

Ep #48: Yoga Teacher to Yoga Therapist



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With Your Host

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.

With this episode I want to dig into the distinction in my mind between yoga teaching and yoga therapy. And the reason is twofold. The first is, I think that there is a clear distinction. And the second is, I was inspired by some conversation that the certification trainees had this past week in a training call we had, where it was really clear that I could see them making that transition from yoga teacher to yoga therapist.

So I want to get into that and share with you what I feel is the distinction between the two because I think it's really important. But I also want to sort of set a foundation here that when the International Association of Yoga Therapists started to set standards and began the process of accrediting programs, they also wanted to make it clear about what that distinction was between yoga teaching and yoga therapy.

Because they were setting standards for training and they wanted to ensure in part that the training for becoming a yoga therapist was distinct from becoming a yoga teacher. Because again, they also saw a distinction between those two worlds.

So it's interesting because being somewhat a part of that process, I listened to a lot of program directors and a variety of other people with different lineages of training to me to hear what they thought about it. And really, there's so many views of what yoga therapy is. And is it different than yoga teaching or not? And we could go like down the rabbit hole of this and just have a grand old time.

More I say that because there was some conscious deliberation with the idea of how to define yoga therapy. Even in the time that the International Association did make a definition. Since that time that definition has

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evolved, right? So it's fascinating, just like the depth that we could go with this.

But I want to share mine because I think it highlights a lot about where I come from and how I teach. And it just gives you a little bit more understanding about, you know, what makes me tick and my way of teaching tick, and the way my training tick, and just how I work with clients.

So let's get into it. So I had this training call on Wednesday with my training group, and it was clear that they were making that shift. And so what do I mean by that shift? So let's first come into this place of defining it. When I look at yoga teaching that's done out there in the world, and I go to many different classes over the time, and I go to some online classes now being that it's the pandemic time.

So I experience yoga teaching in a variety of different forms. And for the most part what I see with a regular class is that most classes teaching isn't specifically happening. It's more of an instruction or a leading. So the yoga teacher has done a fantastic job at coming up with a sequence or a series and then they've shared that sequence or series with the group.

They might throw in some modifications in the event that someone can't do a particular pose, a workaround of sorts. But generally there's a start, a middle, and end that they walk or they guide somebody through. And a lot of the learning that's occurring is happening passively. Right? And there's an enjoyable experience, many times there's some music.

But for the most part that's what I find as a generality of what's out there. I'm not going to lie, I've been to classes where teachers specifically go, "Wait, hold on a second. I need to teach you about this thing that I want you to learn." Right? But that's generally not what is found out there.

And I'm not saying this is a bad thing. Like don't get me wrong, I'm not pooping on yoga teaching, not at all. It's just a way that the practice is delivered, right? And that's just a way.

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When I look at teaching as a construct and I look at good teachers that are out there. Whether they are in education like what our kids go to, or whether they are learning any other skill or tool that's out there. Whether it's language, or bike riding, or skiing, or whatever activity. The really good teachers, they have a process of teaching somebody a skill or a tool, and that there's an outcome at the end. And there's a deliberate process of them learning something.

So that's what I'm referring to as specific teaching. And so you'll see that as being distinct from this guiding process that we see in a lot of yoga classes, right? And so there's a difference there. There's a deliberateness to the learning process. And I see that as being very fundamental in yoga therapy.

So when we think of therapy now, now we're looking at let's help someone resolve a problem. So when I think about yoga teaching and when we combine that with yoga therapy, then what I'm doing with my clients, what I'm helping my trainees learn to do, is to help them become a great teacher. Teaching their students skills and tools in order for them to resolve a problem.

What I mean by them in the last part of that sentence is the client. So if I rephrase that it's, I'm teaching my client skills and tools so that my client can resolve the problem. And that's important in my books because I really believe that the power of healing, the power of recovery, is in the hands of the client.

My job is to show up. My job is to improve my ability to teach. My job is to meet my client where they are at. That's what I can measure. And then when I see how that client is responding to what it is that I'm teaching, I can see where the gaps are in understanding. And then I can either pull in other resources or I can reframe what I'm teaching. But I see the gaps and I can figure out how I can support the person to get from point A to point B, how they can fill that gap.

