The Breath That Moves Us

by Donna Farhi

with illustrations by Stephen Crowe

For many years I have had a consuming question in my own Yoga practice and in my work as a teacher. The question takes many forms, but it can be boiled down to this: What does it mean to breathe naturally? To ask the question, one must believe, as I do, that the body possesses an intrinsic wisdom, a belief founded in both scientific and experiential understanding. At first the question appears simple, but like most such things, its apparent simplicity belies the extraordinary depth of experience that arises in its asking.

It has been very important to me to ask these questions about the breath and movement as a part of an open-ended inquiry that does not necessitate a definitive and therefore self-limiting answer. In the absence of such questioning, one can come to expedient conclusions and formulaic structures that may give the confidence of certainty. This certainty dimly reflects the inherent complexity of living and the potential dynamic state of living fully that so many of us long for. The purpose of this article is to share with you my ongoing exploration of re-enlivening body, breath, and mind within Yoga practice, and, in particular, how this enlivening process can be facilitated by Yoga teachers through the use of breath work.

First, it may be helpful to look at how breath work is commonly introduced and used in Yoga classes. As a student myself, I have received many instructions to breathe. And yet, in all of the classes and intensives I have attended, I do not remember ever having been asked whether I knew what “breathing” meant or how to do it. Almost always it is assumed that breathing is a given, like salt, requiring no further description. In some classes, breathing is simply added as an afterthought, overlaid on top of the asana being practiced. In some traditions, any serious exploration of breathing is left until the asanas have been mastered, creating a separation between the two. In other scenarios breathing is stipulated—“breathe in when you raise your arms” or “breathe out for eight counts.” Such stipulations may become internalized so that the mind, like a control tower at an airport, orders the body about.

In other classes, one is warned that breathing is something of tremendous power that ought to be feared (“If you miss one day of pranayama practice, you’ll do irreparable damage to your lungs!”), and therefore one should go to great lengths to control, harness, and manipulate the breath. At the other end of the spectrum, breathing may be presented as some vague esoteric concept escaping the grasp of all but the most accomplished, forever eluding attempts at capture, like a fist trying to catch and hold onto mist.

While many of these approaches to integrating the breath within Yoga practice have their merits, my concern is that all perpetuate a paradigm in which the body, mind, and breath effectively remain separate. If I am my breath, how can I be searching for it? If I wish to marry all aspects of myself, how can I do this if my mind is commanding my body and breathing process in a way that is reinforcing their
separateness rather than their integration, co-participation, and mutual relationship with each other?

What is the virgin nature of the breath? How did I breathe before I had a name? What is the essential nature of free breathing? These questions ask us to relearn a basic process. This relearning is an essential step in breath work, a step which should always precede the introduction of more formal, manipulative practices such as pranayama. Without this relearning process, such practices can be like grafting healthy branches onto a diseased tree. If our supposedly “normal” breathing pattern is constricted and dysfunctional, we will bring this to all the movements and asanas that we do, so that the postures are superimposed on top of our already existing restrictions. Like a person who walks with a twisted knee, we will run with it too.

In the teacher trainings I lead, almost all teachers find it difficult to facilitate free breathing in their students. What I mean by “free breathing” is not that the student is merely able to command their breathing process at will or follow the teacher’s instructions. I mean that breathing has become intrinsic to the person’s process. Once teacher trainees get beyond merely giving lip service to breathing and raising their standards beyond placing people in pretty positions, they discover that this is one of the singularly most difficult concepts to convey in a class. Most notice that their Yoga students hold their breath and need constant reminders to keep breathing. Simply giving arbitrary commands to breathe, or giving the students rules for breathing does little to remedy the situation.

Constantly deferring to the teacher’s external commands and directives may also effectively prevent the students from discovering their own unique relationship and marriage to their breathing process, a marriage that creates a priceless source of internal referencing. In “answering” the student’s questions with simplistic formulas (such as telling the student when to breathe during a movement), we may steal from them the possibility of deep self-awareness and freedom, which is, after all, the ultimate goal behind all Yoga practice. To be fair, many students (and teachers) have such a need for certainty and security, and there may be a strong compulsion to be given or to provide authoritative rules, whether about breathing or the technique of an asana.

