



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Learning to rest and relax with restorative yoga

Guest: Adelene Cheong

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome to this event all about anxiety. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be joined by Adelene Cheong.

Adelene Cheong

Hello. Hi, Jaia. Hi, everyone.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you so much for joining us today.

So, Adelene is a yoga teacher who specializes in restorative yoga, which is what we're going to be talking about today.

Do you want to start by telling us a little bit about what restorative yoga is for those who aren't familiar?

Adelene Cheong

Restorative yoga is just yoga, firstly. And yoga is about reconnecting and coming back to ourselves. But why we call this restorative yoga is because there's a special intention behind the practice, how it's being sequenced or approach or practice with the intention to rest and restore.

So I have a short definition for it, which is from my experience, it's basically a relaxation practice to support conscious, deep rest.

Jaia Bristow

And I know that deep rest and resting and relaxing in general can be very difficult for those with anxiety. So do you want to start by talking a little bit about why you think that is? Why it's so difficult to fully rest, and then we can talk about how restorative yoga can be supportive.

Adelene Cheong

Thank you for that question, because I was about to say there's a slight difference in my understanding of the word between relaxation and rest and why for some, relaxation is difficult and therefore not able to fully rest and restore and rejuvenate.

[00:01:56]

So the word rest is where the body actively rejuvenates, regenerates, heals, and repairs all those things that we actually need to take away stresses in the body, in the system in order for the body to be able to recover, or self preservation, I also call it.

And relaxation is needed in order for us to get to that state of rest. Relaxation to me, it's a measurable physiological shift and change in the body where you can literally measure heart rate slowing down, we can measure breathing rate slowing down, or muscular tone releasing and lack of tension so we can gradually release.

There's also lots of other things that we can observe, like in terms of the eyes and salivation, things that we can actually pick up and see visually or notice ourselves when we're practicing. That happens when the body is not being imposed by external stimulus through our sensory organs. So relaxation needs to happen, then rest can happen.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting, I love that differentiation between rest and relaxation and that you need relaxation to be able to rest. So how does restorative yoga enable that relaxation to then be able to rest?

Adelene Cheong

We can talk about from different angles, relaxation, whether it's from the physical body relaxation, or some might say, what about emotional relaxation or mental relaxation also.

So in yoga, we talk about the 5 kosha, without getting too much into a training detail, we do want to have an environment where the practitioner or the student, or if you are a teacher when you teach, to whole space where someone feels safe so there's emotion and mental component of that space conducive to support relaxation to happen.

There's also props that we use in restorative yoga. You can see some of my props behind me, some blankets and bolsters. Those are props where we can support and facilitate the physical body to be in a position where there's reduced to no engagement or effort in the body so that we can relinquish and let go of the doing bit of the physical body or the doing bit of wanting to achieve, wanting to perform, wanting to do it right, wanting to be perfect.

And those are mental states of letting go during the practice of restorative yoga. Sometimes we use props, yes, for the physical body to release. But the physical body directly communicates to the mind saying that actually there's nothing for you to do right now. You can just let go.

And then there is a shift. Hopefully there's a shift gradually as we stay longer in the pose. And that's why we do stay much longer in the pose in restorative yoga is to wait for the shift, physiologically the relaxation to happen and then mentally to receive rest rather than doing another pose, another Asana.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I'm curious then, so as you say, restorative yoga helps physically rest because there's that kind of support from which you can use props for and things like that. Physically relaxing rather than resting, I guess we're going to get to the rest point afterwards.

[00:05:58]

And then I love what you're saying about how it can also help with mental relaxation. So we're no longer in doing mode, which so often in our society these days we are and especially people living in urban environments, there's so much pressure to do, do, do. I really notice that myself when I'm in a city versus when I'm in the countryside, how my nervous system relaxes or is more stimulated.

So you've talked about the physical, you've talked about the more mental doing. Let's talk a little bit about the impact on the nervous system. Why restorative yoga helps ease and relax the nervous system.

Adelene Cheong

You can really actually say that the restorative practice is a practice for the nervous system directly. When we do or undo something with the physical body, the body perceives it, the body takes in that information that, okay, the muscles are not doing anything or there is no effort to have to sit up or to engage muscles.

