



Conscious Life presents

# TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

## The benefits of restorative yoga for trauma

**Guest: Adelene Cheong**

*Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.*

### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

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

Today I'm speaking with Adelene Cheong, who believes in supporting and guiding her students to unveil their fullest potential through embodiment and experiential learning. She's particularly interested in the therapeutic applications of yoga. Her classes and workshops are educational and exploratory, reflective and empowering.

Based in London, Adelene teaches internationally 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 Cheong, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Adelene Cheong**

Thank you for having me. I'm really glad to be here.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And before we even start, I want to make sure that people know that you have several yoga sessions included in the Trauma Super Conference. And what we're going to be talking about today is kind of what people can expect from those practices because I definitely want to encourage people to engage with them because it's another asset at the Trauma Super Conference that not every conference offers, and it's a great practice to engage with. So I'd love it if you could start by telling us what is restorative yoga?

### **Adelene Cheong**

Restorative yoga, it's a form of yoga. It's another style of yoga. But the focus and intention is about relaxation for deep conscious rest. So there are certain techniques on how we could manipulate the nervous system to recalibrate for self-regulation, for health and wellbeing. So, in short, that's it. But really, there are also very specific poses and sequences that might promote certain physiological responses as well as nervous system responses. So yeah, I've carefully selected some of the poses and sequences for the practices that's contributing to this conference also.

**[00:02:09] Meagen Gibson**

So the practices that you're going to be engaging in, then, are specifically designed for people that have experienced trauma or might be healing from trauma and can kind of integrate those and take in the somatic approaches that will help regulate the nervous system, right?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, exactly that. Exactly that. So I've carefully selected a few poses that I think I use a lot for my students, and I've used it also for myself when I need to self-regulate. Do you want me to share the titles of it?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. Because it's a long practice and a short practice, right?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah. So there will be a longer practice where I will guide you through the sequence of poses. There are few positions which is called feeling safe again. So that will be the longer practice, a restorative yoga practice, and the shorter practice will be on opening up to possibility, where it's more suitable, it's just one pose, and it's suitable for someone who is now ready to transition out and would like to open up to possibility.

Whilst the first one that I mentioned, which is feeling safe again, is about recuperating, recovering, healing, and being safe. So in that moment of overwhelm or really triggered, the practice of those will be the sequence and poses that I would gravitate towards. So there are two slightly different practice intentions there with the two that I'm offering.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I love that we have so many ways to somatically integrate and engage with trauma work because some people's most accessible and most immediate approach to healing their trauma is a lot of thought involved. There's a lot of top down. And sometimes we miss or can't deal with the embodied physiological experience of trauma and healing and the things that come up when you're least expecting it. And so why is restorative yoga so great for trauma and why does it work?

**Adelene Cheong**

Exactly what you've just said, actually, which is we speak directly from the somatic experience of the body. Subpar the words. I could have talk therapy and keep engaging with you through relaxing this and let go of what has happened. And that will still be engaging with the brain because it's words. But in restorative Yoga, what we do is we use the props and positions as the language directly to the nervous system.

So it doesn't even go through the cognitive bit of what is actually happening or do I need to do anything with my breathing or et cetera. We allow the body, support the body, in position of comfort, absolute comfort, and to feel safe, so that there's just nothing for the body, nervous system, the mind, to contend with or even to interact with or be stimulated. So there will be, for

example, the felt sense of comfort itself for the body to be able to let go. So I don't need to actually reiterate that, it needs to be comfortable.

**[00:05:30]**

I would also use pressure, for example, when our body is being hugged, like someone is swaddling you, hugging you. So with the use of maybe blankets or props or heavy weights, it speaks directly from a tactile perspective, it speaks directly to a nervous system that says hey, you are being held, you're completely supported, so there's nothing for you to do, there's no effort needed at this moment, so, then, you're ready to let go.

So there are a lot of things that could play into that aspect of the practice and supporting someone to transition and to heal, to let go, to feel safe.

**Meagen Gibson**

Giving your body the signal that it can relax to a certain extent and not be on high alert.

