

A Workshop with Sandra Sabatini

by Elizabeth Irvine

I was late for the Friday evening session of the workshop, my train was cancelled and another one delayed. I was feeling frustrated, I tried to keep it in perspective, 'I'll get there when I get there', no good in worrying. I finally arrive fifteen minutes late. I try to slip into class without making too much noise, but the unzipping of my yoga bag sounds like a jackhammer in the complete silence and attention that the room holds.

I immediately 'fell in love' with her voice. She is Italian and her calming, nurturing, motherly Italian accent seemed to cradle me into an instant cocoon of tranquility.

We began in a very simple lying pose, spending quite a lot of time 'letting go' of the stress and tension that the week's hectic pace had placed on our bodies. It felt like we were being given the opportunity to rest, a really deep rest, a kind of attention that we don't usually think about. Giving undivided attention to the breath, it allowed the gravity to pull the body so effortlessly into the ground, and as if spontaneously my body felt so light and free. It all seems so simple as I am writing this idea, but it took an enormous amount of focused attention to experience the 'letting go'.

Sandra explained to us how wonderful yawning is for the body. She said, "Yawning is the body's most natural way of letting go, it can open a thousand doors".

We should allow ourselves the luxury of a loud, huge, Italian yawn whenever possible. As we finished the evening session Sandra had us lying on our back and asked us to place our legs in a lotus position, she asked, "are we still holding on to the day's stress or are we allowing our bodies to do what it instinctively knows?"

The next full day session was focused again on the breath, which is the title of Sandra's new book, *Breath the essence of yoga, a guide to inner stillness*.

Her title completely reflects what her message is all about. She told us a story about how the birth of her children gave her the 'chance in life', to discover the unknown intelligence of the body. To be alert but uninvolved, so that the natural wisdom of the body can come into play. This 'opportunity' she was given led her to the methodology she practices today.

Teaching us about breathing, Sandra said the most important thing is to begin by listening to our own breath. That means to become aware of our breath and find the inner stillness. To look and listen to our own natural rhythm. She said before we can move into classical breathing techniques we need to breathe out (with the help of

gravity) all the tension and stress that our bodies hold. She emphasized it is something that takes time and perseverance, but is essential to discover this before launching in to classical breathing.

The core of what we worked on throughout the weekend focused on four classical breathing methods. I chose my two favorites to share with you.

Kapalabhati 'that which brings lightness to the skull'. The technique is to inhale and then release the air through the nostrils in rapid bursts, at the same time we placed our hand in the area above our pubic bone to feel the pulsation it made. After a round of five short outbreaths, inhale and exhale normally, and begin another round. It is a powerful breathing technique and five minutes of this type of breathing seemed longer than it was.

Sandra said if ever we were in doubt as to which breathing technique to do, start with kapalabhati, "it is like a great chimney sweep clearing out the cobwebs, mechanical, rhythmic, it shakes us with quick, short motions taking away uncertainty and doubt. It is automatic and efficient and it works for everyone."

Bhramari pranayama or mumbling breath translates to 'big black bee'.

While sitting we spent nearly an hour practicing 'mumbling breath'. Inhale through the nostrils and then exhale through almost closed lips making a buzzing, mumbling sound like a bumblebee. In the beginning Sandra asked us to touch our lips with a finger to feel the vibration, and allow the sound to vibrate down our spines cleansing them. Sandra said, "This mumbling exhalation is cleaning the inside of the body with vibrations! It's not doing but deep listening, letting it happen, a thorough respect."

Always after any of our breathing exercises we spent a few minutes of simple breathing.

Personally, mumbling breath is my favorite breathing exercise; it seems to be the exercise I choose most frequently in my practice. I find it extremely comforting and nurturing, it's like my breath is a warm blanket of security that consoles me.

The idea of what Sandra is conveying appears to be something so simple and natural (which of course it is), but to actually 'tap' into it, takes an enormous amount of focused concentration on the breath.

Sandra tells us in her book, "move inside-gather all the senses that are usually extended towards the outer world and turn them within.

It is intelligence moving inwards; during the day you use intelligence to catch words, to catch messages, to listen, to filter emotions. You don't need to do that now, use that

intelligence, that capacity to listen to what is taking place inside. The inner eyes are looking at what takes place inside, the inner ears are listening to the breath."

The 'magic' of what happens when we can allow our minds to remain focused on the simple beauty of the breath is incredible. Personally, I feel it is like being told a really good secret, something that I had always known, but didn't remember or know how to use, like having a built in defense mechanism in my body that was just lying dormant.

In yoga we try to unite our mind, body and spirit. In allowing our mind to be open to the 'listening' of our inner breath we 'tap' into something that has always been there, but now rediscovered. By utilizing this discovery we can give ourselves a special gift that lives inside of us. I feel like this knowing is only the tip of the iceberg, that there is this incredible opportunity to explore, and it is infinite.

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