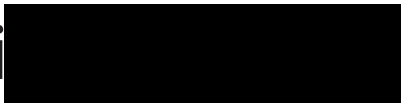


Balance: Inside and Out

Mai



I view art to be more than something that is just aesthetically pleasing. The great downfall of our current generation is a loss of connection with the natural world and the bountiful world within ourselves. As an athlete, and yoga student I have an intense admiration for the human body. I hope to create art that influences others to integrate the physicality of the body with the metaphysical realm of the mind. I feel that this is essential because the two are so closely connected, “a healthy mind leads to a healthy, sound body” (“I Am a Firm Believer”). Because of this, I am interested in the symbiotic relationship of yoga and the chakras, which assign physical parts of the body to a higher mental awareness (*The Chopra Center*). What centers us as individuals in this world? How do we create balance in our lives? Through studying chakras, other culture’s views on the connection of body and soul I hope to discover the answer to these questions for myself.

Life is a balancing act, creating balance in the various aspects of our lives, and finding peace and stillness within that. For me, art is a key component of finding my own balance. I hope to learn about various spiritual beliefs, and also stir within myself the capability to bring more balance and stability to my life. To begin, I decided to surround myself in the yoga community as well as embark on some breath clarity workshops.

My journey begins with my mother, brother and I running down the streets of Berkeley to get to our class, “Clarity Breathwork: Sacred Breath and Embodiment,” led by Dana Dharma Devi DeLong and Ashanna Solaris (Gateway of Illumination). It is my first breathwork class. We arrive out of breath, exhilarated, laughing. Entering the lotus room I find myself plunged into a group of people, of all varieties although it was obvious I was the youngest. Standing in a scattered circle, music begins. It’s tribal and dynamic, it moves your body, it swirls cosmically throughout. It is funky, nearly psychedelic. I cautiously join although it is more about letting the music consume me than thinking where my feet are going to land. I am fascinated with one woman in particular, she twirls away from the circle, diving into the center, she holds nothing back; she is free. I admire the woman who is without inhibitions, perhaps that could be me. I dive in with her and the others. Spinning, swirling, all the bodies moving together; jumping, spiraling, coming together, and mirroring the movements of these various people, sometimes leading, sometimes following, all without saying a word. It’s the creative process, with which I am familiar, but in a completely new and different medium.

I feel the sweat dampening my back, I feel the perspiration begin to form on my forehead, I throw my hands up smiling and embrace it all. All of us moving in our own ways, but still as one unit. Hair in my face, it jumps and sways with me as I move and dance. It’s like a body itself. We laugh as the music crescendos. Stomping, dancing, shaking; we sway as one dynamic tableau as it fades at the end of each song.

Returning back to our circle, energized and unified, we walk together counter clockwise. Upon Ashanna's (ashannasolaris) prompting we say aloud what we are releasing, what holds us back, and someone says “Despair.” “Self doubt.” “Worry.” “Anxiety.” “Self conscious.” “Hate.” “Regret.” “Resentment.” Thrusting it physically away from our bodies. Bracelets shake and rattle as if they are unrooting the very core of our collective negativity. We switch directions and accept the love. The power. “Self appreciation.” “Creativity.” Our voices grow louder with excitement of the possibilities. “Self confidence.” “Direction.” “Balance.” I plunge into the center and start skipping, others follow, we again are spiraling and skipping, racing, laughing. “Inspiration” I say. Like a call and answer other voices echo mine. “Optimism.” “Acceptance.” “Integration.” We now join hands; I hold Ashanna’s and I feel her power radiating through our hands.

We sway gently, rhythmically as she speaks. Ashanna instructs us to find a partner. I look across the room to make steady eye contact with a beautiful dark haired woman, her eyes are intense yet her small smile is inviting. We moved silently to sit next to each other. In hushed tones, we take turns to express our greatest fears and things we hold onto so fiercely, yet we know to be detrimental to our peace of mind. This was a way to acknowledge that, as a way to let go of the negative. How does it feel to let it go? I feel a sense of relief and lightening to speak so simply.

We find our seats, rooting ourselves to the ground. Dana (claritybreathwork.com/dana-delong) begins to play the harmonium, an instrument that resonates with her voice, and my eyes closed and hands open, we begin a chant, a call and answer in Hindi led by Dana. Her voice and the sonorous chords of the harmonium fills the room, and every cell of our being with the vibrations of the music and of our voices coming in together. The room is filled with beautiful noise. We chant after her, our voices joining together and colliding, unifying us just as the dancing had. Again, a beautiful, artistic process emerges, one that is not visual, but resonates within. I feel my body sway as her voice is again raised, and we join back in. The chanting is timeless, and I would love to spend an eternity letting it consume me, but we transition to awakening our physical bodies. I open my eyes and Ashanna begins to guide us in a grounding exercise to bring our focus on to the energy within us, and to connect to that pure, divine source.

Chakra means “wheel of light,” in Hindu culture, and are viewed as spinning vortexes of energy in specific locations of our body. According to the ancient Hindu texts everyone has chakras within them. These seven chakras are: Muladhara, Svadhisthana, Manipura, Anahata, Vishuddha, Ajna, and Sahaswara. Each chakra has specific colors, and personality traits associated with them. It is believed that the blockage, or lack of flow, between the chakras leads to physical or mental illness (“History of the Chakra System”).



The image above shows the Hindu names of each chakra, their physical associations, and color correspondences. There are also individual symbols used to represent each chakra, using varied numbers of lotus flower petals in the design. A beautiful symbol for those practicing yoga, chakra opening, or any various form of meditation is the lotus flower who is “rising and blooming above the murk to achieve enlightenment” (buddhists.org).

