The Power of Meeting Stress with Softness

Yoga, mindfulness, and somatic awareness expert Jillian Pransky shows how tuning in to your body can unwind tension, de-stress the mind, and open your heart

FELICITY PRICE | MAY 20, 2019 | MINDFUL

When you really pay attention to your breath, it's astonishing how much you notice. As I follow the sensation of cool air flowing into my nose, I feel a gentle expansion, a widening through my hand as my belly rises and falls, and down my throat. My collarbones rise and spread, my ribs expand and widen like a fanbone.

Exhaling, my diaphragm contracts into the cave of my abdomen, my spine curling ever so slightly around it. All the while, my body feels as if it's sinking into the floor, my mind follows the gravitational pull, its perpetual relief slowed to a pleasant hum.

This single breath cycle takes less than 30 seconds, but as I have could easily have passed. It occurs to me that it's like that movie Interstellar—as if I'm left the normal time-space continuum and entered a wormhole. Time slows down, and I feel as if I'm floating in a weightless bubble, a wedged pillow covers my hips, drinking in the mildly restorative substance called air.

I'm not normally so observant of my breath. But I'm following Jillian Pransky's voice, a bit vague, slow and clear and incredibly relaxing. She's guiding me through "somatic awareness" breathing practice, which, in this moment, I could honestly describe as liquefying. As it, it feels like my body is melting into the floor, and I feel as if I could be suspended in some viscous substance my mind contemplatively floating alongside.

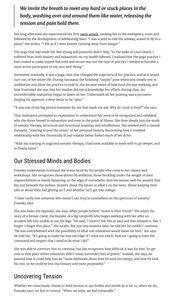
"Let your breath arrive in your body," Pransky says, and if I could, I would tend to assent. I think it's here—but would I just think I can move? And how a tiny thought bubble tend to move the deep Theta products I don't know in drive right away.

I've come to meet Pransky to experience her body-based relaxation system that blends yoga, mindfulness, and somatic awareness into a delicious low-tech sense—a nourishing and welcome respite from the high-tech overstimulation overwhelming our lives. Her "Softness" technique, popular modern yoga stylus—no mechanical tools, no embrace Chaturanga or Up Dog sequence, no orders to do—hold no hair!

Instead we move slowly and deliberately, warming up with a few gentle poses. With calm assurance, she is beginning to direct our tense attention to how we hold ourselves in our bodies, before we begin to "feel" our breath and consider how it moves through our tissues, organs, and muscle bundles. As we lie in passive disengaged to encourage the gentle release of physical shortness muscles, we "receive" the breath as it enters the body. There, we mentally trace where our feet, legs, hips, torso, shoulders, and head touch the floor, and how sensations feel. It isn't quite it or a class, and imagine expanding the exercise with our awareness.

We invite the breath to meet any hard or stuck places in the body, washing over and around them like water, releasing the tension and pain held there. As a contemporary and dancer, she knows that Pransky gently urges, "Let yourself be opened by your breath."

Welcome the breath with a receptive belly. Your pelvic floor softly extend the tension it meets. Your breath will actively expand you. Frank, drive your breath to extend you, and let you.



From Go-Go-Go to Slow-Slow-Slow

Twenty years ago a thirtieth-year-old Jillian Pransky, A different life. Absorbed in a busy marketing career with a major publishing house in Manhattan, she was a go-getter, a climber, ambitious and "very, very, very, very, very." Yet, "I felt I was missing something, I felt I was in a hurry, I felt I was in a hurry, I felt I was in a hurry, I felt I was in a hurry." Yet the foundational ideas I had about myself were unbalanced by my job."

But was also affirm, pushing herself through any physical challenge. She played soccer throughout school, and as an adult she taught aerobics in addition to her day job. She tells how she "pushed and pushed and pushed" herself, ignoring her body's signals, and eventually developed a rare condition, or-dis-dyl, just five months later. "Because I had cultivated inner-outer attitude, I was actually able to cross the finish line," she writes. "But then I was sick for a year. I had pushed myself too much, although I didn't make that connection at the time."

When she discovered yoga, it became an alternative. She practiced at the studio across from her Manhattan apartment, "Sometimes twice and again after work. She loved how it made her feel and started doing that on her off hours.

"I loved how powerful my body felt when I practiced yoga," she writes. "I loved the sensations of openness and expansiveness when challenging my physical boundaries. I felt bombastic so I could feel mighty and successful and strong."

Then her world turned upside down. Her beloved sister-in-law, Lisa, was diagnosed with lung cancer, and died just three years later. The shock of it deeply impacted Pransky, alongside the pain and loss a harrowing crash was revealed, she writes. "We are not only in control of our life."

> ***We invite the breath to meet any hard or stuck places in the body, washing over and around them like water, releasing the tension and pain held there.***

Not long afterward she experienced her first cancer attack, sending her to the emergency room and ultimately, to a hospital bed for a week of tests. "I felt like I was in a bubble, walking a mard by by a plane," she writes. "I felt as if I were forever covering away from danger."

