

Just Breathe

by Cathy Cesario, M.A., E-R.Y.T

"Just breathe," I heard a young mother say to her son in the supermarket the other day. The little boy had spun himself around from his place in the front of the carriage and was desperately trying to reach for the candy bar that he wanted. "Am joy, am joy, am joy," he was chanting like a mantra, but his mother would not grant his wishes for the coveted Almond Joy. He began to panic now, scrunching up his face and getting ready to let out a high-pitched screech, a lethal assault on the unsuspecting shoppers nearby. But the young mother saw it coming, brought the child's face close to hers, and said, "Look at me, take a deep breath-ready? One, two, three..." she took a deep breath in to show him. He took a breath in and let it out with a sigh. "We have graham crackers in the car, and you love graham crackers..." her voice trailed off and I smiled. She had disarmed the missile for the time being.

"Just breathe." I say it all the time. I am a yoga teacher at All That Matters in Wakefield, RI. People of all ages and all walks of life and all levels of fitness come to my yoga classes on a daily basis, mostly to learn how to do just that, "just breathe." If it were only that simple, right? Or is it? Might it be that simple?

You see, when you take deep, steady breaths, something happens to your nervous system. The heart rate tends to slow down, the blood pressure often lowers, and the "fight or flight response" begins to recede in less than thirty seconds. A physiological fact. "Just breathing" stops the physiological mechanisms that create stress in the body in less than 30 seconds. So, if it is that simple, why don't we do it more often?

Habit. We become used to a certain level of stress or agitation. Many of my students who first arrive in a yoga class are instructed to simply relax their bodies. But often I have to go around the room and put my hands on their shoulders to give them permission to relax. As soon as I put my hands there, the shoulders go down. The student looks at me with disbelief, "But I thought they were relaxed!"

Paying attention to the breath helps to bring your awareness back to the body. Often, we don't even realize how much the body is responding to the contents of our minds, which spin at a break-neck speed and often cannot be quieted. Since the mind is constantly talking at us, we lose awareness of being present in our physical bodies and thus lose track of the present moment itself. Simply noticing the breath flowing in and out of the nostrils helps to begin to quiet the mind and relax the body. You begin to arrive in the present moment and in the presence of your body sensations.

The Sanskrit word for breath is "prana," which means both "breath" and "life force." The ancient yogis believed that we not only receive oxygen when we breathe, but we also receive energy, the vital energy that enlivens all living beings. When we breathe with awareness and attention, we become rejuvenated and rebalanced by the energy that our bodies receive through the action of breathing. The breath is capable of helping us to let go of the tension and negativity that we hold in our bodies as we exhale. This is the

function of the exhalation, releasing what we no longer need. The function of the inhalation is to receive the healing energy of prana, which restores and reconnects the body to the mind. With regular practice of consciously relaxing the body, noticing the sensation of the breath, and experiencing the breath as healing energy, the mind becomes less "busy," and it becomes easier to calm both the body and the mind. But there's even more to it than that.

Breathing properly and powerfully can make you happy. And being happy, that is, thinking loving, happy thoughts, makes you less likely to get sick and more likely to live longer. Dr. Christian Northrup, internationally known physician and author of "Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom," tells us that nostril breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is in charge of rest and restoration in the body, a condition that helps to keep you healthy. In her talk on "Wellness," she tells us that "thoughts and beliefs that support self-love and self-worth enhance health and well being and the lifestyle behaviors that support them." She goes on to say that modern science now confirms that "thoughts of anger and thoughts of complaining...lead to an increase of...cortisol, the stress hormone, which leads to inflammation...which sets the stage for disease." The way you think about yourself and the way you breathe have a great affect on your immune system. Therefore, steady nostril breathing and positive self- perception actually reduces your risk of disease and lengthens your life by an average of 7.5 years!

It is when we breathe in a steady, deep, and calm way with the intention to receive healing and with the thought of the breath as vital energy, that we bring health and happiness to our minds and bodies. Thought and intention hold power, and that power brings about healing.

When you bring your awareness to the breath, you are watching the mystery of being alive in this very moment. You are watching the magnificent power of the universe flow through you, bringing you health, balance, and peace. You encounter your true self, the one who bears a striking resemblance to the Infinite Divine source of all life itself. And that experience tends to bring about a state of bliss, or "samadhi," according to the ancient teachings of yoga.

Want to give it a try? Here's a practice I often share with my students. You can try it in the comfort of your own home:

- Lie down in a comfortable place or sit comfortably.
- Feel your whole body relaxing into the ground beneath you.
- Bring your awareness to the sensation of your breath flowing in and out of your nostrils. Try not to change the breath in any way. Simply observe the feeling and sound of your breath.
- Now, very gradually allow the exhalation to become longer with each breath.

- Now, see the breath moving in and out of your heart center. See the breath as light and healing energy filling your heart as you inhale and overflowing the heart with balance and peace as you exhale. Let go of negativity and disease of any kind as you exhale, and as you inhale, receive the nourishing energy of prana.

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