

## Yoga for Cancer - Part 2

### Postures, Breathing and Meditation

'No man is an island'. Everything we do affects our neighbour. If a person with cancer can feel welcome in any suitable yoga class and the effects of practice are felt as the soothing balm of belonging and sameness, we generate a great current of positive intention to heal and reunite with the meaning of life.

The angles applied in practice incorporate use of body, breath, heart and mind. It is the integrated awareness of each of these facets and their subsequent fusion that leads to one receiving the nectar of yoga - the spiritual elixir of knowing that all is as it is meant to be. The Great Perfection reveals itself if only we can acknowledge there is more to life than meets the conditioned mind.

The use of asanas (stances and seats) helps the cancer practitioner move in to the body, feel, objectify and accept what goes on beneath the surface layers of being. Some may have to accept they 'cannot welcome or embrace their situation', while others are more able to embody their cancer. Either way yoga teaches us to work with our difficulty, as a part of the same reality through which the torso, arms and legs function, move and lock. Cancer is not separate from life. It is within it and exists as the result of misinformed cellular regeneration. Yoga postures provide the opportunity to see beyond duality. A student may be standing in tree pose, knowing their body is under attack, yet through the natural process of withdrawal from the unreal, (which occurs in all good practice), that which is true or lasting reveals itself. The yogin/i sees the body, in tree pose, the surroundings, other students and the knowing that cancer dwells within. They can see all of this and notice, if they are prepared to move beyond previously known circumstance (conditioning), that they are 'not this'. They are not the tree, not the body, not the cancer, nor the mind. They are its intelligence, known as the Seer, which informs them all. It only takes one flash of this knowing for the student to reconcile their attention with that which gives life, sustains it and removes it when our time is up. By remaining open to this experience, the focus pours inwards towards the infinite. This may not be easy for a hard wired mind and so an open heart always teaches it how to catch up.

Yogic Breathing is a term for any method of breath awareness leading to and culminating in freedom. There are many 'breathing techniques' which boil down to three stages: breathing out, breathing in and pausing. As with the asanas, breath practice is the opportunity to magnify that which already exists within. It simultaneously reveals that everything on the 'outside' exists coherently; it is not separate. The use of breath places the yogin/i both subjectively and objectively, in the same manner that quantum physics declares a photon or light particle can be in two places at once. Sometimes we feel like we are the breather and at others 'being breathed'.

The breath cannot be forced without sustaining injury. Thus life, which is breath, teaches surrender. It teaches you to let go, while demonstrating spaces in which we have freewill to act, according to our nature.

Breathing is the balance of doing and not doing; inhaling, exhaling and the space between them. This is much like the twilight, where although the light is difficult, the obscure perspective enlightens. The role the breath plays in helping us connect to our deepest self is irreplaceable. It is the thread which reminds us there is something beneath, more subtle and absolutely worth waiting for.

A practitioner with cancer may be limited physically, so this is where understanding and integrating correct breathing is a boon. The breath gives life to asana, concentration and the superior mental faculties that arise during moments of utter stillness or absorption. The postures one practices varies from person to person and which kind and stage of cancer they experience. My sentiment is as Carlos Castaneda put it, "The world is a feeling". We know if we need to do a tree or triangle. We feel it in our bones, so that even if dialogue passes through our mind, laboured thinking isn't necessary.

For the student with cancer, energy can run very low and the mind may become depressed. Breathing practices, like keeping joyful company, help to lift the spirit. As well as intense lethargy, the use of use of strong medicines can cause overstimulation and tax the body with very toxic cancer drugs. In such cases breathing can be applied to help increase the oxygen circulation and uptake, flushing out some of these chemicals in the process. A positive side effect is the improved sense of 'being' and often a rekindling of purpose.

The third aspect of practice is meditation, which may come in many forms. Combining asanas with breathing, the mind is directed to a place of singularity. All merges into one awareness. One may choose to meditate first or exclusively, or just practice asanas or breath work. However, what usually occurs is the understanding of their interplay and how this synergy leads to a more relaxing and fruitful experience. Having relaxed and opened the breath and body, the mind is calmer and ready to slow down. There is no hard and fast rule. Allow experience to guide which proportions of practice are relevant to you. Some form of meditation is really important to one's health and spiritual welfare. Whether it be sitting still or practicing tai chi in class or the park, it is so beneficial to empty the mind of its repetitious concern for the mundane in order to experience 'being' in that mundane, rather than thinking about the 'what ifs and should be's'. This provides perspective of what is really important and thus saves tremendous energy. A shortlist arises in the mind of maybe two or three tasks, the most important of which will be dealt with first. Focusing on one thing at a time, with a concentrated yet relaxed mind, the awareness arises - everything we do can be a chore, or an opportunity for growth. Positive offering matures into devotion.

To sum up try the following -

**Exercise 1** - Sit or stand comfortably. Exhale through your mouth 'haaaaaaaaaaaaaa', pause and inhale through your nose and down in to the pit of your belly. Practice for five minutes and review how you feel.

**Exercise 2** - Close your mouth and repeat the first exercise.

**Exercise 3** - Repeat exercise 2 and lengthen the exhale.

**Exercise 4** - Alternate Nostril Breathing. Cover right nostril, then exhale and inhale through left. Switch to the other side. Repeat the cycle five minutes.

**Exercise 5** - Practice any of: tree, triangle, revolving triangle and warrior poses. Cat, dog, seated forward bends, bridge, plough, supine twists. If any of these prove too challenging or you have pain, focus on the most relaxing, like seated forward bends and supine twists.

**Exercise 6** - Lie Down and relax. Feel the weight of your body and observe your breath for five or ten minutes. Allow the mind to come and go as it pleases.

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