

## **Restorative Yoga**

Restorative poses are a series of supported backbend poses, complemented with supported inverted, forward-bending and twisting poses. The operative word is supported. One's body is propped by blankets, bolsters, the floor, the wall, and sandbags, releasing the muscular body and quieting the nervous system.

Restorative poses are used when one feels stressed, tired, coming down with a cold, or weak. These include times one is particularly stressed with a major life crisis or recovering from an illness or injury.

Stress is ongoing much of the time in our world today. Stress starts with a physiological response to a perceived threat. Our ancestors may have felt the stress living in a world of predators. Today stress includes the fear of losing a job, bias, pollution, nuclear annihilation. To these perceived dangers, the mind alerts the brain to signal the adrenal glands to secrete catecholamine hormones, adrenaline and nonadrenaline. These in turn stimulate the sympathetic nervous system into fight or flight response. Heart rate, blood pressure, mental alertness, and muscle tension increase to serve the supposed fight or flight needs. The body shuts down digestion, elimination, growth, repair, and reproduction systems. Their energy is rather channeled into sympathetic system organs.

Fight or flight response is usually in a moment of danger, but when the sympathetic nervous system response to stress is chronic, the body suffers. The nervous system is not designed to maintain a heightened level of activity for very long. Soft tissue adapts to chronic muscular tension with trigger points, cramping, soft tissue restriction, joint immobilizations. Basically the mind and body wear itself out. They need rest. It needs the restoring function of the parasympathetic nervous system to be activated. The new field of pschoneuroimmunology realizes the connection between the psyche, nervous system, and immune system. Relaxation techniques are studied for their powerful therapeutic effects on our well-being. Chronic stress has taken its toll on our society, but the ancient wisdom of yoga is effective today more than ever.

Restorative yoga relieves stress effectively. A body, supported by props, can let go of the increased resting tone of the muscular system. The nervous system is calmed. The spine is stimulate to gently move in all directions, releasing the subtle energies along the spine, alerting the mind while keeping the muscles relaxed. The inversion response has been studied by Roger Cole, a yogi and psychobiologist. He found that inversions slow the heart rate, dilate the blood vessels of the upper body, dramatically lower hormone levels, as well as lower brain arousal, blood pressure, and fluid retention. Energy is then available for restoration and healing.

Conscious breathing is a major part of restorative yoga. Yogis believe that breath moves prana. Prana is the life force, described as Qi in Chinese medicine, Ki in Japanese medicine. Prana is the basics of the Indian medicine called Auyeveda. Prana is absolutely necessary for health and well being. Muscle tension, dysfunctional joints, and distracted restless minds interfere with the flow of prana. A basic tenet of eastern medicine is to facilitate the flow of energy to heal the body and mind. Skillful breathing effectively moves prana throughout the body. This is therapy in the East.

A series of balanced restorative poses for twenty, thirty, even sixty minutes is most effective. A quiet, clean, comfortable setting is necessary for one to focus on "letting go" and "opening up" images one needs to attend to throughout the session.

A relaxed inhale through the nose is an opening, not only of the rib cage and diaphragm but also an opening of the field of awareness to the spaces around us. During an inhale yogis will move prana from their centers outward through the body and beyond.

A skillful exhale through the nose releases not only the air, but the muscle tension as well. While exhaling in a restorative practice, the yogi settles into the poses, releases into gravity, letting go of the surface body of muscle and skin.

A common series of restorative poses might include:

- Viparita Karani
- Mountain Brook
- Supta Baddha Konasana
- Child's Pose
- Supported Upavista Konasana
- Reclining Twist with Bolster
- Savasana

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