

Ep. #348 - The Missing Ingredient in Restorative Yoga



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With your host:

Susi Hately

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Introduction (00:00.00)

You are listening to From Pain To Possibility with Susi Hatelly. You'll 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 Hatelly.

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Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today, I wanna talk about something I so often see in the yoga world, something that has the word 'restorative' in it, but so often leaves people feeling anything but restored. So the question I want to explore today is *what actually makes restorative yoga, restorative?* Not in theory, but truly in lived experience – in the nervous system, in your tissues, in the felt sense of your own body.

One of my certification trainees recently came back from a restorative yoga teacher training. She said to me, *I thought the process would be relaxing, but it actually beat me up.* She wasn't exaggerating. Her knee was sore, her shoulder was tight, and she felt rung out.

What happened is something I've seen many, many times before (maybe you've seen it too), people are being positioned into shapes that look restorative, but don't actually restore anything. They're being perfectly aligned into what many would call the pose of rest without ever reaching the state of rest, and that difference is huge. When we chase a shape, the nervous system doesn't necessarily get the memo that it's safe. You can have every prop in the world – bolsters, sandbags, blankets, eye pillows – but if your body is bracing, it's not resting. Alignment might look pretty, but restoration isn't a performance. It's a permission in many ways.

It's the moment when your body stops trying to hold the pose and actually receives support. I learned this deeply years ago while I was teaching the restorative component of my therapeutic yoga intensive. At that time, I had incorporated this component because I had seen so many teachers teaching restorative yoga from a place of shapes – putting people into proper alignment with the belief that the proper alignment would facilitate rest. And as I watched students work with each other from that perspective, it became so abundantly clear that when people were being put into shapes, **their bodies were still, but they weren't settling.** Breath was shallow. Jaws were tight. Nervous systems were vigilant. These shapes weren't enabling any relaxation. They were enduring quiet.

Susi (03:21.15)

I was able to point this out to the group, and that's why I started teaching a restorative component in the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive, because it was so powerfully necessary to teach from a place of nervous-system state as opposed to pose shape; and as people saw this, everything for them changed.

Restorative yoga, when practiced as a state rather than a shape, becomes profoundly therapeutic. When someone truly settles, you can see it—their body melts into the bolsters not as a collapse, but as a true coherence in coordination. The body recognizes, “Hey, I don’t have to hold myself up anymore.” That melt is the physiology of safety.

It’s the parasympathetic system finally saying, “Okay, yes, I can exhale now. I can move into a state of rest and digest.” So when I am teaching restorative work, which really is at the essence of the therapeutic work I do, whether a student is lying over a bolster in a traditional, typical restorative pose, or whether they’re moving into bridge pose, I’ll often ask, “Can you bring the quality of rest into this movement?”

Because rest isn’t something you do at the end of class; it’s a tone that can infuse the entire practice. When we stop forcing movement, movement itself becomes a vehicle for restoration. And in that place of rest, we can begin to notice more – the whispers, the yellow lights, the indicators that let us know something might arise called tension, or strain, or pain. It’s that place where your system whispers, “Hey, that’s enough,” and when your mind tries to argue... well, that might be a yellow light. **And when we can listen to those whispers, we don’t actually have to hear the screams.** It’s that point, really, where healing starts to happen. When we stay inside of a range where rest exists, we’re not having to push through tension. Because when we move without that version of tension that’s got a grippy, brace, sort of straining feel, the body and mind learn to trust. That’s when I notice tissue begins the process of stopping guarding and really starts guiding. Because if I could personify it, it believes that you are now listening.

These are the principles that really turn any pose, *any pose*, into a restorative one, not just the ones with bolsters and blankets. Because restorative yoga isn’t really about stillness; it’s about the relationship between breath and the spine, pelvis, rib cage, legs, arms and feet, head and face. It’s a relationship between gravity and ground, between awareness and the body that the awareness lives in.

