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FEBRUARY 2007
CONNECTED THROUGH BREATH

A beginning yoga student walks up to the teacher after his first class, and says 'Yoga is hard. My body is so stiff and my thoughts are everywhere.' My class challenged my students, and I share one of my favorite stories: The yoga teacher smiles and says 'Don't worry, that will pass.' A few months later the same student comes up to the teacher and says: 'Yoga is so wonderful! My body feels so light, there are times I feel I could walk over water. My mind is so focused; there are moments I feel I am centered in heaven with the angels.' The yoga teacher smiles, and says 'Don't worry, that will pass.'

Kathy, one of my students, lies on her back in savasana [corpse pose], having moved into a centered peace—a physical release and surrender—due in part to the yoga class and in part to the calm setting of her retreat, which is away from the clatter of her everyday existence.

"You made me see my father," she says with a smile as her eyes sparkle like the early evening stars.

"I did?" I ask as I walk over to her and return her smile.

"In your story about the student," she continues while looking me straight in the eyes, "when you said he feels like he is among the angels, I could see my father." Kathy's eyes begin to well up. "I'm sorry," she confesses. "I can't stop crying."

As tears moisten her cheeks, her face smiles and her voice softens. She stands with her shoulders relaxed, spine straight, and neck visible and true.

As Kathy engages her body and emotions, she is surprised at how selfless she actually feels. Talking about her father while taking full, calming breaths offers her the ability to relax as she takes in everything she feels.

"He passed away last year, and I came here this week to connect—not to move on, but to move with," she explains. "Seeing him today—and I have seen him in other ways throughout this past year—I know he is with me, and that story made me feel the energy of his love. I know he loved me in spite of any problems. I feel it now. Thank you so much. Thank you."

Chances are you have had a moment of such connection. It could have been in your yoga class, when your child was born, when you accomplished something that you worked really hard at, or when you fell in love. Often in this connection, we feel a sense of identity dissolution as we surrender to the moment, open up to love, and realize the divine. This connection draws us into partnership, parenthood, and the ability to share love with the world.

The art of yoga reveals this connection through its teaching on breath. At first, breath connects the actions of the mind with the interactions of the body, and from there, we can relax into this very moment quicker and easier. When we find ourselves grounded in the present, a transforming gift is presented. We unravel all our potential.

When centered on the breath, you can face habitual thought patterns, be inspired to new views of reality, and change behavior patterns. You can learn to extend the capacity of your breath, such as resting under water for long periods of time; however, these feats are difficult to accomplish. If your body does not receive a fresh supply of oxygen in as little as five minutes, you will die. While breath is more vital than food or water, we spend very little time reflecting on, or practicing to know our breath.

Yoga philosophy describes three states of knowledge: waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. Each of these states has a corresponding physical attribute through which we come to understand the world around us. The first state, waking, has the physical body as its corresponding attribute. In the second state, dreaming, the corresponding attribute is the subtle body, where thoughts, emotions, desire, and other internal imagery (such as day dreams, visions, etc.) are experienced and manifested. The third state, deep sleep, is referred to as the causal body and is where you experience your true self, beyond mind and body, beyond name and address. This state, which can occur during meditation, ecstatic dance, or spontaneously, is also referred to as 'enlightenment' or 'samadhi.'

You can practice for the rest of your life and never achieve this so-called 'samadhi.' You can achieve this recognition (as others have) in a few hours' time. Yoga, on the other hand, is when we recognize all three states with each passing moment and engage in the drama around us.

Yoga philosophy cares little about the accomplishments we can enact with our bodies, the achievements we can

master with our minds. And yet we have a body, and through this body we can experience so much. We have a mind, which can discover even the smallest of atoms. What we choose to focus on, we achieve. Yet Yoga chooses to guide us past the temporary existence of our body/mind, while we discover our full capacities. Your breath is the quickest compass to this recognition. Whether you choose to win a race, or write a novel, connecting with the breath prepares the body and centers the mind. While you continue in your activities, your breath reflects the connection around you.

There are times when you walk into your house after a stressful, busy day, your thoughts are engaged in the day's events, and your physical body is tired and tense. As you settle in for the evening, the energy in your house only accentuates the tension you feel, and your partner or kids easily anger you.

Yet no matter how arduous your day has been, you can be aware of your breath and walk into your house centered. You are already breathing, and so when you are conscious of breath—by inhaling and exhaling deep into your belly—your gross body softens and your subtle body centers in the now. The day's events and other thoughts can still remain, yet you will stay grounded through your breathing, which occurs in the moment. From such a center, you will respond to the energy in your house in a completely different way. Your centeredness of mind and body, the gross and the subtle, will center your home.

This diaphragmatic breathing is the natural pattern of our breath. Yet as you grow older, you get caught up in your anxieties (for example, what you need from others, what others think of your behavior, where you want to go in the future, what has happened in the past, are you successful, or are you loved enough). Your breath becomes constricted and short, and these gross body changes are magnified by subtle body fears.

It is your life. In this body, with this mind, you only have one life to live. Your life passes by—breath by breath, moment by moment. By inhaling and exhaling, you hold both the life and the death of your mind and your body, opening as the infinite spirit that lives all. Can you live your life fully, recognizing the causal, yet with each breath, offering everything you can through your gross and subtle, as if it were your last breath? Will you experience life in its fullness, or will you prefer to dull your senses by watching TV, drinking beer, sleeping hurriedly, rising to work, and then repeating the cycle the next day? Follow your breath, and it will guide you to happiness. Follow your thoughts, and you will stay in the cycle.

Step out of the circle of fear, and pay attention to your breath. Let it spiral down into your belly as you inhale. Let it rise back as you exhale. Continue your activities breathing this way. There is a different quality in the way you sit, stand or walk, a more focused view, perspective or idea. For 15 minutes a day, breathe full and deep, and note in a journal your gross physical changes, your subtle emotions or thoughts, and any experiences you may have had in recognizing the causal, the expression of non-separation around you.

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Gabriel has been practicing and teaching yoga for the past 13 years. Gabriel's broad practice, includes studying with Sri Pattabhi Jois, Tim Miller, among others. His recently published book 'breath: the yogic prime' expresses his insights from his teachers and practice. For more written work or free online classes visit www.gabrielazoulay.com