The paradox here is that breathing is movement. Breathing is about constant change. Breathing is life itself, with all its uncertainties. The student with pencil poised over notebook who wants to know the rules for breathing (when to inhale, when to exhale, etc.) is a student who has a stronger investment in obtaining certainty than in being dynamically alive. So it is important to know at the outset that any true exploration of one’s breathing and movement in Yoga practice strengthens us to live with not knowing. Our equanimity then reflects our acceptance and skill in living with our questions rather than any certainty in having answered them.

The fact is, it is not possible to tell another person to “breathe fully.” Unlike technical adjustments whereby it is possible to position a person’s limbs in space, you cannot adjust breathing in this mechanistic way. The best that any of us can do is to create situations where breathing happens. I have found that the most successful ways to elicit free breathing are rarely obvious or direct. Rather, breathing must be coaxed, cajoled, and seduced through tender invitations that encourage full-bodied sensuousness and full-bodied pleasure.

To provide a practical grounding for this discussion, I have divided the next section into a series of steps. These should not be considered as a hierarchical progression but rather as a presentation of overlapping and related issues that I hope will be helpful in providing a framework for Yoga teachers to explore breathing within their teaching and practice.

**Process One:**

**Internal Respiration**

The act of breathing can be divided into the two interdependent aspects of internal and external respiration. When I take a breath in, the air enters my lungs and oxygen is transferred into the blood capillaries surrounding the alveolar cells of the lungs. In a figurative sense, at this stage the gaseous breath becomes liquid and begins its journey throughout the body traveling on the back of hemoglobin within the blood. Its destination is the cells, and the reason for the journey is that the cells have an insatiable desire for oxygen. Once the oxygenated blood reaches the cells there is a transference of oxygen into the cell, while at the same time the cell gives up what it no longer needs to the blood.

There are billions of cells in the human body and every cell in the body breathes in an ongoing, expanding, condensing, and resting rhythm. It is not uncommon, however, to effectively draw air into the body through the process of external respiration but to ineffectively de-
**Figure 2:** The Pelvis, Spine, and Abdomen: In these illustrations the natural movements that occur on inhalation and exhalation are exaggerated for clarity. Notice how the pelvis oscillates around the femur bones, how the spinal column changes shape, and how the abdomen changes shape. These are movements that should be present (however subtle) in other positions and postures.

**Figure 3:** The Shoulder Girdle and Arms: The free-floating scapular and shoulder yoke move with each phase of the breath cycle providing an ongoing massage to these structures. In free breathing the movement is predominantly lateral rather than vertical.

**Figure 4:** The Diaphragm, Lungs, and Ribcage: The diaphragm acts like a huge stingray swimming inside us, moving the contents above and below it in sensuous undulations. This is a far cry from the pneumatic bellows image most of us learned in biology.

**Figure 5:** The Breathing Body: Breathing is a global body experience. Imagine each and every cell expanding, condensing, and resting in an omnidirectional way.

**Figure 6:** Marrying Breath and Movement: Whenever the breath moves we must move. In schematic drawing 6A the spine is shown responding to the wavelike motion of the breath. Alternatively, in 6B the skeleton is uninfluenced by the movement of the breath.

**Figure 7:** Honoring All the Phases of the Breath: The breath creates a natural “retraction” in all movements. In the forward stretch in 7A the person is alternately lifted and lowered by her breathing movements. In 7B the person maintains the stretch statically, moving “outside of the breath.”
let ourselves be changed. Our belief system determines whether we can breathe in and accept what comes our way, and breathe out and let go of that which will leave our life situation regardless of our efforts to hold on.

Bringing awareness to one's self in a spirit of self-acceptance can herald the beginning of a new relationship toward the self for the recipient of such touch. When we approach a greater degree of self-acceptance, we can literally open to the process of living—that is, we can breathe.

When we touch from the level of our cells to that of another, we attempt to:

- Experience the global nature of breathing.
- Discover where and who the person is.
- Meet the person, accepting and supporting his or her level of understanding (acceptance and curiosity guide the inquiry).
- Communicate his or her intrinsic wholeness without conditions.
- Gather information through our touch without projecting a preconceived diagnosis, our opinions and ideas, or jumping to conclusions and remedies prematurely.
- Center ourselves and facilitate centering in the other as a prelude to change. Touching from the cellular level can precede touch that is used with a different intent (e.g., to adjust or direct to a new position) and can act as a background resonance during more directive touch.