That directly speaks to the nervous system saying that, hey, there is nothing here for you to do. And at the same time, mentally, actually, everything is happening at the same time. It's not like we can do physical relaxation and then mental relaxation separately. Everything is happening at the same time.

Whereas while the mental state will recognize that, okay, there is no demand on the body right now that needs to communicate, to have a conversation even, because that too can be stimulation, having a conversation and talking.

I was just thinking, you can imagine if I'm now in parasympathetic dominance that I probably won't be able to speak to. So I do require some form of sympathetic tension to listen to you, to be able to articulate and speak. So that engages the sympathetic nervous system.

So I think what is most commonly talked about of the nervous system branch, is the autonomic nervous system where there is sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system.

And sympathetic, in short, without going into too much detail, I'm sure there are other speakers who will be speaking more about the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. Sympathetic nervous system is the branch of our nervous system that governs increasing of heart rate, fight, flight mode, meaning we need to engage and be ready to respond to something, respond to life, respond to an interaction, respond to our safety, defending ourselves, protecting ourselves.

Adelene Cheong

So those things are activated in order to perform that. When there is a lack of demand for that, then naturally it shifts to the other end of the spectrum, it's really just a spectrum, which is the parasympathetic nervous system branch, where it allows the reduction, the reduce of muscular tension and tone or heart rate, breathing rate, and other physiology in our body.

Jaia Bristow

I love that summary. Thank you.

[00:09:33]

It's interesting. So I'm fortunate enough to have a mother who practices restorative yoga. And so when I'm home visiting my parents, then I sometimes ask her to put me in a restorative position.

So just the other day I was really tired, and I'm sure many people will be able to relate to this. I was really tired, so I went to have a nap and I lay down and I just couldn't rest because my whole system just felt really jangled and I was stressed and I had all these racing thoughts and I was feeling anxious and there was lots happening. I was thinking about work and I was thinking about other things and money and this and that and like life stuff.

And so I was super tired. Almost sometimes it feels like I get so tired that I can't rest anymore. And so rather than trying to force myself or distract myself, which I know is a method that gets talked a lot about on this conference, like distracting around anxiety, but rather I just asked my mom to put me in a restorative position.

And it was so wonderful because, with everything you say, I don't know a huge amount. I know enough now these days about the parasympathetic and the sympathetic nervous systems. But whether or not in just noticing how having that support and being able to have my whole body feel supported and then a nice eye mask with a weighted, she always puts a weighted lavender sack on my eyes and just reducing light and sound.

And suddenly I didn't feel like I had to do anything. I switched from being in active mode to just being able to relax, as you say. And I could feel it in my whole body. And it's not like I actually fell asleep, but when I came out of that, I definitely felt more restored, more like, okay, now I'm able to get on and do the things I need to do because I wasn't so caught up in those racing thoughts and that agitated feeling.

And I notice sometimes, and I'm sure again, other people with anxiety will be able to relate. I was talking about the comparison between being in the city and the countryside, so often it's when I first stop that after being busy for so long that I feel even more agitated because it's almost like there's a chance to notice the agitation when I'm just living it, then it's just happening.

Whereas when I actually slow down, which is usually when I visit my parents in the countryside after being in cities for long periods of time or being on the go and traveling for long periods of time, then that's when I notice the agitation much more. And so having those kinds of opportunities is really helpful.

Adelene Cheong

I really like how you've explained the whole sequence of events from a state, that high, sympathetic, aroused state and what happened to the body and actually the practice of it. The covering of the eyes, the sound and everything, which describes everything pretty much.

And to the state of bliss and relaxation and to be able to restore when you come back from the pose, which is exactly one of the things that I wanted to share with you is the state of pratyahara.

So in restorative yoga, we're supporting the physical body in a way that we could reduce the effect of stimulus to the nervous system through the sensory organs, of course, like our eyes, nose, mouth, hearing and touch.

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And that state of, not withdrawal of the senses, but rather it's reduced to come to a non reactive state to stimulus. So there's always going to be stimulus around us. There's always going to be something that's moving around in the world or sound outside of the room. You might be practicing during the day, there will always be light, sunlight through the windows. We can cover, draw the curtains but then we could also put on an eye cover so that we can block out that stimulation that's coming in.