I place my hand at the root of my spine and imagine with her as she speaks of the deep roots that are grounding me deeper into the earth, putting a fire to all I do. Resting in the base of the spine is the muladhara chakra, or the root chakra, which is red. This chakra holds our most basic survival instincts and needs, as well as the sense of belonging. When the energy flows freely there’s a sense of innate confidence and security. On the other hand, a blockage often creates worry or anxiety. The root chakra is a connection to the earth, holding the essence of vital information for decision-making. (*Sacred Centers.*)

My legs begin to tingle and fall asleep; I move them in front of me as she goes up to the second orange pelvic chakra. Svadhithana lies in the reproductive area, and is associated with creativity and not just literal birth of a newborn baby but also the birth of new aspects of ourselves, as well as ideas and goals. When healthy, the energy flows freely to connect to a

higher energy that inspires one to write, develop, innovate, and create love. Yet when it is congested one may feel a sense of empty dryness.

Next up to the third chakra, which lies in the stomach, and as I close my eyes all I feel is warmth and genuity. Manipura is in our solar plexus, akin to gut intuition, it governs our will, along with our self esteem and personal power. This chakra holds energy, distribution, strength, and will. As the energy flows freely, one has confidence over abilities to create and manifest intentions and desires. Yet feels powerless and frustrated when there is a clog in the flow.

Tenderly moving my hand to my heart, I let my breath expand and reach out, expand and collapse, expand and touch the hearts of those around me. Working from within our breath, Ashanna urges us to allow our breath to be deep and full, breathe to move our bodies. Anahata is intended to embrace the spaciousness, as well as the love, and create balance as one eases into the opening of the heart chakra. The heart chakra, which is green, is called so not just because of its location within the chest, but for its relation to compassion and love. When open, with energy moving effortlessly there is a deep sense of connectedness with all of the world. Yet when the path is obstructed there are intense feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The fifth chakra of communication, Vishuddha, resides inside the throat. Vishuddha is associated with self-expression and the capability to voice innermost feelings or dreams. A congested throat chakra often leads to anxiety and over-censorship of communication. In yoga, this chakra's opening is designed to lift energy from the base as well as to embrace sound and move with it, letting sounds move the body.

Next is the third eye chakra and I soothingly caress my eyebrows, the bridge of my nose, my third eye. Ajna is the indigo brow or third eye chakra, which is located directly between the eyes. This is the center of all insight, ajna is where all information is integrated with intuitions. When this chakra is open and clear, the energy flows purely and freely and we feel deeply connected to our inner wisdom and openly trust ourselves. Blockages cause a sense of self-doubt and distrust. (*The Chopra Center*).

Finally, coming to rest with my hand upon the crown of my head, with each inhale I sit higher, each exhale rooting me stronger, each inhale breathing in the power that lies within me. Residing at the crown of the head is Sahaswara, represented in a deep rich purple. This chakra is a connection to a higher consciousness. Also known as the "thousand petaled lotus" which bursts open when someone experiences enlightenment. The crown chakra is unity and wisdom; it brings awareness of body, "awareness of awareness, witness consciousness, eventually releasing attachment" (Sacred Centers).

The accessing of chakras is a beautifully crafted dovetail with yoga. Yoga is used not only for the strengthening and conditioning of this physical body, but also to form a connection with one's higher self. Often particular yoga positions, or sequences are associated with the opening of chakras, as well as setting specific goals or intentions through yoga practice. Yoga can be defined as yoke or union, which perfectly captures the relationship between it and chakras ("Chakra Yoga Sequences").

We are to spend the rest of the class laying in rows, just simply breathing. It seems silly to be instructed on how to breathe. Haven't I been doing that all my life? I feel the difference now, hyper aware of the sensation as my ribs expand. Circular breathing seems a simple task. Yet as I lay, imagining I'm pulling breath up from my toes to the crown of my head. I exhale, imagining it is plunging deep into the earth. I realize just how intense, how vital, the simple act of breathing can be.

My face tingles. I feel light-headed and melt into the carpet. Music begins and my heart swells, I feel like my breath is a feather swaying in the lyrics and fluttering down with the instruments. The words and notes swirl about, but they never register as words with meaning, no I just let them flow over me. "Let the emotion move through you." One of the instructors whispers this softly to me, and with compassion she presses her fingertips to my collarbones, triggering the release of the tightness of an emotion that I was holding on to, but hadn't noticed until then. I hadn't realized my eyebrows were knit together in frustration, my face crumpled in distress. Her touch lingers, and spreads through the rest of my body.

This experience with clarity breathwork is a reminder that life is many things, and I don't believe that I can label it in its entirety, but I do know that it is a balancing act. Finding contentment within the self, discovering and falling in love with the things that create balance. I don't believe that yoga is necessarily the answer for all, although I feel deeply connected by it personally. I can draw inspiration from Shakti, a Hindu goddess, of creative empowerment, who is the entity of divine feminine power, and Shiva who is the male god of concentration, knowledge, and the mind. Shiva and Shakti can stand alone, but are at their best when one is in balance with the other (sivasakti.net), much like all relationships and interactions. How do the relationships we have with ourselves affect the relationships we are creating with the rest of the world? As you lift yourself up, you lift those around you; similarly creating a balance within oneself as an individual positively influences their interactions.

Through breathwork, art, and deep research I have discovered just a few pivotal things that lift me up and create balance in my life. I've found that it is not about stopping thoughts, but instead becoming aware and enjoying the stillness amongst all the chaos of life. My stillness is in my art. My breath. Within me.