

Thoughts on Presenting Breath in a Yoga Class

There are a couple of ways that might be helpful in presenting the breath. First, you might just want to invite your client to notice that they are breathing and explain that this process is always going on, we are just bringing a little more attention to it. Then you might invite your client to notice some of the physical qualities of the breath - they might feel the nose or the tip of the nose if they are breathing through the nose. They might notice a gentle rise and fall around the chest and shoulders. They may feel some activity around the lower ribs. Or finally, some muscular energy in the belly. This is an invitation to notice some of the physicality of breath.

Another approach is to explain that the body is built to breath through the nose. That's why we have nose hair, to filter the air! also, nasal breathing tends to be more diaphragmatic. The diaphragm is the muscle most responsible for breathing (about 75% of the process) and basically runs along the lower ribs from the bottom of the Sternum all the way to the sacrum below the lower back. If you like you can put the right hand just below the navel on the lower belly and the left hand over the heart, just below the collarbones. This is a nice gesture but also one can use the hands as a guide to help with beathing. At first the practice might be to get a little bit of movement around the lower hand, the belly hand, as we breathe. Belly breathing is more diaphragmatic. You can explain that when we breath into the chest and throat only we are engaging the system of fight or flight - we are actually telling the organism that something is wrong and that we need to get out. Chest muscles are secondary muscles for breathing and are only meant to be primary in situations of danger when we need alot of oxygen fast in order to move to save ourselves. When we breath primarily into the chest we are taxing the nervous system. In contrast, when we breath more diaphragmatically, we are soothing the nervous system. The message is that everything is ok and that we can relax a bit. While these are anatomical realities they are not necessarily experiential realities for the trauma survivor. It may actually feel safer to tax the nervous system and breath into the chest than to deal with all it entails to breath into the belly and toward the pelvis – to begin to feel this part of the body especially for survivors of sexual abuse. Still, it may be very helpful to start this practice of breathing mindfully with this kind of knowledge because the deeper, diaphragmatic breathing can become a great resource in life rather than just a process that we have to go through in order to sustain our existence. With this type of breathing practice, although it may take quite some time to get comfortable with it,

it is possible to experience breathing as a way of actively celebrating life rather than just something we do passively in order simply to survive.