

Ep #31: How to Not Wreck Your Hips in Yoga



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hatelty

From Pain to Possibility with Susi Hatelty

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Susi: Hello and welcome. Thank you for joining me for this episode of *From Pain to Possibility*, and specifically in how not to wreck your hips in yoga. Now, this might be a contentious issue, just the way that I've titled this, but I titled it on purpose because this is not a new topic.

I remember back in 2019 there was some media based out of Europe and in the United States about some Instagram influencers who were having hip replacements. And they were contributing the injuries that they had had from yoga as catalysts for these hip replacements. So, it's not a new topic.

I also remember reading an article years ago when I first started practicing yoga and teaching yoga of someone saying, you know, a lot of people didn't know where the SI joints were until they started practicing because their SI's were so sore. And so many yoga teachers for a long period of time just kind of shrugged their shoulders and said, "You know, pain is just a part of the practice. It's what happens with the hips." And I find that so remarkable.

And it's still being said today, despite more awareness of mechanics and biomechanics and movement and anatomy. It's still considered kind of normal. And I understand why. I mean yoga, as an activity, even granted there's a lot of layers to yoga, but as an activity just like running, just like skiing, just like hockey, just like walking, it has its tendencies for injuries, right? It's not the fault of yoga per se, but it's more about what happens when human beings move their bodies. So there's really nothing to blame here.

But when we add in an awareness of mechanics, and of paying attention to one's body then things can really, really shift. So, I want to dig into that because for those of you who think that that's just the natural part of yoga,

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or maybe you've heard that and there's something innately in you that's thinking that's just not true, I'm saying that you're right. It is not necessarily true that yes, on one hand, yoga, there's an activity component to it. It can lead to injuries like any other activity. And like any other activity when we bring in this notion of awareness and of connecting into our movement then we don't have to get injury, injured.

We can recognize when our bandwidth is small. We can recognize when we're pushing too hard. We can recognize the signs and signals of over training. And it's a matter of tuning our awareness. And that's what's key. It's a matter of tuning the awareness and then acting upon that awareness, which are all human functions. That's not a function of yoga, right? Those are human functions who are practicing the practice.

So, that's what I want to dig into a little bit. I first want to talk a bit about why yoga has this tendency towards hip injuries. And then what we can do about it. So, a lot of studies have been done around yoga and yoga injuries, and the tendency is around knees, hips, and SI joints. That's what you hear most about.

There are also issues around the wrists, and the elbows, and the neck. But I will cover that in another episode. Because what I find with the hips is because so many poses require the hips to move well, that when they don't move well the compensations that can arise further up the chain and down the chain can create a lot of those other issues, right? Neck issues, rib cage issues, shoulder issues, knee issues, feet issues.

And my experience has been when teachers come to my trainings and start to improve through their hips so many other things get resolved. So, that's why I want to spend this time focusing in on the hips.

One of the things I find that can be a struggle is that long-term yoga practitioners are long-term because they love the practice. There's something really awesome about a juicy stretch. I'm as guilty as it is the next person. Like a juicy stretch feels really good.

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And there can be this conflict between, or a tug of war even, between that juicy stretch feeling and that consistent persistent pain that people can experience. And then there's a conflict to make one think, "Well, maybe this yoga thing isn't very good." But what I want to offer up is that a stretch sensation doesn't actually mean anything. All it means is that there's a stretch sensation.

So, what I mean by saying it doesn't mean anything is it doesn't indicate that you're doing a movement properly or that you're doing a movement improperly. Because we can compensate our way into any movement in order to have a stretch sensation. And it can be a completely crazy position, and not at all the position that we were wanting to have happen.

So, the first step of this process is to recognize that while a juicy stretch sensation is awesome it's not an indicator of doing anything correct, or accurate, or right. Nor is it something to say that you're doing anything wrong. It's merely a sensation. So it becomes interesting.

So, then you might ask, "Well then, what am I paying attention to?" Where we get to play around with this part of the conversation is about your own movement pattern. And what are you paying attention to in your own movement pattern.

