



Conscious Life presents

SLEEP SUPER CONFERENCE

Restorative yoga for rest

Guest: Adelene Cheong

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Sleep Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Adelene Cheong, an international movement and breathwork teacher with a special interest in yoga for scoliosis and back care, restorative yoga, and yoga nidra meditation.

She's a trainer and mentor on various reputable yoga teacher training and yoga therapy programs. Adelene, thank you so much for being with us today.

Adelene Cheong

Thank you for having me. It's an honor to be part of this movement and this conference. Exciting for me also to be part of it.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. So I want to address right away that a lot of people's associations with yoga and rest, since this is a sleep conference, they might not associate the two. So I would love it if you could tell us a little bit about what restorative yoga is and how it contributes to your ability to rest well.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, yoga is a big word. I mean, it's so popular now everywhere. It really depends, the understanding of yoga really depends on what we're exposed to. Because sometimes I'll hear students coming into class and say that, oh, my doctor recommends against, or my doctor recommends doing more yoga and things.

Then I would also question what is the doctor, the GP's experience or exposure or what they have read about yoga that's suggested against or for yoga. So yes, there are lots out there in the public domain, some more fancy positions that we can see, very gymnastic things that we see on social media.

But there is also a huge part of yoga that is about stillness, that is about meditation and quiescence. And restorative yoga is in that realm of stillness, quiescence, moving into a place where there is just peaceful rejuvenation. So, in short, if there's a definition from my experience, restorative yoga is a relaxation practice to support conscious, deep rest.

[00:02:32] Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. And if somebody is struggling with sleep, let's say there's a lot of reasons why people can be struggling with sleep. They can be mental, emotional, physical, nutritional. And so when someone first starts practicing something like restorative yoga, the idea of stillness might bring up a lot of discomfort. And so how does the practice of restorative yoga address that discomfort?

Adelene Cheong

Yes, thank you for that question because that's a common question that I get asked also. Familiarity. It's the familiarity, the taste of comfort and relaxation. So the first instance, if someone's used to productivity and moving and doing and achieving, it's very much also mental expectations and belief that we have to perform even during sleep we have to perform and do something and achieve something, when we come to restorative yoga, we are actively choosing to undo.

To relinquish the effort of achieving. It's as much a mental process as with physical relaxation. So there's mental relaxation, emotional relaxation within the practice. So as much as some poses you'll see, which I'll share in the practice sessions, where we are lying around, there are some bolsters, there are some blankets, et cetera.

But what's really happening, as much as there's some muscular relaxation, which can also easily be achieved with massage, like when you massage, you get muscular and physical relaxation, but also a deep level of ease and peacefulness within, which is very important for stress relief and in order to sleep well.

It's very much the mental and emotional relaxation that we are after. Restorative yoga is really about manipulating the nervous system so that we shift from a high regulated stimulation of sympathetic arousal to parasympathetic dominance.

There is definitely a distinction between sleep and restorative yoga. Yeah, I would say they are cousins, but not quite the same. And that's where I want to rewind back to my definition when I said this is a practice, which is a relaxation practice to support conscious deep rest. Because I do distinct the word relaxation and rest.

Relaxation is something that we could physiologically measure. For example, if you're in a laboratory and the EEG, heart rate monitor, and breathing rate monitor, et cetera, you could literally see someone is moving into relaxation. Heart rates dropping and blood pressure is dropping, or muscular tone begins to relax. You can observe yourself relaxing in terms of tensing up and relaxing the muscles. Breathing changes.

So you can pretty much say that, okay, I am moving into relaxation. I'm in that state. And only when we are in that state, then the next state is rest, where rejuvenation and healing can happen. So that's the part where the body is free from stimulation, free from stresses and load in the system so that it could actually recalibrate, regenerate, heal, grow, repair.

Things that we can't just lift a few dumbbells, a few sit ups to get it sorted. It's a reduction process where you're removing stresses and then the body's left with, okay, I'm going to repair and I'm going to grow. I'm going to heal the space for that.

[00:06:46] Meagen Gibson

It's so interesting because this is why we talk about yoga while also presenting practices that people can follow along with and engage with, because there's such an educational piece that's so important here.

And you bring up such a great point that all of the doctors that I've interviewed for this conference as well have also corroborated and mirrored, which is that you can't just go from active, active, active, active, and then assume that your body is going to automatically sleep.

You're busy in your day, your life is full of stresses. You put your kids to bed, you watch a bunch of TV while also doing emails, and then you get into bed and you're like, I don't know why I can't sleep.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And putting a practice in the middle of those things where you adopt not only a mindset and an emotional state of okay, now I'm going to let go of stress. I'm going to shift my mindset. I'm going to shift my emotions.