Neutral touch allows the person to become present in the part of the body that we hold. One can tell when a person has brought her attention into a specific area of the body because cellular respiration will increase in the area we hold. Once her awareness has entered that part of her body, any instructive or directive touch we give has the possibility of being "heard" because someone is home.

If we adjust someone into a new position before the person has this awareness, she may take on the new position we ask of her but may have little ability to repeat the movement by herself because her own perceptual process has not been engaged. She may also dissociate from the body in order to do the new movement, a process most clearly demonstrated when the student holds her breath in order to get to the new position.

Cellular awareness establishes a state of relaxation. This is a welcome return to the undifferentiated state and ground of our being, the direct experience of wholeness and the resolution of conflict within oneself by entering a state of neutrality. The ability to relax in this way establishes a baseline experience of a "center" that we can use as a reference point.

From the reference point of cellular respiration, we learn that breathing is happening to us if only we allow it. For whatever reasons, restriction in breathing occurs because I am unwilling or unable to be moved. As you are reading, you may pause to notice that your shoulders may be alternately expanding away from your breastbone and condensing back toward your chest. This is happening to you; you are not making it happen. But you can prevent the movement, whether consciously or unconsciously, or you can consciously direct the movement to happen in a mechanical way. Or you can co-participate with the naturally occurring movement of breathing. This process of co-participation forms the second section of this article.

**Process Two: Steps Toward Reestablishing the "Essential" Breath**

I have attempted to codify those conditions that must be present for full conscious breathing to take place. These steps may be useful material within any Yoga class regardless of the tradition practiced. I invite you to contribute to them with your own experiments, inquiries, and creativity.

1. **Perceptual Baseline:** Create situations in which students can develop a more refined awareness of their breathing, not as a process of controlling or changing the breath, but by simply noticing how it is. By establishing this perceptual baseline, students can then compare and appreciate changes that happen in their breathing both during and after Yoga practice, and more importantly, in common everyday activities.

**Strategy:** Whether the classroom exercise is a simple relaxation or a difficult asana, students should not be told what they should feel during a perceptual exercise. If there is an "ideal" to the process of perception, students might negate, ignore, or discount what they perceive. It is essential that they be allowed to acknowledge their own personal experience. Even if a student is breathing poorly, how much more powerful for him or her to notice this before being offered alternatives. To this end, the teacher can achieve wonders by fostering students' spirit of curiosity and delight in discovery. With all things, but especially with breathing, when students
enter an inquiry from the perspective of trying to get “it” right, they sabotage their efforts through the tension and fear of failure implicit in striving.

2. Identify Breath-Holding Patterns: Help students to identify the ways in which they might be interfering with the free movement of breathing. An important component of this step is determining whether a student has any strong ideas about what constitutes good breathing. Many of these ideas come from common unconscious practices in the West, such as holding in the abdomen, and are particularly self-defeating.

Other ideas about breathing may have been learned (as was the case with a recent student of mine who had been taught to contract her scapulae together as a strategy to open her breathing). Yet other ideas about breathing arise from the language we use. The very idea of “holding” a Yoga “pose” contradicts the natural oscillation that should be present when breathing and movement are married. Here are some common restrictive patterns to look for:

- Chronic holding of the abdominal muscles and the tension in the organs underlying them.
- Tension in the form of contraction through the pelvic diaphragm. This includes unconscious tightening of the anal sphincter muscles and tension in the genitals. The mere act of speaking frankly about these taboo areas of the body can give students permission to live and breathe from them.
- Tension in the throat or vocal diaphragm.
- Overusing the secondary respiratory muscles in the upper body while under using or restricting the use of the primary respiratory muscles.
- Restricting cellular respiration by exaggerated contraction of the muscles, beyond that which is necessary for the task.
- Contracting the central body and diaphragm as a strategy for establishing and sustaining stability (for instance, holding the breath while attempting to stand on one leg).
- Opening the peripheral body without the support of an open, mobile center. Commonly, the arms will be flung into the movement in the appearance of expansion while the core remains contracted.
- Contracting the muscles around the joint space so as to prevent the sequential undulation of breath movement in the body rather than allowing a sequential flow of movement through the joint.
- Having a set idea of a position and “holding” the position, rather than sustaining the position through an ongoing dynamic relationship with the breath.
- Hyperventilation (breathing too fast).