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So there's this collaboration between student and teacher, client and teacher. And there's an understanding that we're in it together, that there's this relationship. And that we are helping the client resolve their problem.

So there's a transition really, that I find with yoga instructors and yoga professionals who come into my training programs. And they are moving through this process of becoming a yoga therapist. And I want to share one example that a trainee actually shared after our call. And I thought this was really interesting.

And this is from Tiffany, "It was interesting to hear Susi reiterate that we are letting go of being yoga teachers to become yoga therapists. We'll no longer lead, coach, teach sequences, etc. to our clients. Instead, we'll teach our people about their bodies and how they move. We will help them learn how to resolve their problems and their patterns."

"I have this picture in my mind of us stepping out of our old roles and stepping into our new ones that we are in the process of creating. Up until this point -" And I think this is really important. "Up until this point I thought of yoga therapy as an add on or an expansion of my teaching yoga. I hadn't thought of it as the shedding off of one role as I step into this other."

"Now, it doesn't mean I can't teach a regular yoga class, I will, but I will never teach it the same again. I look at bodies so differently now. As I go back to teach in person group classes soon, I'm very curious to see how that will affect my teaching and queuing as I see the bodies of my students once again."

And this just sums it up so, so well, right? When we are supporting someone in this process of teaching them a skill or tool to help them resolve a problem, to help them understand their patterns, what we're ultimately also letting go of is the workaround or the modification, right? In the yoga instructor world we are providing modification so someone can stay in the class and help that class in the forward.

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But at some point, we've got to say no to the workaround. If we really want to help someone to progress it isn't about the workaround, it's about helping someone shift the neuromuscular patterning, the coordinating, or the motor control or coordination patterning that's going on between their brain and their tissue.

And when we can help them do that, what I have found consistently over time, it's that patterning when that's changed that can make huge shifts in one's own awareness and attention of themselves. And in turn how they absorb and dissipate force through their body. And then in turn, how they experience their symptoms, right?

Because they're bringing their awareness and attention back to themselves in a very, very deliberate and a very thought-provoking clear way of how their body is contributing to the scenario that they're experiencing. How their brain, or their thought patterns, or their mindset is contributing to the way that they're moving, the way that they're feeling, the way that they're bracing, the way that they're splinting, the way that they're gripping. So there's this awareness piece that we're really helping our client grow.

So here's what's really interesting about this process, is that to do this process we really need to feel, right? Because what we're asking ourselves to do as yoga therapists, in my mind, is to pay attention to some of these subtleties that our student might not be aware of, that our client might not be aware of. Right? Because we can't resolve anything that's out of our awareness.

And as a professional, I can say to someone, you know, things that I see and I actually had this experience when I led a workshop at a yoga conference in Toronto one year. Where the person in the room she said, "I am at this conference because I want to figure out my downward dog. Everyone's telling me how I'm so out of alignment in it. I just, I can't feel it."

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And she went into her downward dog and it was remarkable how off her shoulders were. And I said, "You can't feel that?" And she said, "No." And I'm like, "Well, that's interesting." And so then we went through a series of movements. I helped her improve some movement patterns just with some other small movements that I have. And then she went back into dog and she goes, "Oh, I can feel this now."

It's a great example that we as teachers, that we can tell our students what they're not aware of. But if we're not actually giving them the skills and the tool so that they can feel it for themselves, they're not going to resolve it.

So our skill level, in part, has so much to do with our ability to see and perceive the subtleties in somebody else. And here's what's really interesting about that process, for us to be able to perceive those subtleties in somebody else, guess what we need to do? Yeah, we need to feel it in ourselves. We need to feel that subtlety in ourselves.

And when we can feel that subtlety in ourselves, that which is subtle in somebody else becomes so blatantly obvious, right? Our ability to see just accentuates and it is so highlighted. It just magnifies in like 3D in some cases, like it's so apparently obvious. And then when we can see that we can then guide our clients, eye, or choose movements, or nidras or other technologies that we have in the yoga practice.