But at the same time we can't exactly block out not breathing or not tasting or not hearing unless we completely wear earbuds and things. But still there will be internal sound.

So how do we then come into a state where the body gradually recognizes that it's no longer interested in those sounds or those smells or people moving around you are no longer, I'm just not interested anymore?

Or maybe the ego at that point has no ambition to interact with that information and therefore in a restrictive shape or pose that we come into, we want to support the body also in terms of touch in a way that there is no localized pressure or poking on the body that distracts the mind. We call it distract because it's basically an attraction that we don't want, that's distraction. That is causing any discomfort in the body because discomfort draws our attention to attend to our safety.

So supporting the body in a way that the body is pretty neutral in terms of how it's being cradled or supported or wrapped, there's no pain, discomfort. It's important because that's what stimulates so that we can come to a state of neutral attention.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I think, like you say, it's that focusing on safety and comfort and so trying to alleviate any pain, any stimuli that would make one feel agitated in some way.

And for me, I always like having a pillow on my chest or some kind of weight on my chest when I'm in those poses because that makes me feel safe.

And also what I love about restorative yoga is that it can be adapted. So there's the basic poses, and then we can feel for ourselves what feels right. So, for example, it's not standard, I don't think, to put weight on someone's chest, because for someone else that might actually be anxiety inducing. Whereas for me, that's what's comforting.

Adelene Cheong

Absolutely. It's to elicit what's your response in the moment. Some people might enjoy being swaddled and wrapped with blankets, but some might feel that that's a little bit claustrophobic or too much of kind of covering. They need more space, in which case they won't be able to mentally, emotionally accept that relaxation, just because of this is a little bit tight around how they experience the pose or experience the moment.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And that's what I love about it, is that it's, like you say, it's what helps you relax as an individual.

[00:16:57]

And so that leads to my question, who is restorative yoga for? Who can benefit from it? And what about people with mobility impairments or things like that? Who is it for and how can it be adapted to individual needs?

And also, I spoke about my mother putting me in a restorative position, but I assume that, and I know that it can also be done on one's own. So could you talk a little bit about doing it on one's own versus having someone else put you in the position and about how to adapt it for as many people as possible?

Adelene Cheong

That's a big question, but I'm most happy to talk about it. Restorative yoga is for anyone who has a nervous system, which means everyone. Every human being that has a nervous system, because it's really like I said earlier, that it is a practice to regulate the nervous system to find homeostasis, to restore homeostasis and balance for health.

But how we approach it, whether that is in an office setting, where you're in your office or at home or in a group class or one to one or even just practicing yourself, it's how we practice and approach it depends on the furniture you have, depends on how much time, depends on location if you are traveling in a hotel or at the airport or at home. So it really depends.

But of course, given say, okay, let's just say what you were saying earlier, one to one, if someone were to offer it to another person or in a group setting or practicing ourselves. And I think you also mentioned if it's for someone who can't get to the floor easily or is that right?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah. If people have mobility impairments, can it also be adapted for them?

Adelene Cheong

Yes, definitely. Actually, after two practices that I've shared on this conference, there is one practice where we stay on the chair, we are not on the floor. So there is one pose where you are just sitting on a chair and coming forward.

In that same practice also, there is one for someone who prefers not to be on the floor or it's not convenient to be on the floor, you are in the office setting or in the kitchen. There is also one where you can just lay over a table so you can review that. And of course, there's another practice which is more floor based.

When someone is not able to get to the floor, we can adapt it through more of a chair variation or even bed. We can do it on the bed or on the sofa, so just sit on the sofa. More importantly is understanding the energetic alignment of the poses.

So each restorative pose has an energetic signature and intention behind it. So it depends on the intention of coming to the practice. If your intention coming to the restorative practice that day is simply to have some space in your day, in your activity, to do list, or is that where you just got back

from travel and there's jet lag and, like you were saying earlier, that you are extremely tired and fatigued, that at the point that you just can't sit down and relax.

[00:20:59]

But how do we elicit and regulate that when someone is overly exhausted? How do we adapt? I will need an example of a pose to be able to adapt each pose, but I could only say that every pose can be adapted as long as you understand what we intend to do in the pose.

