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A Breath of Life

The room is hot and humid. It is filled with dim, golden candlelight and the heavy smell of incense, each contributing to the warmth between the pale-yellow walls. The space is packed: with three rows of people, each contained to their own mat, moving in unison through a series of postures. As the practice flows, condensation beads on the window panes, mimicking the sweat that drips from each and every body in the room. An instructor stands at the front, her petite, sculpted frame moving throughout the rows on bare feet, calling out poses and dictating the cycles of breath.

“IN-hale,” the instructor says. Her booming voice rings throughout the small space as each group member lifts their chest to the ceiling in upward-facing-dog. The room takes a cohesive breath in. The hum is audible over the chiming music.

“And, EX-hale” she says, again with power, as the class pushes back to downward-facing dog. Collectively, the participants move their breath from the depths of their lungs and into the room, leaving their bodies open and cavernous. The cycle of postures repeats.

A while later, after the class has finished their practice, the instructor guides them into their final posture: *shavasana*, or corpse pose. With the group lying on their backs, relishing in the infernal heat produced by their bodies, the instructor walks to the left side of the room to turn off the stereo. When she returns, she wears a sweat-soaked towel around her neck and carries a small book in her hand. The room has fallen silent. The instructor casts her gaze on her students, taking note of the energy that has been expended in their ninety minutes together. She opens the book.

“Observing breath is a tool to cultivate self-awareness.” She says, her voice softer now. “With every mood and emotion your breathing has a different rhythm. When you are angry, or frustrated, watch your breath; you will notice that it has a certain quality. When you feel fear, watch how your breath responds. Whether you feel love, sadness, happiness, or are totally at peace...clue into your breath and see how it feels, and sounds.

“These are the words of Baron Baptiste.” She says. “I ask you to heed his advice and take a moment, to observe your breath. Follow its rhythm and its tempo. See what you find.”

I am lying on my back in the second row, eyes closed, with one hand over my stomach and the other atop my chest. Beneath my hands, I can feel the rise and fall of my body. I can feel my shaky inhales and exhales. I try to listen to what this breath is telling me, but I cannot find its message. It seems fragmented, uncertain...lost.

“Baptiste tells us that *breathing* is how the body and the mind get aligned in the experience of being whole and complete.” She says. “Our breath, it is the sole agent that connects our bodies, our minds, even our spirits! So, as you leave today’s practice and go about the rest of your day, ask yourself: Do you feel aligned in your body, mind, and spirit? And if the answer is no, I encourage you to start with your *breath*.”

I feel as though she is speaking directly to me.

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How to Treat Your Anxiety:

1. Take drugs
2. ~~Exercise~~
3. Get a dog

4. ~~Do drugs~~
5. Meditate
6. ~~Spend lots of money on a therapist~~
7. **Take a yoga class**
8. ~~Eat a balanced diet~~
9. Stop drinking coffee
10. Don't worry so much

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The biology of breath exists in the movement of air through the lungs in a series of inhales and exhales. It is the act of bringing air into the body, and then pushing it back out. The rhythm of breath then translates to the beating of the heart. An inhalation stimulates the heart, making it beat a bit faster. The exhalation that follows is the counter: it tells the heart to slow down. When we have greater inhales than exhales, we quicken the pace of the heart, triggering a response from the sympathetic nervous system and releasing adrenaline into the body. This sets off a stress reaction in the brain, resulting in a state of panic. Anxiety often produces a similar response.

But longer, slower exhalations, again, have the opposite effect. They slow the rhythm of the heart and activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which sends signals of safety to the brain and the body. Longer exhales also reduce adrenaline production. What's funny is that slow, steady breath has a way of tricking the psyche. The lungs and heart can feed back to the brain and essentially convince the body that things are calm and peaceful. This can be done even when the sympathetic nervous system has been triggered. With nothing more than the slow, elongation of inhales and exhales, the body's response to stress can be halted.

The Baptiste yoga practice has capitalized on this effect.

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"In Baptiste yoga, we have a special way of breathing." A different instructor says, as he too moves his way through the rows of people. "The air should enter and exit through the nose, and it should be pushed out from the back of the throat, making an ocean sound. As you breathe your way through your practice like this, you send signals to your brain that you are calm and safe."

"We call this the *ujjayi* breath." He says. "In Sanskrit, *ujjayi* means victory. In today's practice, let us be victorious in weaving the breath force through the tapestry of our vinyasa. Let it make you strong and powerful. Let it guide you through today's challenges: on and off the mat"

I move through posture after posture lead by my own *ujjayi* breathing. I begin to feel strong. The breath is cleansing, bringing me force and energy. I let it carry my body through the practice, unveiling an odd sense of empowerment. Somehow, it makes me feel like a warrior.

At the end of the class, I lie on my back and allow the rhythms of my heart to wash over me. I do feel calm; I even feel safe. Again, I place one hand on my belly and another on my chest and try to notice my breathing once more. It feels different, more connected to my body. It feels like something that belongs to me.

If only that feeling had some permanence.

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Find your breath. I say the words to myself that night. Just breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In-

In-

In-

Thoughts run free. Meanwhile, I'm imprisoned. I push the air through my nose and mouth. It moves quickly, violently. My throat sings. Lungs burning, they're catching fire; the walls are collapsing. The pain is static. I count to ten. Nothing happens. I bring my hands to my temples and squeeze my eyes shut. I count to ten again.