We can use those techniques and technologies to really support someone to elevate their awareness of themselves, so that then they can actually feel what's going on. And then they can intervene in a way that actually solves their problem, right? So the idea here is that we are wanting to resolve a problem. So how do we bring someone's awareness to this process of helping someone resolve a problem?

So one thing I'm hoping that as I'm sharing this is that some of you who are yoga professionals, and you've never quite felt totally at ease with it, or

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maybe having an inner resistance to being a yoga teacher, that now you might see why.

Because maybe the instruction part or the sequence development wasn't really your wheelhouse or didn't really resonate with you. That you actually wanted to be doing a whole lot more, right? And how to meet a person that much more clearly and cleanly so that when you look out into the room and you see people doing their downward dogs it's just not like right and you can't seem to get to all of the people out there with your queuing. It's like, but they're not changing what's going on?

And where I have heard some yoga teachers just kind of shrug your shoulder and say, "Well, that's what people do." You are someone who's been like, "No, there's something not quite right there. What can I do to help these people?"

So for you, you might be actually someone who's like, "Wait a second, this is making sense. I know what it is that I need to do. It's not just about a sequence. It's not just about universal set of queuing, it's actually I really want to meet someone where they're at and really support where that person is and support them in moving forward.

Which leads to another point which I think is really important, is this idea that I like to talk about around power over versus power with. To me, when we're in a teaching relationship there's a coming together of two parties when there's two of us. And that the person coming through has all this experience and understanding about who they are and what they know. And then the teacher has all this experience of their knowledge base.

And that we bring those two together and that's a level playing field. And together, yeah, it's a coming together like a double helix. And I've got this model called the Healing Helix, which really is a teaching model of there being a client and a teacher. And together they're helping to resolve a

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problem, right? And that gives space for the client to take ownership of their own process of learning, their own process of healing.

So as the teacher, it becomes so apparent and so necessary to meet the person where they're at. And you might find that when you're working with someone that the client is doing something that you don't, in your own mind, approve of. You want to lead them to the right answer. You want to lead them to the place where you think they should go. But really, it's about leading them into their own specific choice. It's about showing them the options and then allowing them to choose.

So it becomes really interesting. And this comes out of a higher insight that Rachel had on Wednesday during the training. Which she said, "You know, I butt up against a personal paradox. You know, I don't want to control others, but I do want to be in control." Right? And so it starts to be interesting when we look at this idea of control inside of this construct of teaching, right? And then we can actually meet people.

This is the last part of our aha, which is we can actually meet people where they are at without necessarily agreeing with it. Right? We as the professional get to be who we are, teaching in a way that is authentic and honors the client and where they're at because ultimately, we're teaching them skills and tools for them. For the client to resolve where they're at.

And the process that the client goes through is the process that the client goes through, and we don't have control over that. That's just that's their process, that's their journey. Our job is to show up as a teacher. Our job is to show up as ourselves. Our job is to meet them where they're at. Our job is to notice where the gaps are. Our job is to provide them skills and tools to help them move forward for where they want to go. Right?

It becomes so amazing when we look at this idea of yoga as an opportunity to help someone resolve their problems. And we, as the yoga professional, are teaching the skills and tools to do just that. It's the power, it's the magic

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of yoga, of being an excellent teacher and providing the space for someone to just live in their process. To be in their process of recovery, and healing.

Now, if this has inspired you, if you're a yoga professional and you're thinking, "Yes, this is what yoga therapy is about for me. This idea of thinking about it in this way really resonates." Then you are going to love the upcoming program, Revealing Human Potential. We're running it this summer. We're just starting to launch registration.

Email us at health@functionalsynergy.com to be put on the priority list. And we will email you and connect with you about what the program is about and how to really support yourself in moving forward and supporting your students and your clients in their recovery and their healing process. Enabling you to be in that space where you can teach them effectively, meet them where they're at, show them the skills and tools for their own recovery and healing. I would love and be honored to teach you.