti means 'power' or 'energy' - so my book *Yoni Shakti* is all about the original power and source of our vitality - our life force.

In yoga philosophies, *shakti* is considered to be a feminine quality, not because it is just for women, but because it moves in cyclical ways, in the rhythms of power that are characteristic of a feminine strength, in circles and spirals, shifting and changing. Most yoga teachers in the UK and US are women, but most of the big celebrity names at the top are men. Resistance I have found is not really because I am female but because my way of teaching honours and respects the cycles of women's lives. This is an inconvenience to commercial studios, which often operate along the very masculine, competitive and hierarchical lines →



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established by yoga teaching lineages, whose values I question. I have found resistance from teachers and studios that promote a commercialised yoga industry that puts profit above all else – because my work takes time to welcome individuals, and to respond to their needs. My work questions the colonised, commercial approach of most standard yoga studios. I have also resigned from most of the yoga organisations I was once part of because I feel they are profit driven and unjust, often racist and misogynist. I work in collaborative circles, co-operating with colleagues in a form of healing, deep democracy that works with inclusive teams and circles of teachers. This is not a combination that many commercial yoga studios like very much!

Many people are surprised to discover that there is widespread abuse of women in yoga teaching environments. There exists in yoga the whole spectrum of abuses, from sexual assault and trafficking to bullying, shaming, exploitation and violence. There is also much racism and other kinds of harm perpetrated in many commercial studios and yoga teaching institutions. I have been writing and speaking about this since 2012, but it is only in recent years that revelations across nearly all yoga traditions have come to light. I set up Yoni Shakti The Movement (yonishaktithemovement.com) with the intention of eradicating abuse of all women in yoga and to reclaim yoga as a tool for planetary healing and justice. We launched a highly successful crowdfunding campaign at the start of May 2020 and reached the funding goal one week before the campaign was due to finish. Yes! The funds raised are to finance a large-scale public awareness and education campaign to bring justice and healing back into yoga education. Yoga is too precious a tool to be left in the hands of the abusers.

Right now is the time for the voices from the margins to be centred. This is the moment to stand for what we most truly believe in, and speaking the truth of injustice is key to this because until every voice is heard there can be no healing. Yes, we are here and now in a process of

re-claiming our true natures, our connection to life, our place in the delicate dance of the rhythmic cycles. It is a special moment to be on this planet. I remember being a young activist during the 1980s when I was involved in anti-oppressive campaigns, like the anti-apartheid movement and the boycotts and demonstrations around that. I remember the great sense of solidarity and global support of the justice-seekers at that time – this sense that we could all work together to bring about change. It feels a bit reminiscent of that feeling now – but today the capacity for global shift is much greater, more powerful, because we have better tools for connection, and also, sadly many more decades of abuse and injustice to overthrow. It feels now we are better placed to dream into being the world we want for our children.

I understand the practice of yoga to be a process of rediscovery – of reconnection to an intuitive and embodied wisdom that is present within every one of us. Since we are all alive here together on this earth, and we are all part of this earth – made here upon earth and born through earth and sharing all the same elemental qualities and energies of every other life form on the planet, we are all connected to the cycles of life. These rhythmic cycles are the source of our health and wellbeing. I see that the practice of yoga reconnects us to that essential nature and that nature is freedom: when we practise yoga we recover and restore that experience of connection to all of life. And that is what I try to encourage and share when I teach or write about yoga therapy.

I have practised yoga and meditation since I was a child – and I feel that is a huge privilege that has nourished me greatly. Yoga was always central to my wellbeing – and I remember feeling very sad and angry when I became a mother to my first son and was excluded from yoga communities because I was pregnant or because



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effortless way to enter into the healing states of meditative awareness that give us access to healing and inspiration.

For over ten years, from 1998 to 2008, I worked with the NHS to make yoga more accessible to health professionals. We shared yoga therapy for pregnancy, birth and postnatal recovery through St Thomas’s Hospital and at King’s College Hospital, with full support from midwives. I am pleased to say that these forms of yoga therapy have become much more mainstream and accessible to many women since then. I have also developed teacher and therapist training courses to share this work of yoga therapy for women. Our courses in postnatal-recovery yoga, and yoga for women’s health including menstrual and menopausal health, pregnancy and birth, are all accredited by the International Association of Yoga Therapists, and I’m pleased to work with them to make yoga therapy more accessible and understood in the broad spectrum of complementary healthcare approaches to women’s health issues.

I teach yoga therapy because I see the great positive benefits that it brings to people. To this day my greatest teachers have been my three children (aged between 12 and 21): the experiences of mothering have been for me the most profound lessons in love, unconditional support, fierce commitment, gentleness and humility – this is yoga. If I could imbue all women with the innate knowing of just one thing it would be that the wisdom of your own body is the deepest truth, that listening to your cyclical rhythms is key to health and wellbeing, that you are powerful! ♦

Uma Dinsmore-Tuli is the author of Yoni Shakti: A Woman’s Guide to Power and Freedom Through Yoga and Tantra (YogaWords)

I had my child with me. At that point I decided that I wanted to put my skills as a communicator, as a writer and teacher, in the service of yoga and yoga therapy for women – to share the benefits and reveal what could be harmful also. I was motivated by a sort of righteousness, an indignation at the disrespect shown to women’s bodies. I thought it was unjust and unfair to expect pregnant women and new mothers either to do the same practices as everyone else, or to be excluded from practice because of their bodily challenges, so I set to work on developing courses and writing books about yoga therapy for women to provide nourishing and nurturing practices that I couldn’t find easily in the main yoga traditions.

Yoga nidra literally means ‘yoga sleep’, or the sleep which is yoga. It is a profound state of relaxation and repose that reconnects us to our true nature and restores our rhythmic cycles of wellbeing and health. Total Yoga Nidra is the post-lineage, independent form of Yoga Nidra that I have developed with colleagues in the Yoga Nidra Network. It’s at the heart of my work with yoga therapy because it is the most profound,