

The Breath of Life

By: Max Strom

A few years before I began teaching, I was acquainted with a woman who had practiced Hatha yoga in various styles for over two decades. She had naturally limber joints and her body was unusually flexible and quite strong as well. She appeared to never break a sweat. She and I used to practice in some of the same classes together and although I was highly impressed with her external practice, I noticed that her disposition was a bit anxious and critical. This confused me. I didn't understand how someone with such an advanced asana practice could carry such nervous energy and negativity. Over time as I became more aware of the significance of breath during asana practice, I realized that during yoga, this woman's breathing was in fact inaudible. Upon closer observation, I realized her breathing was shallow and even tense and her ribcage barely moved. Then I comprehended why she never seemed to sweat: she was building no internal heat with ujjayi (yoga breathing). The picture became a little more clear.

Then one day, she confided that she had begun wearing a retainer to pull in her front teeth. I was surprised because she had what I thought were very nice teeth. Well, it turned out that when she practiced yoga, she would unconsciously press her tongue into her upper front teeth with such force, she had changed the angle of her bite, and she now needed a retainer to realign her teeth. This explained her condition to me. In her dutiful practice of strength, flexibility, and apparently will, she had unknowingly been cultivating internal tension. Her breath was shallow, preserving and "freeze-drying" this tension within. This is why she could practice daily and still be "a bit high strung," as she described herself.

My personal conclusion from this and other similar observations is a good asana practice produces better health, strength, and flexibility, i.e.: health and athletic benefits.

But asana practice combined with a devoted breathing practice, and vigilant attention gives us all these benefits as just the beginning.

Because what happens next is that the lungs open. The lungs, literally containers of both grief and inspiration, release old grief from the chest region - then the storm within the mind begins to recede, and the nervous system calms down.

Breath penetrates, breath invigorates, and breath heals. Conscious breathing is one of the most powerful transformational tools available to us. Many people are skeptical until they have experienced the power of their own breath. But once people have experienced the power of their own breath, they understand why it is called, Life Force.

The ancient yogis said the breath was our direct energetic connection to God. If this is so, then to focus on our breath with spiritual devotion, makes Hatha yoga a spiritual practice - because as we fill our body/mind with breath, we fill ourselves with the great spirit of the universe.

About Max Strom



Max Strom is known for inspiring and impacting the lives of his students, teaching with the aim of personal transformation and has become one of the most revered Teachers of yoga in the US. Former owner and director of Sacred Movement Yoga in Los Angeles, Max taught over 400 dedicated students a week. Many teachers have cited Max Strom as a most important influence in their teaching and yoga life. He now travels extensively teaching and lecturing on yoga and spirituality and trainings teachers. He is recognized by the Yoga Alliance at their Advanced Teacher Level (ERYT). You can see more of his work on his DVD, Max Strom Yoga – Strength, Grace, and Healing. www.maxstrom.com