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, and I often say that the props are the language in restorative yoga. We use the props and blankets to elicit, to invite out the experience somatically, so that the nervous system will just respond to that somatic experience than trying to convince, at a mental level, convince you to relax and let go.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, it's interesting because as you were speaking, I was thinking about how so much of our physiological response to trauma is not in our control. But you can set the circumstances up so that that physiological response also disengages. We're not controlling it with our mind. We just set up the circumstances physiologically using the props and blankets like you said, to give our physiological responses the signal, it's okay, it's time to relax and engage in a different way.

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, absolutely that.

**Meagen Gibson**

So if somebody is experiencing extreme pain, because we know a lot of trauma survivors have a lot of pain, that Venn diagram has a lot of overlap, and so if somebody is in a bunch of pain, how does someone begin this type of practice?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, I think sometimes gentle movements can be helpful to regulate before settling into a still, quiet position of restorative yoga. But saying that, when someone approaches restorative yoga and they are really in the pose, for example, or practicing, and they experience pain, I would pause for at least ten breaths. I use ten breaths just as a guide. But really it could be your six breaths or

twenty breaths, to allow yourself to process and notice if that is a pain that is permanent even when you come out from the pose or is it transient that is just in this moment.

**[00:08:14]**

So if there is a pain that literally I can feel in my knees, that is twisted, there's like a sensation that potentially even when I come out from the pose that might be injury, then I will definitely move out from the pose and readjust or even completely change to another position. But if I stayed for twenty breaths and the pain actually shifted a little bit, even if it's just reduced by like 2%, I would stay in the pose for longer for it to pass.

So I'm assessing whether the intensity of that sensation actually shifts or does it stay and is incrementally amplified so that we can have a choice in that moment. Is this a choice of just fear or is this a choice of a real thing that I need to deal with, which is my knee, in that moment?

### **Meagen Gibson**

I love that description. It reminded me that I was actually doing one of your restorative yoga practices from a different conference and noticed I had a really sharp pain in the back of my head and it was so strange. And so I did exactly what you just said and I was breathing through it and then I was like, I think I need to investigate this. And it turned out I had a bobby pin in my hair that I had forgotten about and it was digging into my skull. So I removed the bobby pin and the pain was gone.

Sometimes I was like, no, I want to see if this is something that's coming up. And it turned out it was actually just a physical obstacle that was causing my pain. But I love kind of leaning into it and giving yourself the breath to allow some investigation and see if this is going to transform. And lots of other aches and pains come up, or just discomforts or an itch or something. And that's the scenario where you can breathe through it and see if it's going to transform at all and change.

### **Adelene Cheong**

Yeah. And I wanted to say that also that in that moment when you have a choice, is very empowering and that is one mentally to be able to reclaim your power, in that moment, I can choose. I can choose to stay with it or I can choose to abandon it and just take it another day or completely change to something else. So that sense of having the choice that you are deciding in itself is healing.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And we can't overemphasize that. I mean, agency is such a felt sense that is sometimes taken away from people who have experienced trauma and they don't feel like they have as much choice and agency over their feelings, their bodies, their sensations. And so what are some unexpected but completely normal feelings and sensations that might come up for somebody with trauma while practicing restorative yoga? And then how do you recommend people deal with them? We talked about pain, but what are some other emotions and feelings that might come up?

**[00:11:06] Adelene Cheong**

No one knows. Anything can happen. I can't give you a straightforward answer with that. Anything can happen. But also recognize that the intention of the practice is about relaxation, is about recalibration. So going into the practice right at the beginning, having this intention within ourselves, so often when I begin my practice, I'll just lie down before even setting up with any pillows or blankets and props, is to check in with myself that, why am I doing this?

Do I even really want to be here to do this? And until I say yes to it, that I actually choose, again, that choice, I actually want this for myself because I am trying to self-regulate in this moment, then I enter into the practice. That in itself sets the scene for safe practice. Whilst I'm in the pose, if someone is experiencing discomfort, I think we talked about pain... What was the question again?

