



Take a Deep Breath

Yoga therapist Leslie Kaminoff talks about why breathing is the basis of all yoga

By Sara Avant Stover

The focus of my yoga practice was once primarily on my external form—mainly, on how many advanced asanas I could master. While this served me up to a point, I realized that my perspective could deepen. A few years ago, I took a yoga class where my own breath served as the central focus. While the asanas were not necessarily advanced, the attunement to breath awareness alone instantaneously dissolved some deep patterns of holding. I felt, in many ways, that I was practicing yoga for the first time.

Leslie Kaminoff feels passionately about this type of individualized, breath-centered approach to

yoga. A yoga therapist inspired by the tradition of T.K.V. Desikachar, Kaminoff serves as founder and co-director of New York City's three-year-old The Breathing Project. An internationally recognized specialist with over 25 years experience in the fields of yoga and breath anatomy, he currently practices yoga therapy and teaches anatomy in both New York City and Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Kaminoff is also the founder of the highly respected international yoga bulletin board, e-sutra (esutra.blogspot.com).

After attending one of Kaminoff's yoga anatomy lectures at The Breathing Project, I had the opportunity to talk with him more about why breathing has become his favorite project.

Fit Yoga: *What is The Breathing Project?*

Leslie Kaminoff: Well, fundamentally, The Breathing Project is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit educational corporation, meaning we are a charity, or an educational foundation. The purpose of the Breathing Project on that level is to provide educational resources to the professional public, which includes yoga, Pilates, gyrotonics teachers, and other healthcare or fitness professionals. We offer educational resources on the role of breathing and movement in health, wellness, and spirituality. The main audience we have found for our programs, which is interesting, is yoga teachers. So we've turned into a highly respected and valued educational resource for yoga teachers and the community.

FY: *This is a unique name, The Breathing Project. How did that name come about?*

LK: I wanted to emphasize that the core of what we are doing really has to do with breathing. What we teach here is individualized, breath-centered yoga. And calling it The Breathing Project was to give the idea that it is a work in progress. It's as if we're involved in an ongoing research to see all the different ways that breath and breath awareness affect health, movement, and yoga therapy. The Breathing Project then becomes more of a verb than a noun. We're working on it. We're working on breathing.

FY: *So why is the breath so important in yoga?*

LK: Well, it's so important because if you consider what happens without it... (*laughs*). Breathing, really, in my view, is what distinguishes yoga from other activities that may seem (at least on the surface) similar to yoga, like stretching, calisthenics, and, to

a certain extent, dance. An emphasis on breathing makes what we do unique because the fundamental acts of inhaling and exhaling are the basic rhythms that we have to work with in yoga, in movement, and also with the mind. Breath is the connection between the mind and the body. Without [breath], you could be doing something that looks very much like yoga practice, but, in actuality, you would just be doing postures and stretching.

FY: *How do you go about teaching this approach at The Breathing Project?*

LK: Well, the group yoga classes here in the West are a relatively modern invention. For instance, the actual deep teachings happened traditionally in more of a one-on-one situation. But what we try to do here, even in the group classes, is to leave the format open enough so that people can individualize their experience. They're going at their own pace, working with their own length of their own breath. It's amazing how many people have been

doing yoga for years, and they always do their Sun Salutations in complete unison with everyone else in the room. Whose breath is that? It's everybody's but nobody's because everyone's length and quality of breath is very different. And movement and pace you do should be reflective of that. So in our group classes here, there are ways of turning everyone loose

and saying, "Here's what you're going to do. Follow your breath and just take your time."

FY: *What is the biggest problem you see with how yoga students are breathing?*

LK: People learn a particular way to breathe in a yoga class by just moving their belly. In turn, they

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start locking down their rib cage even more than they probably already were, and, eventually, if you stay in that pattern, you'll hit a roadblock. You've frozen out some of the breathing structures because of the way you've been taught to breathe. I run into this all the time with yogis.

FY: *What advice can you give to people about how to breathe better?*

LK: I would put the caveat in front of all of this by saying that there is no single right way to breathe. Breathing is shape change. Here I am sitting, talking to you. There-fore, a particular pattern of breath is appropriate to move air across my vocal chords. If I were to stand up, another pattern would be appropriate. Or, if I were to stop talking and start doing yoga, a whole other pattern would kick in.

So really, all breathing exercises are supposed to do is free up the system—not teach the system the right way to do things, but teach the system how to undo habitual ways of operating. It's a very important distinction.

The purpose of a breathing exercise is not to master that exercise because it's the right way to breathe. The purpose is to figure out the way you're already breathing. What are your habits? Whatever gets in the way of a new pattern is what you want to become aware of.

FY: *So once one becomes aware of his or her existing breathing habits, then what?*

LK: I would say to work with three-dimensional breathing.

The belly movement is the thoracic cavity getting bigger from top to bottom along the vertical dimension. Then, the diaphragm is also capable of lifting the base of the rib cage upwards and outwards. That's the transverse, or side-to-side dimension. And then there's the sagittal dimension, front to back. So we have up/down, side/side, and front/back. There are similar movements in the abdominal cavity, only it doesn't change volume, like the thoracic, just the shape.

FY: *This approach to breathing sounds much simpler than what I have learned in other yoga classes.*

LK: Certainly. When put into practice, it is not rocket science. It's getting the breath and body moving in coordination. Once that starts happening, all these wonderful things start happening as well. Back pain starts resolving. You can use your abdominals more effectively to support your spine. You can release stress. You can relax muscles.

In actuality, it's really simple stuff. The devil is in the details. Of course, you can take the simplicity of it and then learn how to apply it to more complex situations, but the basics are always there. That's why yoga has become so popular. It's easy to teach—and it works. Yoga gets the body to operate along its original design parameters. [The body] is engineered by nature to operate a certain way. When you respect those principles and get [your body] to operate accordingly, it just works better. 🧘

For more information, visit www.breathingproject.org. Kaminoff's book, *Yoga Anatomy*, will be published by Human Kinetics in November 2006.

Roll Over

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neglected, but that are particularly susceptible to overuse and injury. "Even in yoga, we see a lot of injuries in hands and wrists," says Zake. "This system helps re-educate both hands and feet, teaching proper alignment through the use of special ball equipment for legs, hands, and feet."

Very recently, Zake made an agreement with the Canyon Ranch health resort properties in Las Vegas, Tucson, and Lenox, Massachusetts, allowing them an exclusive arrangement to offer the full range of Yamuna's work including YBR® classes and YBR® Hands-on and Rolling Massage as part of their wellness programs. At her studio in New York, she and her staff offer classes that combine YBR® with Pilates work and yoga, optimizing the benefits of each.

"We literally take postures apart," she explains, "and help people understand their own personal restrictions and to breathe into where the ball is placed. For instance, if you've never been able to get into a Lotus Pose, I would take you through the muscles that are restricted, one by one, working slowly through each hip joint and over the lateral muscles. By using your own body weight, breathing into the tight muscles, the release and opening are able to occur more quickly, and energy is unblocked. For me, it's about helping each person to achieve a freedom within their bodies that will last their entire lives." 🧘

Author **Debra Bokur** travels frequently writing about yoga, wellness and culture. Even before she knew about Yamuna's rolling techniques, she always included a tennis ball in her carry-on for self-administered shoulder and back massage upon arrival.