

matthew j
TAYLOR™

Ask a Yoga Therapist

How Does Breathing in
Yoga Therapy Ease
Suffering?



www.matthewjtaylor.com

o: 480-699-4867 f: 480-699-4894 10213 N. 92nd Street Suite 102 Scottsdale, AZ 85258

The "Ask a Yoga Therapist" series is for general information purposes and does not constitute as medical advice or prescription. Readers should seek local, qualified consultation and direction from their healthcare professional prior to acting on portion of these columns. Individual consultation is available with Dr. Taylor at www.drmatthewtaylor.com .

© 2010 MJT Brands. All rights reserved.

Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: I field quite a few questions about breathing and pranayama in Yoga therapeutics. Many are centered around technique-oriented processes such as “How many repetitions?” “Retention and safety” and the where breathing fits in a practice. In this issue I would like to zoom the lens out a little further to offer a less classical perspective on breathing and Yoga therapy.

A: As I mentioned last issue, in Yoga therapeutics it is presumed there is suffering being experienced and the Yoga Sutras offer important insight into easing and preventing that suffering. Specifically, Sutra II: 3 addresses the kleshas with Avidya being the first and overarching source of suffering. Such forgetting of our true nature as “connected and non-separated” is more difficult when we and our students regularly appreciate the process of breathing moment to moment.

The key words in that statement are “appreciate” and “process.” Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* describes 10,000 hours of application as a threshold of mastery in a field of experience. In my 20,000 plus hours of sitting with students since I began integrating Yoga and rehabilitation I have observed the amazing and humbling power of breathing to restore and heal. Not some fancy multi-level pranayama, but just creating an environment of safety and focus where we both can remember breathing is happening right now.

In that space, I invite the student to “appreciate” the breathing process by directing their attention to their immediate sensory experience. Can they hear that breathing is happening? Can they feel some part or parts of their physical body move in response to the breathing taking place? Is there a temperature difference at the base of their nose between inhalation and exhalation? Are each of the breaths the same? Do they flow, fill and empty the same way each time? These simple reflections based on introspection often yield surprise and comfort within minutes. The discipline is to be there, right then, sensing and deeply experiencing the breathing taking place at that moment...nothing more.

Not exactly headline news, I know. Yet so often in our technique-centered culture we rush to asana, restorative asana, Yoga nidra, etc, without pausing to very simply “be” in the breathing process. May I caution you against the rush to technique? I have the privilege of working with people that have complex, presumably unsolvable health challenges. Almost without exception they point to this appreciative practice as being the most valuable “technique” they take away in their practice regardless if they are now back to improved function or facing a terminal disease scenario.

The other word I emphasized was “process.” Hidden within process is hope and connectedness (Vidya). Offering students the experience and remembering that being is a process of progressive unfoldment, discovery and change rekindles curiosity and the fresh-eyes of ‘now.’ While appreciating breathing as outlined above, we now know students decrease activation of their executive mind whose job it is to fret and worry. Simultaneously they light up their sensory cortex and begin a regenerative cascade of

comforting internal states. Without the pesky worrier, they create a positive, building loop of noticing, enjoying and delight in the moment, even in the face of severe pain sensation. This appreciation of the impermanence of all sensation to include pain creates ease within the chaos of their suffering state.

As their breathing pattern shifts and opens, with rough edges and hard turns falling away, there emerge opportunities to invite inquiry into what I have found to be two central questions of life. I am careful not to imply answers to these questions, but rather invite observation, reflection and direct experiential knowing by the student. The questions are simple...the answers, a lifetime process:

1. Where does the Breath come from and where does It go?
2. Are you the breather or are you being breathed?

Please don't believe what I am writing. Try it next class you lead, the next one on one session you offer, and in your own next practice. Set aside the doing, be still and "know."

Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT has a doctorate in transformational learning and change (a.k.a. Yoga). Matt is an AYA member living in Scottsdale where he and his wife have a Yoga-based rehabilitation clinic. He is an author, researcher and practitioner of Yoga therapy. He is past-president of the board of directors of the International Association of Yoga Therapist and teaches nationally. He is an expert legal witness for Yoga injuries and is passionate about Yoga safety. For more information see www.drofyoga.com .