

Subtle Teaching Points: Different ways to more fully engage with our asana practice

Through subtle teaching points we can more completely engage with our asana practice so we are no longer moving mechanically from pose to pose but rather engaging ourselves at a much deeper level. In this way yoga asana becomes a much more powerful transformative tool.

Each of the following examples show ways we can:

- **harness the mind**
- **focus internally upon direct experience**
- **increase inner sensitivity**
- **introduce accompanying yogic theory & philosophy**

1. Synchronize breath and movement

The breath is an excellent focus for the mind. During our asana practice we can simply synchronize breath and movement. This can be used when practicing a single asana and is particularly useful when working with movements flowing from one to another. As we tune into the breath using ujjayi breathing it is also helpful as it allows us to gradually lengthen the breath and the gentle sound of ujjayi breathing is very relaxing and can increase our ability to concentrate, opening the doors to meditation. (e.g. The breath and the mind are linked together like two wings of a bird)

2. Move and open on the exhalation or practicing a different variation of a familiar pose

Very often we open the body on the inhalation and close the body on the exhalation so to focus the mind, especially when performing simple familiar movements, try breathing in the opposite manner; for instance exhaling up into Bhujanghasana (Cobra). Working in this way will create a different experience of each movement and concentrate the mind. (e.g. we will be forced to move out of habitual patterns e.g. our samskaras). This can also take the form of a slight variation to a familiar pose.

3. Focus on the natural pause in the breath

We can place our attention on the natural pause in the breath. Here we breathe easily and steadily noticing the natural pause occurring. At the point of pausing we can experience stillness and quietness inside. The breath should never be strained with the pause naturally occurring. Slow deep ujjayi breathing is a good breath to use. (e.g. Experiencing presence beyond thought, beingness; slowing down our mind/body for renewed balance)

4. Connect with a whole body feeling

If we can initially create an awareness of the whole body and maintain this feeling then the mind will inevitably quiet. We will also feel a closer link with the body as it moves generating a more intimate relaxed direct experience. (e.g. Drop out of the head and become embodied for relaxation in life)

5. Focus upon the breath creating sensations within the body

Inevitably the body is moved however subtly by the act of breathing, Initially we can link into this feeling by practicing basic breathing techniques such as the complete yogic breath. During the asana

practice we can place our focus upon these subtle movements and see if our breath can gradually draw us more deeply into our experience of each pose. (e.g. Be present from moment to moment noticing what is occurring in your direct experience)

6. Focus upon the breath leading the body

Here we can practice asana with the focus upon allowing the breath to move us, taking our time to allow the breath to lead us into and out of our asana. This will often mean that our asana practice slows down and becomes much more meditative, it also means that we will be practicing according to our own personal rhythm. (e.g. Listen inwardly; self-referencing)

7. Radiating the life force

As you move through your asana practice every time you inhale imagine the inhalation is drawing energy into the whole body, prana or the life force encompassing the whole body. Every time you exhale imagine the exhalation is drawing prana to the very core of your being. (Yoga is concerned with increasing prana within)

8. Feel along the lines of energy within the body

Every pose has its particular lines of effort and we can take time exploring these as we stay in each pose. By making small adjustments our inner experience of the pose will have altered. This is an excellent focus for the mind as we progress in our asana practice. (e.g. Yoga asana helps us to release tension, attune and align our body so prana flows more freely)

9. Using mantra

Mantra is a traditional way of purposefully harnessing the mind. We can use simple mantras whilst working through an asana practice to fully engage the mind. English words could be used such as 'receiving and releasing' on the inhalation and exhalation respectively or we can use Sanskrit mantra. A good Sanskrit mantra is So Ham pronounced 'So Hum', pronouncing 'So' on an inhalation and 'Hum' on an exhalation. This can also be reversed to 'Ham Sa' to produce a slightly different mental and energetic effect. Bija or seed mantras can be used to good effect but we need to take care since many of them are very powerful, a good seed sound to use is 'Srim' pronounced 'shreem'; this can be softly toned every time we exhale to evoke feelings of devotion, beauty and love. (use of mantra to protect the mind)

10. Focusing upon a specific point within the body/invite a specific quality using language and/or visualisation.

We can choose a drishti or a specific point to focus our awareness upon. Traditionally the primary choices would be the heart or the third eye between the eyebrows since these serve to lift us on every level but it can be any point of attention. Using evocative language can suggest a different quality of practice, we can use a metaphor or visualisation to bring another dimension to the practice of an asana.