Some people will respond better with a forward fold in order to calm, which is one of the practices I was saying with the chair position or lying on the table position. Just simply because there's contact and gentle pressure against the front body, which is the visceral. The visceral offers that gentle compression but still breathable gentle compression so that the body can move more into the posterior chain, which is more where the parasympathetic nervous system branch out.

And we could use... Sorry.

Jaia Bristow

No, nothing. I was just saying fantastic.

Adelene Cheong

We could use blankets. We could use bolsters to adapt to the person, like a moment ago when we spoke about some people might need more space in order to relax, in which case I probably would use more blocks rather than blankets. I'll use bolsters, pillows rather than too many covers and fabric on them to feel more spacious for them to be able to breathe easily.

Whereas some might feel that I need more support and therefore I might get a little bit more cradling, a little bit more nesting around the body to speak to the nervous system because the senses are basically taking information, speaks to the nervous system that hey, you are able to let go now, everything's taken care of and you can just breathe and be there.

And the use of props, you're talking about modification, the use of props, I see the props really as the language in this practice. The props speak directly to the body perceiving and then the response of the body whether to relax or to not relax or to let go or not.

Jaia Bristow

What I love in everything you've shared is you're talking about all these different places that people can practice restorative yoga. Like the office, the airport, or at home. And so what I'm hearing from you is that, and again, you're talking about how much time you have.

So it's really a practice that can be adapted to your needs rather than you having to adapt to the practice, which can sometimes be a little tricky. People don't always have 2 hours a day to dedicate to yoga, for example.

But if it's just like, oh, I'm feeling anxious right now and I just need... Or oh, I have a 10 minute break between meetings and I just need to relax my nervous system a little bit between meetings. Or if it's, like you say, jet lag or traveling or at the office and feeling like, oh, it's my lunch break and I've got half

an hour right now and I'm not going to go home and do like an hour relaxation, but there's practices I can do right here, right now.

[00:24:23]

And so I love that. And I love what you're saying as well about adapting to one's own needs around sometimes more support, sometimes more space. I love that you were talking about some of the props touching you and speaking directly to your nervous system.

I know, I was attacked a few weeks ago and after the attack I got into bed and I had lots of pillows, luckily. So I had pillows all around me and so I was cuddling pillows and I had pillows all around me to make me feel safe and cozy because I was on my own.

And people who have been going through lots of quarantine during the pandemic and things like that, it's a wonderful way to feel that kind of safety and that support even without another physical person present.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, totally. See, naturally your inclination is ready to support the body. Naturally that works for you, which is how you find comfort, how you feel safe. So the body already has some level of idea or maybe absolutely the idea of how do I self-regulate in that moment?

But often what happens is that we overwrite that. Sometimes when we have a low grade anxiety or low grade stress in the system, constantly day in and day out, that gets omitted and overlooked, and therefore it escalates. And that's where illnesses, diseases or the mental emotional state gets really affected or chronically affected over a period of time.

And like I said, yes, it could be 2 minutes, it could be half an hour, it could be 1 hour. It really, again, depends on your intention and what's available. You could simply just be sitting down and lying over a table or just lying on the floor, put your legs just on the sofa, which you can get a chair or sofa pretty much anywhere, even at an airport.

I wanted to clarify and say one thing is that if we have a consistent, more formal restorative practice to familiarize ourselves with the taste of relaxation or certain shapes that your intention for that pose of releasing the shoulders or gently opening the abdomen, so you're familiar with the taste of that pose, then you can more easily adapt and recreate that with any furniture or jumper, sometimes in a simple supported back then because I'm wanting to open gently across the diaphragm and abdomen.

Formally, if I'm here at home, I would probably use my bolster, yoga blanket. But if I'm traveling, I'm just like in a friend's house and there's an emergency for lying down, then I would just fold up my scarf and my jumper and put in my lower back, but knowing how it feels like, what I want to recreate in order to get that 2 minutes of instant rest in that moment.

So firstly, I would say to encourage is to get some formal or at least attend some restorative classes where you can familiarize it with the taste of relaxation, that state of relaxation, the shapes that support your intention. And then feel free to modify with any furniture, any props that you might have.