And the reason I bring this up is because when we look at what is taught in 200- and 500-hour programs, what is often taught are alignment maps, final positions, and what is the sensation that someone should feel in those positions in order that they're doing it right.

They're looking at the final, final position. And so, if someone's alignment is off or if they're not feeling it in the right place then there is instruction given in order for them to feel it in the right place or to put them into a better place.

But here's what's really interesting. If someone's alignment is off in the final position, they've already moved beyond what they're actually capable of. If

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the position is already looking funky, if you're already looking at the final position in your student and saying, "Mm, there's something not right there." They've already moved beyond what their actual movement ability is. So, to then adjust somebody in the final position is adjusting them too late. Which is why there is a lot of issue before COVID about hands-on adjustments. Because they're already adjusting too late.

So, if you're adjusting too late you're trying to adjust a position beyond the position then you're putting a compensation on top of a compensation. You're putting more tension into a position that's already in a limited or a dysfunctional place. So you're just adding more problems on top of a poor movement pattern, which just creates more problems, right?

But, unfortunately, where we're at with 200- and 500-hour teacher training programs at this period of time, and we've had a long history of this, is that we're not speaking about function, we're not speaking about mechanics. And part of the reason is because yoga has so many layers to it. Everything from, like all the layers of koshas. I mean, I'm not going to get into them here on this episode.

But, in order to train someone up to be a teacher there's so many aspects, to the point where people would even argue that 200 and 500 hours of training is just the start, right? So, if you don't continue on with your training then you're going to be a bit lacking in some of these aspects of mechanics. And yet that's where a lot of teachers start teaching from.

Now, I'm not trying to lambaste teacher training programs. It's more about shining a light on why we're in the predicament that we're in, right? We're not addressing the bio mechanical function the hips play. We're not addressing that the pelvis is a platform, and the pelvic girdle is a bridge between the upper and the lower part of the body. We're not talking about when people move into standing poses that the leg bones are moving in the hip socket.

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And what I mean by that is they move forward and back, flexion and extension. They move into abduction adduction, which is away from the body, toward the body. And they also move into rotation.

When you really look and you listen closely, we speak very little about that hip movement, that leg bone and hip socket movement. Instead, what's being spoken about are the feet, or the torso, or a lengthening of the spine. We're not focusing on the actual joint that's articulating.

So, why is that important? Because where attention goes energy flows and awareness grows. So, if you are focused in on moving your feet as you step back into your high lunge you're not focusing on the actual articulating joint, which is the leg bone and the hip socket. And if you look closely, that while the feet are important, how that leg bone moves into the hip socket has a significant impact on where the foot is placed. So, when we can start to bring our attention to the actual articulating joint we make a big shift.

Which is what I was saying a bit earlier, that when teachers come to my trainings they're flabbergasted at how little they move in their hips. Like they're shocked. But they start to recognize how much other tension they're holding in order to do a movement. But when they actually start to move better, even just like what seems to be a millimeter better in terms of more pure and precise movement, the reduction of their pain is almost immediate.

And it's flabbergasting to them because they have been told that pain is a part of the practice. Everything that they've tried hasn't worked up to this point. But yet, everything that they have tried up to that point hasn't actually involved the articulating joint that's meant to be moving in the movement that they're trying to do. This is why the topic is so significant to our practice. Our practice is very hip dominant. And yet so much of the instruction is not focused on the hips.

And I want to reiterate, when I talk about hips I'm talking about how the femur, how that leg bone is moving in the acetabulum, that socket of the

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pelvis. That is what I'm referring to as the hip joint. When that is not moving well, when that leg bone is not moving well in that hip socket, for whatever reason, then that can lead to SI issues, other hip issues, performance issues, IT band issues, gluteal issues, knee, back, Even further up the chain to the quadratus lumborum, and psoas, ribcage, the T-spine, the neck. Pelvic floor issues can be related to your jaw, so it becomes really, really, really, really interesting.