And then, through practice, as the way I'm understanding you describing, gives my nervous system the signals that, okay, we're going into rest mode now. We're going into relaxation mode now. Seems like a fantastic way to set yourself up for the engagement of sleep and falling to sleep easily.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, a very good point. When you were speaking, I'm thinking, yeah, the speeding up. The speeding up. And how do we unwind and quiet down the transition of it? Again, the distinction of it from sleep, restorative yoga and sleep, is that this is a conscious practice.

Sleep is basically a reversible state of consciousness. If we don't come back from that consciousness, that's called coma and death. But really it is an active, conscious rest of the body. In teaching the body, familiarizing the body, what it tastes like to be at rest without falling asleep. And that gradually would help someone familiarize with, okay, I can relax before I go to bed.

Like you are just saying, speeding up, speeding up, last email before I jump into bed, we are running at fifth gear if there's like a driving thing and there's a fifth gear, really fast, how could we transition from fifth gear to third gear to second to first gear before we could rest in neutral, in zero?

That's like when the body is properly relaxed and lying down and resting. Otherwise I'll be lying in bed but the muscles are still tense and I'm still doing. There's still a residue of gear two, gear three, if I have to use that as a metaphor, that is still doing something.

Meagen Gibson

Or even I'm imagining a car in neutral but the gas pedal is down. And you're hearing the engine rev, but you can't go anywhere because, yeah, we could take the car metaphor for a while.

[00:11:32] Adelene Cheong

Yeah, definitely. And that's also why some people would say that, yeah, I had my quantity of sleep. Like, I had 8 hours, 9 hours of sleep, but I still feel tired. And then I would often question the quality of sleep, has it been restful? And you've heard someone say restless sleep. So, yes, the quantity is important, but as much as the quality of it, so that it is restful in the sleep.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm sure that these practices really help engage the body's ability to have quality rest. I think everybody has experienced what you've described, which is having enough of a quantity of rest and yet waking up still feeling tired and not feeling like they slept, even though all evidence to the contrary, yeah, I went to bed at ten, I woke up at seven. That's plenty of sleep. Why am I still tired?

And it's this inability, your body is still in overtime, your nervous system is still in overtime while you're actually sleeping, trying to do several jobs that you were not engaged in.

And I love how you just contextualized the practice as giving your body the familiarity, like the practice of it. It's not, I do it once and then now my nervous system knows how to do this. It's a practice that you develop. You develop familiarity over time.

You can engage in that part of rest and relaxation faster. Not that it's a contest. We're not trying to make rest and relaxation even a contest, but these practices build on themselves and your body becomes more and more familiar with how to rest.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, definitely. And also, you touched on a point earlier. The transition into sleep, you were saying, there's a practice that I have shared on this conference also, which is specifically a few positions and breathing and things that we can do. Literally a quick 15 minutes.

It doesn't need to be an hour long practice and things, to transition from all the emails and kitchen things into bed. What could we do during the 15 minutes to shift gears to neutral gear before we get into bed and then the body is already at that restful place?

Meagen Gibson

It's interesting because you mentioned a couple of routines and I can't go to bed with a dirty kitchen, and it feels like this is just one of those routines that you should also engage in. It's like, well, if I can't go to bed with a dirty kitchen, why would I go to bed with a revved up nervous system? That's another practice of cleaning my mental and emotional and physical kitchen before I go to bed as well.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, you got it. That's it. Just like brushing your teeth. So you brush your teeth. Clean up. Also, physical tension in the body that we carry before we lie down. And often I find that when someone lies in bed and immediately they would just knock off, they said, oh, I don't have problems sleeping. My head hit the pillow and I'm off.

[00:13:11]

Physiologically, what's happening when someone often finds that, it's not just a one off, but regularly that way, it's probably out of exhaustion than actually resting and sleeping in terms of the quality of sleep, because naturally it does go through 10 to 15 minutes. Scientifically, there is 10 to 15 minutes for the body to rest down or unwind in order to then those off, to actually fall back into sleep.

That's a healthy, saturated with rest body and mind than someone who is totally depleted. There will be instances if there's jet lag, if there is just a long week of traveling or moving house or something, or young babies, it can be that. So taking that out of the equation, if that is not the case and still there is this deep level of exhaustion, then I would really question how is the sleep quality doing and what are you doing throughout the day and the transition to bed and cetera.

Meagen Gibson

Great point. Yeah. I always believe that there are two types of people, people that struggle to fall asleep and the people that fall asleep very quickly. And they marry each other. Maybe that's just me.

So when we're talking about restorative yoga, is there a special time of day that is best to be practiced? Is there any time of day you shouldn't practice this type of yoga?

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, generally for me, for my practice, I like to practice midday ish after lunch. The 2:00, 3:00 ish when the body needs that Siesta. I actually really agree with Siesta. I think that's a really smart thing that the body can't actually run for 16 hours without a pause. So that siesta time, 2:00, 3:00 is pretty much the midway mark for a typical day, for a regular day. Except those night shifts or irregular hours.