Strategy: What is most relevant is not what the teacher notices, but what the student notices. That is, it does not matter how astute is your observation if the student has no awareness herself. Your task then is to create situations in which the student can perceive herself more clearly. Having the student exaggerate what she is doing can often clarify the effects of her actions. For example, if a student holds in her abdomen, it can be very helpful to ask her to exaggerate the holding and to observe what happens to her breathing as a result.

Another helpful inquiry is to have students extend their arms out to the sides level with their shoulders and to notice how the breath is moving the arms, rotating them inward and outward, toward and away from the center. Students are then asked to find out how much muscular effort they need to use to co-participate with the breath movement. Too little effort and the arms will be limp carriers of the current, but, more commonly, too much effort in the form of contracting muscles will stop the breath from traveling from the core into the arms.

In any inquiry that you might invent to clarify breathing, you cannot ask students to believe in your ideas. Rather, you must ask them to doubt you, so that they will investigate more deeply, ask questions, experience for themselves, and formulate their own answers.

3. Dismantling Breath-Holding Patterns: The process of reestablishing natural breathing is a process of deconstruction. By removing obstacles to the free flow of breathing, I can then allow the breath to move me. Part of the process of dismantling is to identify the underlying forces causing breath holding. These may include a habituated stress response that has gone unchecked, distorted body imaging (e.g., “I believe that if I relax my belly, I will look unattractive”), and cultural and social pressures to work faster than is comfortable or possible within a relaxed breath rhythm.

There are considerable rewards and status that come in our culture from being a person who does things quickly, or being a person who works eighty-hour weeks. Such individuals may exist “outside their breath” and have strongly held suppositions that resist any embod-
ied change. Breath holding may be related to a student’s belief that all action should be effortful. (Recently, I asked a student why she was tensing all her muscles in an asana and what would happen if she relaxed some of that tension? She responded, “Then I would be a lazy person. I would not be working hard enough in my poses.”)

Strategy: Integrate questions in each class so that students can look more deeply into their own beliefs and attitudes toward their body. For instance, I often ask students in tadasana to close their eyes and to notice whether they are holding their belly in. If so, can they remember the very first time they thought this was necessary? Given the freedom to sense and feel, many students recollect very specific situations in which they received powerful messages to restrict the abdomen. They can then assess whether this habit serves them or is a habit to which they have become subservient.

A note about pranayama: While pranayama can be used to strengthen, refine, and liberate breathing, too often pranayama is taught without addressing underlying breath-holding habits. Paradoxically, the manipulation and control of the breath used in most forms of pranayama may result in suppressing the deep-seated fears and insecurities that cause holding patterns in the first place. This is rarely the conscious intention of the practitioner but can be a very common undesirable result.

Most literature on pranayama is steeped in control-laden language, dualistic overtones, and a transparently veiled fear and abhorrence of Nature (most often represented by the feminine principle) and sometimes, blatantly, of women themselves. Whether this was the intention of the practice as it was handed down is arguable. I believe that yogis could not have come to the realizations they did without deeply probing the unconscious and the natural world, but these original practitioners’ methods may have been lost to us or reinterpreted through the eyes of patriarchal societies through the centuries. Regardless, we can make our own contribution to the evolution of Yoga given the knowledge we presently have about the danger of manipulating Nature toward our own ends.

Sadly, the more control, however illusory, I have over my breath, the less connection I have to it and to myself. The control implicit in many pranayama practices can be used to seal the lid on our personal Pandora’s box. The control implicit in many pranayama practices can be used to seal the lid on our personal Pandora’s box.

Neither suppressive control nor uncontained release are sound approaches to breath work. While the latter offers a person the drama of catharsis, it rarely offers the equanimity afforded by progressive integration.

