As most yogis know either intellectually or through direct experience, breath is a most nuanced and dimensional reflection of our mind. Our breath can be an intimate guide to our psyches, and observing its movements and patterns is a revealing and direct path to understanding our most subtle behaviour and disposition. Whether we watch our breath or manipulate it can mean the difference between insights or cover up - and only by practising both can we surely know for ourselves.
Control and Manipulate vs. Letting Go and Observing

There are many reasons to utilise breath techniques when practising asana – it deepens a shallow breath, calms the nervous system and mind, and may keep an otherwise wandering mind in check and in the body. But just like the Buddhist parable of a man who constructs a raft to cross over a river and then continues to carry the raft overhead on dry land, it’s as important to be able to utilise a technique as much as it is to be able to let it go.

Easier said than done. Once we are comfortable utilising a technique it becomes a friend, a dear companion on our path towards being more peaceful, calm, steadier, kinder. A technique trains the mind to stay on something, such as in meditation, watching the natural rhythm of breath to train or tame the wandering mind. So asking this familiar friend not to accompany us can be quite difficult as it becomes a habit, skilful, but a habit none the less, and letting it go can be wrought with emotions of all kinds. A crutch is a crutch and attachment is attachment, and anything that becomes unconsciously habitual is not liberating. It can act as a shield to seeing what is naturally, as it is – without any kind of manipulation or conscious control. We can’t see things, as they are if we are constantly fiddling, manipulating, fixing or changing them. As we practise to become more and more free of unconscious patterns, it’s an important step in maturing spiritually to examine how we practise, and why. For any technique can keep us contentedly on the surface by enabling us to steer the ship of the mind, rather than observing it’s path when let loose in the uncharted waters of the unconscious.

Standing at attention

I remember being under the kind attention of a much older woman yogini, who asked to see how I stood so that she could assess my alignment. I stood in front of her as I would stand in the front of my mat – in Tadasana, spreading my toes, activating my legs, stacking my spine, etc. She looked me up and down, and then asked me to stand naturally. “I am standing naturally!” I said. “No”, she said, “stand like you do normally.” I resisted – it took so much effort to let go that I realised just how much I held on. I held on to how I thought I should be standing, and under that surface, how I thought I should be. Not only were my muscles rarely at ease, it turned out that my heart wasn’t either. I had unconsciously created this habit of ‘holding’ my self emotionally, which affected my physical and energetic body. I had become so accustomed to this that it became normal. My normal was nothing like a natural state of being at ease.
No Interference

It can radically change a yoga asana practice to be a passive observer of your breath, rather than in any kind of control. Notice for instance, where your breath goes when you are experiencing an uncomfortable stretch somewhere in a pose. If you have a tight hamstring, this can be obvious – usually unless we are trained to be aware of this reaction, breath will move as far away from a place of discomfort as possible. If the hamstring is tight, breath might be high up in the chest. Genetically, we are inclined to quickly remove ourselves from danger, and this is a very skilful habit to have. But, as in many types of patterned behaviour that has become unconscious and unquestioned, this reaction has become too easily triggered and most of the time, to no real benefit. The surge and urge to run from anything dangerous or uncomfortable has become a habit of fleeing anything even remotely unpleasant. Our minds are so habitually prone to check out, find a distraction, find something anything to take away the pain or discomfort without a second thought that we've taken the initially life prolonging habit a bit too far, overstressing our system and depleting our life force.

In the body then, there can be vast areas that we no longer inhabit because of an injury (discomfort), a trauma (discomfort) or tightness (discomfort) we don’t even recognise that there are parts of our body that have become off limits energetically, mentally and physically. These places are avoided by breath and mind, and subsequently, when practising a posture we will explore breath in certain areas and avoid others, and as breath and mind riding together we have the opportunity to recognise the areas of the body we aren’t consciously connected to.

Meditation in Motion

By allowing the breath to be as it is while practising postures, we move into meditation in motion territory. We can begin with the intention to simply observe the breath, wherever it goes, and however it displays itself. What transforms the intention into a fruitful practice is the actual attention that we pay while practising, or while doing anything at all. Mindfulness is the moment-to-moment noticing of what is going on as it is occurring. Mindfulness of the body can begin with just noticing breath as it is, wherever it goes and how it responds to each posture or shape that our body is in- seated, standing, walking and lying down.
Working with What We See

By noticing breath when it becomes tight, or noticing that the rhythm of breath has changed we are offered a window of time to make a thoughtful choice about how we respond or react to what it is that we are feeling or thinking. To be this aware and sensitive, it’s helpful to practise postures that you are very familiar with, not challenged by physically. The emphasis is on what the breath and its partner the mind do according to what the body is feeling. How does the breath reflect thoughts and emotions? Insights will arise as you begin patiently observing. Are there areas of the body where deeply unconscious emotions are stashed away? You can only know by kind exploration – traversing the inner landscape can be done step by step with awareness of the breath, where the breath goes easily, consciousness is there, where the breath won’t flow, are areas of unconsciousness. The good news is that our entire body can become conscious, and our mind, heart and body can communicate exquisitely, we only have to begin to bring them together.

Direct Experience Exercise

Practise 3 different postures that you like and are relatively easy for you. Hold each pose for 5 – 10 breaths. While in each posture pay close attention to your breath – where it was full and easy, where it wasn’t. After each posture, reflect and note, before moving on to the next pose. Eventually, you may notice a pattern.

Once you’ve noticed where you don’t breathe so easily, practise poses that open that area of your body, and gently and kindly begin breathing into those areas. Take your time and treat yourself as you would your best friend. If anything emotionally uncomfortable comes up, talk to someone you trust, or seek professional advice. The tissues of the body hold thoughts and emotions, and we all need support from time to time.

Ultimately, your willingness to see things in your body and mind as they are without adornment, manipulating or fiddling will gently usher you towards options of taking better care of yourself by knowing yourself in an intimate and direct way. Many skills and insights to working with what you see are available through insight, or with the help of a skilful teacher. In being more attuned to our silent, inner - most reflection of breath, we become more awake, available and present for our short and very precious lives.

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