**Meagen Gibson**

To what other kind of feelings or sensations might come up? So I'm thinking if someone... Joy is, obviously, entirely possible, but someone also might have just incredible sadness or grief, right?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah. So emotions are transient human experiences, just as thoughts and memories and experiences that we have, they are also transient, but sometimes with trauma it gets really sticky. It gets really sticky and it gets re-triggered and then the nervous system acts on the trigger. So what we're doing with this practice, with restorative practice, is we don't talk about the trauma itself, we don't talk about the memory itself. We just speak straight to the nervous system.

We just speak straight to the nervous system to heal, to self-regulate, to build resilience, in the nervous system, to be able to handle sympathetic or parasympathetic dominance on demand when we need it. So it's not that we only want to be sedated and parasympathetic, but when I'm also stimulated and sympathetically aroused, even right now, as we are having this conversation, I'm needing some part of my sympathetic engagement in order to be able to articulate and speak and engage with you, but also on demand. After this interview, am I able to self-regulate and be calm and just go about... My heart rate down, relaxation, and all? So the practice is just doing that.

**Meagen Gibson**

And allowing yourself to have those experiences when you're under no threat directly, right, that you're safely embodied, you're safely taken care of, you're in a safe space to practice. And so when those sensations come up, you allow yourself to experience them. And that's how you're building resilience. Because we talk about resilience a lot, and people talk about resilience a lot, and I think one of the things that people misunderstand so much is that resilience is not built in just the face of adversity. Resilience is built in the face of adversity when you're safe and protected and supported.

**Adelene Cheong**

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely that.

**[00:14:35] Meagen Gibson**

And so that's kind of the basis of this practice, is to build that resilience in a supported, safe environment, right?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, absolutely that.

**Meagen Gibson**

So, when is it recommended that someone stop their practice and how can they safely return to it so they're not avoiding discomfort, but also allowing themselves the agency that we talked about earlier, to cultivate safe practice.

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah. I want, including myself and everyone who hears this, you can stop the practice any time you want. You can choose at which point that it's appropriate for you to return to the practice because you are in absolute control. The first thing that someone needs to know when it comes to practice is that they have absolute control as to how much, how little, they are ready to take in.

I mean, it could be the most beautiful, safe pose and practice, but if the person is not open in that moment to receive, nothing goes in, nothing goes out. I'm just in that seized moment. So first thing first when we come to a practice, is knowing that you are in control, although we know control is an illusion, but you are in control. And also choosing support, that external support, so if you feel safe to practice in a group, with a teacher, or with a therapist, if you feel safe to have external support for a while, use that.

I've recommended for students also to use positioning, which I'm going to be introducing in one of the longer practices, I was saying to feel safe again is to use the wall or pillows so that there's a wall behind you as you position yourself for practice. That could also be an external support during the practice.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. And so both of your sessions, we've got an hour long or, no, about 45 minutes and 20 minutes. And the hour long, I just want to remind people, is called "feeling safe again". And the shorter, which is about 20 minutes, is called "opening up to possibility".

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, I'm really excited to share the shorter practice as much, the opening up to possibility, it's one that I find, where the body is experiencing being fully held and supported and feeling safe, but at the same time entertaining the slightest possibility that things will shift and change and new possibility will come up. There's potential in the pose, in the experience itself, supporting. So, yeah, I'm excited to share that.

**[00:17:35] Meagen Gibson**

Wonderful. Other than at our sessions, in our conferences, obviously, Adelene, where can people find out more about you and your work?

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, I do teach an annual retreat where it's all about recalibration of rhythm, so personal rhythm, and it's called Relax and Restore retreat. So that happens every year, June, in Spain. And there are a lot of workshops and classes that I teach throughout the year. Some are shorter, some are longer trainings, which are all listed on my [website](#). So I hope to be able to connect with some of you and feel free to email me, drop me a line, especially if you have experienced the practices on this conference. Drop me a line, let me know how it is for you, how you experience it, or if you have any questions or clarification, I'm most happy to have that conversation with you.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Adelene Cheong**

Yeah, thank you. Namaste.