And it begs the question in some ways when we talk about strengthening, and stretching, and hip opening what are we actually doing? Because if you look closely, and I'll give you some links in the show notes to support you in this, is when you look really closely we think, and many people in yoga think they are opening their hips so to speak, but they're doing everything but. They're moving their pelvis, they're getting their QL involved, they're binding up through their psoas, they're over gripping through the rear part of their pelvic floor, they're gripping like crazy through their jaw, they're holding their breath.

So then, what is actually happening? Instead of what we think is happening, which is hip opening, we're imposing a lot of tension, we're imposing a lot of strain, and we're imposing a lot of poor mechanical patterns, which I often refer to as compensatory patterning. It's really quite a disservice to what is actually possible.

So here's something that I want you to consider, and I'm going to take you through an exercise where you're starting in Tadasana, so in standing. And then I want you to start to move into tree pose. And think about what needs to happen to move from Tadasana to tree pose. Said another way, if Tadasana is point A and tree pose is point B, how do you move from point A to point B?

It's not so much what needs to happen in the final position, it's what happens on the way to final position. I call that the gap. The gap between A and B. So, when you're seeing someone in the final position of tree and you notice that their pelvis is skewed, and then you say to them, "Okay, re-

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square your pelvis.” You’re now actually compensating on top of a compensation.

Because when someone started in Tadasana their pelvis wasn’t skewed. But when they moved into Tadasana the idea was that you want to rotate that leg bone in the hip socket and you want to move that leg bone into flexion in the hip socket. So the foot comes to, like the free foot, comes to the inside of the standing leg. Whether that’s at the shin or the inner thigh.

But so many people, whether it’s through awareness or whether it’s through a lack of function, they are unable to do that and so their pelvis moves instead of their leg bone in their hip socket. So they think they’re moving their leg bone in their hip socket but in fact what they’re doing is they’re moving their pelvis.

The teacher then sees, “Oh look, the pelvis moved in the final position, we better put that pelvis back in the right place.” So then they put the pelvis back in the right place but then the leg falls inward a little bit and it’s like, “Oh, oops. Nope, the leg needs to be more into rotation.” So then there’s an attempt to queue rotation and the pelvis moves again.

And there’s this back and forth, right? And then something might have to be lifted or something happens in the rib cage but all of that is starting to build on tension patterns on top of the fact that they weren’t moving that leg bone in the hip socket to start with.

When someone is adjusting after all of that they’re not addressing the actual problem. Which is about, in tree, that leg bone moving in the pelvis. It could also be that bringing the weight over to the standing leg, that stability in the standing leg, that might be lacking a little bit. It could also simply be not a mobility, or even a stability, or a strength issue. It may simply be an awareness issue.

That’s what I find with the teachers who come to my training, it’s not so much that they lack the mobility or they lack the stability or the strength, or

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even the stamina, it's that they didn't know that's the way they were meant to move. So, simply drawing the awareness to the area and they go, "Oh, this is what I'm supposed to do." Then it's like, "Ah, okay, well this is what I now do." And then they notice all the positive changes that arises from that and things work.

So, the key is here is to, first of all, notice from A to B what the movement is. What is required to move into tree pose from Tadasana? What's actually meant to happen at the segments, at that joint in order to move from A to B? And then notice as the person moves from A to B, do they compensate? And then if they compensate can you intervene before that compensation?

So, if I bring into the story about the trainings that I lead, when a teacher is there and I say, "Okay, hold on. Back up a little bit, come out of tree. Did you notice first of all that your pelvis moved?" And they're like, "Yep, my pelvis is no longer in that space." Okay, so now move only as far as the pelvis doesn't move." And then they actually realize, "Oh, okay, that's what my actual movement is in my hip. Well, no wonder I feel the way that I feel, because I'm not moving nearly as much as I thought I did in through that hip."

So then they start to work at that area and because they're now more connected to how they are meant to move and what that movement is they've got much more clarity about what their body is doing or not doing. And then they also have better feedback overall internal to external. We're actually addressing how to improve better movement.