And that's when I like to have my pickup instead of a caffeinated coffee, I'll go for my lying down, Shavasana et cetera. But saying that, initially when I first come to this practice, this is like way back now I talk a little bit of history just for a few minutes, is that I find myself often falling asleep when I'm supposed to be in conscious deep rest, because the body is just so exhausted from years of stress, years of stimulation.

And I wasn't satisfied about that. I obviously wasn't happy. And I started to practice first thing in the morning. First thing when I wake up in the morning, I went into my yoga space and I lie down and practice my restorative practices because I am so desperate and adamant to familiarize myself with the taste of relaxation without falling asleep.

Because it's less likely that I will fall asleep because I've just woken up, at least the circadian clock I mean the homeostatic drive in my body. The sleep cycle thing. It's hopefully there to support me. Although sometimes I do fall asleep in the morning, but I managed to over months, years, okay, now I know how it feels to stay conscious and in relaxation.

Now I trust myself to practice any time of the day, even if it's later in the evening. Because later in the evening a lot of times people are so tired and they'll just like fall asleep in their yoga practice or restorative yoga practice, which is great if that is what they need.

[00:17:25]

Sleep is what they need. We need to fulfill that sleep depth. But at the same time, over time we could familiarize and get that practice of staying with relaxation and rest that really surfaces in the long run and improves the quality of sleep also.

Meagen Gibson

That's a really interesting point and honestly when I asked you that question, that's not what I anticipated your answer to be. So I'm fascinated. And you bring up such a great point about homeostatic states and circadian rhythm and, theoretically, if you woke up and you had enough sleep, to go into a practice, conscious rest practice, makes perfect sense.

And also, instead of it being something that you get at the end of your day that you earn after you've exhausted yourself, it's something you give at the beginning of the day and then can touch into throughout the day without having to do the full practice. It's like, okay, can I relax this part of my body? Can I become conscious that even if there's tension there, can I find my breath? Can I do all of these other things?

So it actually brings up a good point, which is if somebody's not familiar at all with what restorative yoga might look like or feel like, or what the practice might entail, or if they haven't done yoga before, they're first at the sleep conference, can you give us a brief description of what that might look and feel like?

Adelene Cheong

Look and feel like, yeah. Often when there is a new student coming into class, I say, we're really here to relax and lie down, which you have done for years, you already know how to get there, and you have always known how to get there. And I assure them that they have been there because as an infant, as a baby, we always know when to relax and rest.

If you recall, or probably if you have young children around and recall, they would crawl and play a little bit, engage with some toys or sound a little bit, and then when they get tired and they have enough stimulation, they will just flop and just rest. Even not in bed, even just on a hard surface on the floor and things.

And when they are well, rejuvenated and rested, they will pop their head up and continue to interact. So we already have that system within us, but at some point along the way, we got taught out of it because we were told that we need to be here at this time and we can't rest yet. You can't stop yet.

You have to finish this homework or probably this tuition or something before you can actually pause and rest and lie down. So I want to assure my students or those who are coming to restorative yoga for the first time that you already have that. Now it's reclaiming it more than learning a new thing.

And the first thing to pay attention to is comfort. And comfort is very personal. It may mean one extra blanket. It may mean a slightly different angle of your arm. What is comfortable for you? So in class, the very first class or very first practice, I encourage students to pay attention to what does comfort feel like, how do you make it more comfortable?

[00:20:58]

How do you make it more delicious, that it's enticing for you not to move, you even want to stay just because it's so comfortable already. Because the body knows what is comfort and we just need to get there so that the body could stay there and rest.

Of course, with restorative yoga there are specific shapes and positions that promote particular intention. Maybe something that is more for emotional inwardness and being with myself. And some might be like okay, I just need more space in my life right now and I take another restful position to attain that intention.

But all in all, the most important thing is comfort. Take away stimulation, discomfort and pain in the body, then the body would not contend with those distractions to rest deeply.

Meagen Gibson

It's interesting that you were saying about infants and babies really having that felt sense of knowing how to sleep. And what was occurring to me is that usually, in the best case scenarios, they have a lot of support. So they either have a parent, they fall asleep on a parent, which now that my children are older, I miss that deliciousness.

Or they have the support of bedding or a pillow or something like that. And so when you're talking about positions and restorative yoga and figuring out what's good for you, and there's also supportive elements if you're in person doing supportive yoga with somebody.

Things like pillows and bolsters and blankets, you want to make sure you're warm enough but not too warm. And that if there's tension in your body that you've got a way to open it up. You know, I'm a person that sits most of the day in front of a computer and so I often want to get my chest open and stretch my shoulders back and things like that.