[00:28:14] Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I love that. I love the fact that you don't have to spend a fortune on props that you can adapt to whatever you have to hand. Like you say, roll up a jacket, if you're in bed use your quilt and your pillows and you don't have to buy loads of things. And of course, if you have things handy, then that's great.

And I love again what you're saying about focusing on the intention. What is it that you're trying to achieve right now? Is it because you're stressed and anxious? Is it because you're jet lagged? Is it because you're wired and you want to be able to relax before sleeping? It's so useful for so many different reasons.

And there's so many different postures and so many different intentions and it can be put in different times. And as you say, it can help both, like you say, it's really helpful if you do it regularly because then you teach your body to recognize what it's like to relax so that then you can stimulate that relaxation much more easily when you're in a moment of agitation. So it's great in the long-term, as you are saying, as well as in the short-term.

I've been doing it for a few years and so, well, my mom's been doing it for many years and whenever I visit I do it a little bit with her. But then when I need it in the short-term when I notice I'm particularly agitated or stressed or can't sleep, then that's really supportive for me.

As you mentioned, there are two of your sessions that are freely available as part of this conference. So I really encourage people to go check those out. There's one on today and there's one on a different day.

And how can people find out more about you and your work, so that if they want to continue learning about restorative yoga and finding out about the different postures and what can be suited and adapted to their intention and their needs and their bodies, how can people do that?

Adelene Cheong

I was going to say just search online, but at the same time I want to clarify that there are a lot of videos and photos that I've actually Googled and seen online when I type, restorative yoga, are not quite what I meant and what I experienced restorative yoga is. So there's some discernment into the practice of restorative yoga.

So the best thing is to find a person who has been trained in restorative yoga. And there is a website that me and my teacher Judith Hanson Lasater promote where you can find restorative yoga teachers in your local, whichever country, whichever city, which is literally restorativeyogateachers.com.

That's where you can find a list of practitioners who have done training, proper training and understanding, have a good understanding of the experience with restorative yoga.

If you'd like to know more about my work and practice with me, classes, workshops and retreats, etc, that's just my name, adelenecheong.com. That's my website where you can find more information. There are also some video resources on my website where you can learn simple tips and things about restorative yoga.

The practices that I've offered on this conference, there's one I mentioned that you pretty much could just, each of the poses could really be independent if you only have like 10 minutes or something, you

can just do the one that's lying over the table, for example. Very simple, just something comfortable and soft on the front body so you're not on the hard surface of the table and come forwards in line.

[00:32:16]

One of the things for anxiety that I want to talk about is supporting the forehead. Supporting, having something around the forehead to have that soothing information to the nervous system that it is okay.

When we have a headache or when we have something that we are trying to remember and to think hard about, we put our hand on our forehead. Like right now if you could just put your hand on your forehead and just notice naturally you just close your eyes.

So putting something on your forehead, supporting it with a pillow, eye pillow if you're lying on your back, if it's on your front, you can put something where you can rest on your forehead, it's really helpful for quieting your mind or that anxiety moment. Those are a few quick tips.

If you are a therapist or a yoga teacher who might be interested in learning more about the behind the scenes, not just practicing it in classes, but actually interested in knowing the philosophy, the yoga philosophy and what actually is happening in the pose when someone's lying down for, like 15 minutes, 20 minutes, there are trainings that are offered.

There's a level one, level two training of restorative yoga where you can learn some key fundamental poses in level one, and then level two, we talk about more therapeutic application and anxiety is one of the huge topics we talk about in level two, also. Anxiety, depression, burnout.

Those are some of the things that we highlight in terms of how to work more therapeutically with your student or yourself or someone you would like to share with.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic.

Adelene Cheong

I hope to be able to support you in person and online wherever you are, it depends on your location, to this practice. And taste it, experience it yourself because it's not just in the cheery talking bit of it.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it and I hope that other people are inspired to practice restorative yoga, especially knowing how easy it is to adapt to your own needs and body and time and location.

Adelene Cheong

Thank you so much for being here and hosting and doing all that you're doing for this conference. It's huge work, but it's so serving of the world right now, so thank you.

[00:35:04] Jaia Bristow

Thank you.