Susi (07:10.91)

Let me share a few moments from a class that bring this idea to life. When I was teaching a group session, everyone started on a spinal stir. You can imagine that this prop is sort of similar to a folded blanket, and I helped people to just settle, to feel the breath through the ribs, to notice where it was moving the body – the abdomen, maybe the pelvis. The idea here wasn’t to change it, but to simply notice where the breath moved the body as the inhale came in and the exhale went out. Then I invited them to soften the inner corners of their eyes, and after that moment, I could begin to see their bodies’ outer form staying the same, but the inner tone settling perhaps about two octaves lower. And it was from that state that we moved into gentle bridge poses. Now, my intention wasn’t to strengthen per se, but strengthening did happen.

I instructed to sense; to notice that hip extension, which is the driver of this movement, the leg bone and the pelvis, notice that motion and then rise only as far as that motion is happening, and you can breathe easily.

How much ease can you move in and still have the same result? Can you move with 5 to 10% less effort and still have the same result? And as they were settling more into their sensing world, I could add more cues of relationships to pay attention to. So not only how the leg and the pelvis were moving, but the pelvis to ribcage, and the ribcage around the shoulder.

Susi (09:50.06)

It's amazing when you bring these ideas together because not only does effort soften, the lift becomes smoother, and there's this cohesiveness that happens through the body and the mind and the movement. In many ways, this is what I mean by bringing rest into motion. **It's not about doing less. It's about doing with less resistance.**

Later in the session, we did some small foot movements. As they were moving, you could see the change elsewhere in their body. Tiny, precise awareness at the foot level echoed upward through the entire body.

They could then feel what they were feeling, not so much what they thought they should feel, but what they actually felt. It's that act of noticing that can create this recalibration. It's really the quiet genius of what's possible with restorative work. After that class, we had a conversation, and one person said, "You know, with each thing we did – the feet, the hips, the spinal stir – my upper body just kept getting more and more relaxed, and I now feel taller and more centered." If you've been following me for any length of time, you won't be surprised at all by my response to her: "You know that you can have this, this state that you have – the fact that your physiology is expressing it – means you can have it because you have it. It's not a fluke. This is ease in your system." Her nervous system is remapping safety.

Another person, the one who had been to that restorative yoga teacher training I mentioned, she had said, "My back and knee feels fine now. My feet feel alive". And all we had done is move with awareness and respect for load.

See, restoration—restorative yoga—really isn't passive. Yes, for sure, there can be a line over a bolster and blankets and getting super cozy, but the reality is that whether we are still or whether we are moving, restorative yoga is an active, living relationship between awareness and physiology.

Susi (12:43.58)

Awareness itself can facilitate integration. And the reality is that you can't really micromanage the process; the body and mind integrate what they're ready for. Our role as practitioners and teachers is to create the conditions for that integration to occur—giving the space for the nervous system to reorganize instead of trying to control the outcome.

So what makes restorative yoga restorative? It's not the props, it's not the shape, it's the state. It's the tone of attention you bring to the practice. True restoration is when the nervous system feels safe enough to soften, when the breath and the tissues start moving in rhythm again, and when movement arises from clarity rather than control. It's a state of restorative intelligence –

the body's innate capacity to recalibrate through awareness. It's like taking the same ingredients you've always had and elevating them into something extraordinary. You're not adding more, not at all. You're refining what's already there. So the next time you set up for a restorative practice, whether it's legs up the wall, a bolster under your knees, or just lying on the mat, ask yourself: am I shaping, or am I truly allowing my nervous system to settle?

Because when you shift from shaping yourself, essentially performing something that looks like rest, but really, you're enduring it, and instead allow it to be received by you, that's really when the practice begins and has impact. That's when your body and mind whisper, "I am safe now," and that's when restoration truly happens.

Susi (14:54.33)

Thank you for listening. Thank you for the opportunity to share practice of restorative yoga in this way – with awareness, gentleness, and **with the understanding that rest isn't the absence of movement, it's the presence of safety.** We'll see you next time.

Hey, you know what? If this is interesting to you and you're ready to go on to the next steps, we have opened up the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive registration for 2026 in April. And you can check it out over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**. I'd love to see you there. Take care.