So that feels restorative to me. We store a lot of tension in particular places of our body depending on our work and our dispositions. Things like the hips or the shoulders and neck and things like that. So I love that you brought up the support part.

Adelene Cheong

You're spot on. Support is huge in restorative practices. That's why the use of pillows and blankets and furniture, we could use anything to support the body so that we can have the intended shape. And sustainable because we do need the transition time. I talk about the 10 to 15 minutes, into 20 minutes sometimes, for the body to adapt and then let go.

Also, safety is a huge part. For babies to feel safe, for adults to feel safe in order to let go into relaxation, your eyes are closed, it's dark. To feel safe in the environment and also the support space in order for you to let go. It's really important, emotional relaxation.

[00:23:50] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I was just thinking about how even something as simple as blankets can be so powerful in that way. And I know if I'm really struggling with something, my husband will laugh. It's 95 degrees here in Florida and he'll say, how could you possibly add another blanket to the bed?

And I'm like, I just need weight. I need weight on top of my body to calm down my nervous system and to get me grounded into this bed. And he's like, great, fold it up and put it on your side because I don't want any part of that extra blanket.

Adelene Cheong

You've totally nailed it. And weight and body compression is literally the language that speaks directly to the nervous system. So one of the traits of communication through restorative yoga is the use of blankets and compression against the body. So there's pressure. It feels like someone's hugging you.

You know, when a baby is being swaddled, that swaddling gives a sense of safety and also support, like physical health and support. It speaks directly to the nervous system because it's all on our skin. Speaks straight into the nervous system saying that, hey, you are safe, you're okay, you're totally supported. There's nothing for you to think about or to do. You can let go.

And that's inducing the relaxation response in that way. So, yeah, compression, it's nice. Not for everybody. But most people, most people, just because there might be a small demographic who might prefer they don't want to feel restricted. They might want to feel more like I need more open space. And those might be the few people who prefer to be more like spread out and things, instead of too many layers and hugging...

Meagen Gibson

It would do the opposite to their nervous system. Which is not what we want. So it's mainly figuring out what feels supportive and it might be compression or it might be laying in the shape of a starfish.

Adelene Cheong

Exactly. Yeah. And you were asking earlier for beginner students, when it comes to a class, how do I educate? The first piece is comfort. But how do you know if that is your comfort? Notice if it's easy to breathe. Naturally, when it's comfortable, your breath naturally becomes easy and effortless.

When it's actually effortful to have to take a deep breath, there's something else that is still disturbing the body in some way that we could attend to, basically. So notice how you're breathing and how breath is actually slowly regulating the experience. It's one of the other key components before we even talk about how many bolsters you need and what shape you need to be in. So paying attention to that.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And it could change over time, like when you get into your practice, you could need a little lift under your knees or you could need a little support under your lower back. And then as you get into the rest and relaxation and you're able to rest, that need might change. You might be able to stretch

full out on your back. But really learning that on your own and what means restorative relaxation for you might just take a little bit of practice and time and support.

[00:27:21] Adelene Cheong

Yeah, I really appreciate your views, actually. Yes, lots of experience in restorative yoga sounds like the support of the back of the knees, et cetera, and all with flexion. Flexion is also a position for relaxation because that's the fetal shape of safety. So generally, we would encourage all major joints to be slightly flexed in restorative poses.

Rather than in a startled position where you're excitable or you're ready to engage and have a conversation with someone, interacting with someone. So, yes, that inwardness and flexion of all major joints. Yes, it could be a back bend, but still the brain is quiet. There's some flexion in the shoulders, et cetera, rather than pushing the shoulders back. It's one of the key components to restorative practice. Yes.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Well, I think we're all ready to actually engage in our restorative yoga practice now, and I hope everybody checks out your session that we'll have available also for restorative yoga practice so that we can put all of this talking into action or a lack of action, if you will.

Adelene Cheong

Yeah. Two practices. Well, one practice is the pre sleep practice where we talk about, like, the breath and some positions to wind down the nervous system.

And the other is actually, I talk about sleep positions, sleeping positions, that are kind of restorative based, but support the understanding of how to sleep and support the body well so that the body can physically relax and feel safe in that fetal position, et cetera, to relax. So, sleeping positions as well for another session.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Well, Adelene, how can people find out more about you outside of the other practices that we've named as well?

Adelene Cheong

Yeah, I do share lots of restorative poses and some practices on my YouTube channel, on my Instagram, but of course, all the resources you'll find also on my website, which I'm sure you'll share, it's my name adelenecheong.com

And there are lots of free resources there. There are some courses for those of you who might be interested in going deeper into learning the theory and what's happening behind the scenes of the practice, then yeah, definitely, most happy to share more.

Meagen Gibson

Adelene Cheong, thank you so much for being with us today.

[00:30:03] Adelene Cheong

Thank you.