Then they start to notice more ease. Then they start to notice more sustainability. Then they start to notice that as they move into other positions, like warrior 1 or warrior 2 or triangle, they start to move with a lot more consciousness, a lot more fluidity, a lot more connection. Because they are now more aware of how their pelvis and their leg bone are interacting. They can feel that movement in space.

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So rather than being seduced by the sensation of a stretch they are tuned in and have a much more embodied experience of where their body parts are in space, better proprioception as they move.

So, let's talk about tree again. When you, as a teacher, are watching your people what do you see? What do you see as they move? And then can you instruct and queue to what's actually meant to be moving? What's the articulating joint that's actually meant to be moving?

Now, some of the push back I will get from this is that the teachers will say, "Well, my students don't want to do that." I get that because sometimes it's requiring the student to slow down a little bit and pay attention rather than blast through some poses, which some people want to do.

But what I've also noticed is when we frame what it is that we're doing in a way that is related to the outcome that they're wanting, whether it's more strength, better mobility, better posture then the people tend to do it. Right? Because there's a reasoning for why they're doing it and an understanding as to why they aren't making the gains they want to make. So, it really comes back to how you frame it, how you instruct it, how you help it become meaningful and significant for somebody.

So, when you're noticing it just notice it from your perspective of how your body parts move and where your awareness is. And then how can you support your own student in having that own experience. Allow yourself as the teacher, when you're watching the movement to just see. Allow your vision to focus in, specifically on joint areas, and then allow it to become more broad.

So, not only are you watching the articulating joint and seeing what it's doing, but what other body parts are getting involved in the movement. What's their breath doing? Right? And just allow yourself to go broad and then narrow. Broad and then narrow. Broad and then narrow. And you'll start to be able to see a lot more and you'll find that your queuing becomes a lot more specific in terms of supporting your students.

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Now, if you're a student, or if you're a teacher who's wanting to do this for yourself, you can do this in front of your mirror. I mean, one of the great things too, what I've found with being on Zoom more often with people is I'm actually noticing that I'm seeing myself move in a way that I wouldn't have seen myself without a camera. So then that helps raise my own awareness about my own self and my own movement. So, that's something else that you can consider as you explore how you're actually moving.

And then also take a look at some of these links that we have on our social channels, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram TV where you'll get a sense of how I'm teaching the various positions in the movement of into and out of and you'll get a sense of the deliberateness of my queuing. About where we're moving and what joint is actually articulating. And how that follows along with bio mechanical and anatomical principles. And so that may also give you some ideas of where and how you can play with these concepts to really improve your own movement patterns as well as your students.

So that then yoga doesn't have to have this reputation of being a hip wrecker. And it's a way for you to completely avoid that. And not only completely avoid that but instead, actually grow your mobility. Actually grow your true stability and stamina around that and greater strength so that you're able to do more, feel better, and just have way more fun with your body.

Now, if you want to dig in further with this there's two options for you. One is that I have a two-hour course that you can download that's entitled How Not to Wreck Your Hips in Yoga. So you can get access to that. And if you want to dig in even further, then we've got the therapeutic yoga intensive coming up. And we spend six days on all of this. Digging into how to break down common yoga poses into their component parts so that you can really understand what is supposed to be moving through these poses, how our bodies are meant to move overall. And how that contributes to pain reduction, how that contributes to improving performance and feeling really, really good.

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It's so vital when we're looking at helping people therapeutically with whatever their condition is. Whether it's a physical orthopedic condition, whether it has something more related to mental health, whether it has something more related to autoimmune, or recovery from surgery. It has such an impact on all of that. That when people can become aware of their body and improve their body awareness, that their body really becomes of service to them and a friend to them. Which is super powerful.

You can learn more at therapeuticयोगaintensive.com. You have a great time exploring this. And if there's any questions fire them off to me. I'm happy to address them in an upcoming episode.

Check out the show notes for How Not to Wreck Your Hips in Yoga. Or email us directly at health@functionalsynergy.com. I am happy to help you not have your hips be so sore and for you to become an even more excellent teacher. Really refining your skill and supporting your students to feel super good. Have a great time on your mat.