Integration, like most things, is a slow and steady process distinctly lacking in razzle-dazzle. We open ourselves to new possibilities not because we are pried open, but because we are ready to integrate the opening.

4. Encourage and Allow Oscillation in All Movements: Breathing causes oscillation throughout the entire body (Figures 2 through 5). This oscillation contains both a “retractive” and “expansive” phase, punctuated by brief natural pauses. As the body is allowed and indeed encouraged to move, the entity that we call “body” becomes married to the breath (Figure 6).

The retractive phase refers to the part of the breath cycle that draws the body slightly out of a posture. In hanging forward, for instance, the spine may raise slightly up during the inhalation (i.e., retract) and release deeper into the pose on the exhalation (Figure 7).

Similarly, when we extend the arms in Virabhadrasana II, the arms retract back slightly toward the center of the chest on the exhalation. Thus, when we try to stop ourselves from moving, whether by “holding” a pose or because we are overusing our muscles and thereby preventing the wavelike motions of the breath to travel in the body, we are embodying separation at its deepest level.

Most Yoga students find the idea of being allowed and indeed encouraged to move while practicing the yogic asanas revolutionary. To this end, the teacher must be capable of
demonstrating this not only within his or her own body, but through the skilful use of voice and touch (more later).

We all know how easy it is to hold the breath momentarily when we are learning something new. We momentarily may suspend the action of breathing in order to learn a new movement, enter a Yoga posture, or remain and perhaps even defend our expression of the Yoga posture as a static unchanging entity. The habit of holding the breath for whatever reason can be effectively dismantled when participants are encouraged to explore the yogic asanas in a childlike spirit of inquisitiveness, rather than as a process of arriving at a predetermined right position. By removing the tension implicit in failure, I can allow the breath to rejoin the body through a process of discovery.

**Strategy:** In my own beginning Yoga classes, I have developed a series of inquiries that allow students time to perceive and appreciate just how much the body is moved by breathing. These inquiries are outlined in detail in The Breathing Book (Chapter II: “The Breath That Moves Us”). They can be used as a series or broken into segments to be integrated within the context of the class. When students develop an awareness of the basic movements that occur because of breathing in simple supine, sitting, and standing positions, they can then bring this knowledge with them into more complex movement challenges, whether these movement challenges present themselves in the form of breathing while talking or breathing while bending backward.

As students develop a basic awareness of their breath, I suggest progressing very slowly into more complex movements. If a student is challenged and overwhelmed by the introduction of too much technical information or movements that are difficult or stressful, it is all too easy to fall back on old coping strategies, the first and most common being holding the breath.

To this end, the teacher has to be very clear that breathing has absolute primacy in the teaching of asanas. If this is my primary concern and focus, students will make it theirs! If my focus is unduly and prematurely on the precise correctness of alignment and position in each asana, that too will become the primary directive of the student. We want to encourage students to make their processes more important than the pose.

Many teachers are reluctant to embrace this approach, believing that students must have a veritable litany of technical and structural information before worrying about breathing. It is true that students do need basic alignment instructions that give them some sense of the integrated form of each asana, but this instruction can be introduced in successive layers working from the general to the specific, from simple to complex, over a period of time, all the while reinforcing the natural movement of breath as a precursor and cause of good alignment.

Unless a student is at risk of injury, this means that the teacher may at times strategically ignore a student’s technical and structural errors. If I overwhelm or badger students, or talk relentlessly without including pauses for them to integrate the instructions, students will feel obliged to hold the breath and get “it” right even if it means bypassing their own process.

We cannot rush this natural process of learning and arrive at the same results. When I have made the mistake of doing so, I see that my students are able to mimic the appearance of the postures without having the experience of the postures. Technical and structural directives are actually very easy for the student to perceive and to act upon—these can easily be elaborated upon later. Breathing, on the other hand, if experienced as divorced from movement from the onset, is exceedingly difficult to introduce later. Not surprisingly, the most challenging students I have ever taught are those who have had the most technically oriented training.

Another good reason for this rationale is that in order to breathe freely, I must learn to align myself well. If students are actively exploring how changing positions and shapes affects their breathing, they are building a wealth of knowledge about alignment. Students who have this base find their own way into good alignment from the reference point of their breathing.