Find your breath. Find your breath. I'm whispering now. Just breathe.

Breathe,

Breathe,

Breathe.

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Experts say that learning to use abdominal breathing as first aid for anxiety and panic sensations is invaluable. Since the natural reaction to stress and anxiety is shallow breathing, the brain interprets the pending trigger as a signal of danger. This amplifies the physiological reaction, activating a fight-or-flight response. Therefore, to quiet these physiological sensations, it is imperative to employ deep, abdominal breathing exercises as a means of on-the-spot treatment.

Mindfulness studies also conclude that attention to the breath functions not only as a means of self-soothing, but also as a method of distraction. When focus is shifted from the source of stress or panic to the act of taking deep, intentional breaths, patients are more likely to find relief from their anxiety. From this philosophy, it is believed that one can literally change their mind and mood through a steady focus on the breath. Yoga practitioners often describe this effect as the correlation between breath and the absence of thoughts. In fact, many yogis believe that the secret of life can be found in the space between exhalation and inhalation.

"*Pranayama*," says the petite instructor in her powerful voice. "is the practice of putting your attention on the breath and intentionally being at play with it."

I'm holding a steady gaze in Warrior II, simultaneously blinking sweat from my eyes and taking notice of the instructor's words.

"*Prana* meaning vital energy found in breath, and *yama* meaning infinite expansion. The phrase quite literally means infinite expansion through the breath." She says. "By training yourself to keep your attention on your breath, you bring a meditative power to the pose and integrate the body, mind and being. This process is where meditation and physical movement intermingle, meeting up in real time through your poses."

In the psychology community, it is understood that mindful breathing invokes a nearly instantaneous effect on anxiety. This physiological strategy is also believed to be a universal treatment for anxiety relief making it a commonly prescribed and, supposedly, a highly successful method of self-help. However, the oversimplification of such a task by some healthcare professionals can often yield resistance from patients.

Imagine suffering from a chronic mental illness and being told by someone in a white coat that the key to a holistic recovery is to *breathe slower*. Does that not feel patronizing? I mean, is there no other cure? Maybe something that feels a bit more, I don't know, substantial?

"No, no. I'm not talking about medication." I say in a sterile office. "I've already told you that I don't think I'm ready to go on the medication."

I just wish there was something more I could be doing besides *breathing*.
(interjection from my physician: *Well, you could try implementing a regular exercise routine.*)

One,
Two,
Three,
Four.

I count the seconds of an inhale, keeping time with a GIF from Tumblr. The geometric pattern rises and collapses with what's supposed to be slow, well-time breaths.

Four,
Three,
Two,
One.

I count the seconds of an exhale. The knot in my stomach loosens, slightly. I start again.

One,
Two...

The air catches and my stomach clenches painfully. I take two sharp inhales, with virtually no exhalation. My insides are tightening. Hands come up to meet my eyes as I bury my fists in the sockets. Frustration mingles with exhaustion. Fear swallows both of them whole.

I force myself to exhale from the back of my throat. I do it again, emptying my lungs. Again, this time from my belly. I reach down to the floor to retrieve my phone. The GIF starts again. So do I.

One,
Two,
Three,
Four.

...

I hold myself in downward-facing-dog, again in the warm room with soft, golden light and pale-yellow walls. Today it smells of lavender and sweat. I press my hands into my mat and lift my hips with the strength of my shoulders, greeting a light strain in my hamstrings. The petite instructor stands at the front of the room. Today she does not choose to read from a book.

“Our yoga practice has the ability to bring us to a state of harmony. What we practice here can make us fully present in our beings, it can turn us into the brightest manifestations of ourselves. But how? How can yoga do something so *extraordinary*?” she asks, pausing. “The answer...is something you will have to seek out for yourself using your own mind-body connection.” The instructor’s answer is met with light laughter from the group. They had been tricked into thinking she was going reveal all her yogi secrets to them. The instructor smiles, knowingly.

“Yes, yes a bit of a tease huh? To help you out I will end with this clue: Life is absolutely dependent upon the act of breathing. She says, her voice lighter than ever. “To breathe is to live, and without breath there is no life. And that is a truth that stretches far beyond what we do here on our mats.”

I’m now lying on my back at the end of my practice. With one hand over my belly and the other atop my chest I feel my body rise and fall with steady, intentional breaths. While I’m breathing, I think about all of the things I’ve tried in hopes of fixing myself. I think about awkward conversations in stuffy therapist’s offices and herbal tinctures and plant-based diets. I

think about meditation apps and melatonin to put me to sleep on nights that my eyes won't close. Dozens of self-help books, a good support system, and long hikes to clear my head that have all lead seemingly nowhere. I think about how this mantra of breath is both shamefully simple and endlessly challenging. And I think about how maybe yoga isn't what's going to heal me.

But I guess at the end of the day, it's worth a shot.

** Credit to Baron Baptiste, well-renowned and highly respected practitioner in the yoga community and his book Perfectly Imperfect: The Art and Soul of Yoga Practice, as well as Yogi Ramacharaka and his book Science of Breath; both of which informed the dialogue/philosophy of the yoga instructors in this essay.*