Visiting teachers who have assisted my classes are often amazed at how little “adjusting” students need when they have this inner reference system. Changes in breathing, breathing restriction, harshness, or holding of breath are all states that alert students that their alignment is poor. The teacher can help through demonstration, verbal “clues,” or tactile feedback when students are completely out of the ballpark in their proprioception, but
the process should never be taken away from the person.

I have found the following guidelines helpful for maintaining a healthy balance between attention to form and attention to content. While teaching or practicing any asana or movement one can use this simple check list:

1. Mobile Core: Simply—am I breathing? Am I allowing my breath to move my central body? Is my core soft and mobile? If the core is mobile, the belly, the entire spinal column, and all the internal organs will reflect a state of ongoing oscillation and undulation.

2. Connecting the Mobile Core to the Periphery: From this awareness of a mobile core, can I find the relationship of my core to my six limbs—head, tail, arms, and legs? All movement connects from the core to the limbs and back again. All appendages communicate with each other through the core. In any asana, alignment is the attempt to find a harmonious relationship between the core and the periphery, bringing all parts to play as a whole. If I can find clear pathways between my core and my limbs, my breath will move from my center outward unimpeded.

3. Allowing Oneself to Be Moved: Within the configuration in which I find myself, can I allow myself to be moved and changed? The pose becomes a "soft intention" rather than a destination. As I am exploring the asana can I keep the pathways open between all the parts so that no matter whether I am standing on my hands, head, or feet, I continue to allow the breath to move me?

4. Amplification of Breath Movement: By nature, the movements within the body caused by breathing are subtle relative to the gross movements perceived by the average person. In yogic asanas, we attempt to feel the dynamic inner movements within the relatively static form of the postures. How much more difficult this must be if a person has never allowed his or her body to move in space. It is quite a stretch to expect such a person to perceive or experience something as subtle as the rotation of the sacrum during inhalation and exhalation.

I have observed that students who have had a background in dance or some other movement form such as T'ai Chi understand and feel subtle internal movement much more readily than those without this grounding. Because of this, one of the strategies I use most frequently is to encourage the amplification of normally quite small movements caused by breathing. The inquiry below is an example of how large movements in space can teach us about small movements within the body.

Inquiry: Begin by lying on your side in a position of relaxation with your knees bent. Give yourself a few moments to settle and to feel how your breath is moving within you. Imagine your body as one cell, alternately condensing and expanding, and follow the visualization by allowing your body to condense and expand, curling into a fetal position and then opening out. Because there is no right way to do this, just allow yourself to explore the many different ways that you can condense and expand, gradually letting the movements become larger and larger.

Feel free to change levels, to sit up, to stand, or even to move or dance around the room, all the time amplifying this ongoing movement of expanding and condensing. When you have reached the limits of that amplification, reverse direction, and over the course of many minutes let your movement become smaller and smaller until at last you find yourself in relative stillness.

As you lie quietly, can you feel the continuation of the expanding, condensing, resting rhythm with your body? Now begin your Yoga practice, working slowly so as not to leave your experience. Can you continue to allow the subtle movements of the breath to move you within your asana practice?

What is Good Breathing?

By now you may be asking, "What is the best way to breathe?" To this I can say that the best way to breathe is the way that supports the activity that you are doing. If you are presenting an important proposal to your boss, your breath will need to be quite different than if you are singing a lullaby to your child. Free and effective breathing does, however, have certain characteristics that we can all learn to recognize. Some of these are:

Oscillation

The whole body oscillates and moves slightly during free breathing. This movement does not occur as the result of suppressing movement somewhere else but arises effortlessly. The oscillation has a way of traveling sequentially through the body from the center to the periphery and back to the center.

Diaphragmatic

The breath arises predominantly through the action of the central diaphragm rather than through the action of the more exter-
Internal Origination

The breath arises from within rather than being pulled inside mechanically by using the outer muscles of the body. Instead of breathing we are breathed.

Multidirectional

The breath expands in all directions, radiating out just as a full-blown dandelion seed head radiates from its core.

Calm and Regular

The breath has a feeling of being and creating calm in the body and mind. Its rhythm is regular most of the time.

Two/Three/Pause Rhythm

During quiet respiration it is normal for your inhalation to be about two seconds and your exhalation to be about three seconds followed by a pause. More simply, you breathe out a little longer than you breathe in.

Flexible

Just as waves arise in endless variation in the sea, the breath arises with endless variation and adaptability. The breath changes as our thoughts, feelings, and movements change.

Effortless

The act of breathing is filled with a sense of ease and relaxation.

The Breathing Teacher/
The Breathing Student

Just as biofeedback researchers have discovered that emotional states are contagious, so are breathing patterns. We have all had the experience of talking with someone who rushes through their sentences in a state of hyperventilation only to find ourselves unwittingly starting to match that cadence. The most profound way that a teacher can teach about breathing is to be that process. And what does this mean? This means that the teacher can embody the following:

1. The Voiced Breath: When I speak, my voice is supported by my breathing. The surest sign of this is that there will be natural pauses in my speech rhythm to reflect the pauses in the breath cycle. Just as pauses in the breath rhythm give me moments to assimilate and rally energy for the next breath, silent pauses in instruction allow the student to test, explore, and uncover new information. The tone of the voice will be deeper, indicating a free movement of the diaphragm rather than the dry, squeaky pitch that is emitted when we are tightening the diaphragm and throat.

2. Breathing Touch: When I touch, my touching reflects the breathing process in my own body. For many years I could not understand why I seemed to be very good at helping students to learn how to breathe in the asanas through my touch. When the class would divide into partners, the students could rarely get the same results from the exchange.

What I discovered, and now help other teachers to recognize, is that when we lay our hands on someone, we need to be aware that an exchange of information is taking place between two resonant fields.

For instance, if I place my hands on someone's spine to help him or her become aware of respiration in the back of the body, my own hand, elbow, shoulder, and spine must be in a state of breathing oscillation. In particular, I need to allow breath movement in the part of my own body that I am touching in the student. Quite miraculously, without using any force, the student begins to understand what breathing is about through my own nervous system.

Therefore, no matter how explicit your instruction, no matter how "technically correct" your adjustment, if you are not breathing, this is the most salient information that the student will receive subliminally. You cannot, in essence, make someone breathe through force, but only through providing a situation in which breathing can happen. The situation is strongly affected by your own resonant field.

3. Language of Breathing: When I speak about breathing, I use language that invokes the kinesthetic, auditory, and visual experience of breathing. Teachers may find it helpful to look at their own predilections within their bodies. If you tend to focus primarily on your musculoskeletal system when you practice, it is likely that this is the system you will focus upon when teaching.

In turn, your language may reflect this musculoskeletal prejudice in the choice of words you use for instruction. Words such as floating, expansive, spacious, airy, light, buoyant, and shimmering create very different reactions than words such as push, pull, contract, rotate, drive, or cut. I am always particularly conscious of my use of language in the classroom, but I have also found that one of the best ways to find a "breathing language" is to work more subconsciously. As I feel my own breath when I am
teaching, I allow the language to arise out of my direct somatic experience.

4. Intention: When I work with others, my intention will create a magnetic force as it were, drawing both myself and the students in a particular direction. One could present the exact same postures in the exact same sequence, but with different intentions there would be entirely different results. Probably the most crucial intention to maintain when integrating breath work is that the person and their experience should always be more important than accomplishing a particular posture or pranayama technique.

Apart from the rare student who has a highly developed sense of self, it is all too easy for most students to subjugate a compassionate relationship with themselves in order to attain immediate results or quick progress. Or, as one student described to me after attending a particularly difficult class, “I had to leave my self in order to practice yoga that way.” When the teacher can hold a clear intention that the work is about finding one’s Self rather than finding perfect postures, this can help to bring the student back over and over again to the true purpose of the transformational practice we call Yoga.

Note

1. These ideas are paraphrased from the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. For more information, see her book Sensing, Feeling and Action, which is available from The School for Body-Mind Centering, 189 Pondview Drive, Amherst, MA 01002. Phone: 413-256-8615; fax: 413-256-8239.

The illustrations for this article are by Stephen Crowe and are reprinted with permission from The Breathing Book by Donna Farhi, copyright 1996 by Henry Holt & Co., Inc., New York, NY 10011.