The yoga that had made her feel strong and powerful didn't help. "In the midst of Lisa's death, I suffered from such anxiety and exhaustion. As my health failed, I realized that the yoga practice I had created was not sustainable and that I no longer was the type of practice I needed to become a healthier version of myself and to heal my body."

Somewhat ironically, it was yoga class that changed her trajectory of her practice, and as it would turn out, of her entire life. During Savasana, the finishing "resting" pose where you simply rest in stillness, Pransky felt a "tsunami" of pain, sadness, and grief. She was "overwhelmed by pain and was frustrated she was that her teacher did not allow adjustments in her class. So, in uncomfortable exhilaration began to down on her. Underneath all her pushing was a tsunami longing for approval, a deep desire to be "seen."

"It was one of the big pivotal moments for me that made me ask, Why do I push so hard?" she says.

That realization prompted an exploration to understand her need to be recognized and valued, why she drove herself to exhaustion and even to the point of illness. She dove deeply into the study of yoga philosophy and practice, and eventually became a Kripalu-trained yoga teacher and Somatic therapist, "teaching to point the center" of her personal history, discovering how a troubled relationship with her chronically ill and volatile father fueled much of her drive.

"With my training in yoga and somatic therapy, I had tools available to work with to go deeper, and to finally listen."

Our Stressed Minds and Bodies

Pransky understands firsthand the stress faced by the people who come to her classes and workshops. She recognizes those drivers by ambition, those building under the weight of their responsibilities, those who have experienced loss, those who have been hurt by relationships, those who feel just beneath the surface. Anxiety about the future is what's on the mind. About keeping their jobs or about their kid getting an f and whether he'll get into college.

"I have rarely met someone who doesn't say they're somewhere on the spectrum of anxiety," Pransky says.

She also knows the opposite, she says, when people believe "stress is their friend." She enjoys the story of a chronic stress. She knows it's a big, complex who begin working with her after an "incident" or "crisis." Pransky says, "I'm not a fan of the word 'stress' because it's so big. Also, I hear people talk about 'stress' as if it's a thing, as if it's a noun." Pransky prefers to use the verb form, "stressing." "Stressing" is a process, a dynamic, a verb. It's something we do, and we can learn how to do it differently." She writes, "But two sessions later, he told her he couldn't continue "He was overwhelmed with the possibility of what out relaxation would mean for him," she says. "He said, 'I'm so stuck in my stress that I don't know who I am.' Stress has been my identity, I have compared and compare that I need to do what I do."

She was able to convince him to continue, but she recognizes how difficult it was for him "to get over to that place where relaxation didn't mean surrender, loss of power." Instead, she says, he learned how it could help him be "more deliberate about how he used his energy, and how he took his rest, so he could be more cautionary and more purposeful."

Uncovering Tension

Whether we consciously choose to hold tension in our bodies and minds or it is, as she says, Pransky says, we find in control. "Where we relax, we feel vulnerable."

Tension becomes our armor, holding the fear, worry, and vulnerability at bay. But eventually, inevitably, it fails us. With stress hormones coursing through our bloodstream, as we hold ourselves in a state of "fight or flight" we become prone to a deep fatigue, our immune system weakens, our energy wanes and we become "prone to falling apart." But it takes us so long to stop dropping through the eight. Or blame our crash at someone we love, or scatter a panic attack and become afraid to be our lives.

Before we can release tension, however, we have to know where we hold it. And it's not always obvious. Pransky says that "Tension can be so much living with it, we think we are relaxed while, in fact, we are still harboring tension."

Laying with my head and back supported by a bolster, my mind idly following my breath as it moves through my long body, I'm suddenly aware of a sensation of opening deep in my core, and something seems to drift within. As my breath sinks into new spaces, I feel a sense of sadness. I wonder if I'm holding on to old grief, or if I'm just feeling the sensation of my breath connecting with older family members and coming face to face with how much has changed and how much more change is still to come. I've spent hours on planes and trains and in cars, and I haven't done any yoga or much exercise at all. I'm ready to go home, but some things there too are uncertain. I miss my dog.

Where is I holding the breath? Pransky is saying, and as she enumerates 101 ms, I'm crushed for this guidance. I touch the softness lightly with my breath, exploring its shape and size. Its tension and density. After what could be a few moments or an hour, it starts to grow lighter, thinner, and more transparent, until, it's gone. I feel lighter, my mind suddenly alert, yet my body is still deeply relaxed.

Blue

> ***As we just notice, just rest, just listen, we offer ourselves a great kindness that makes us feel cared for.***

This experience is why Pransky is a proponent of practicing mindfulness with somatic awareness. When we engage in somatic practice, opening the anatomy and embodying the breath deeply into the body, we not only trigger the relaxation response, we uncover those deeper areas of tightness and holding. And as we just notice, just rest, just listen, we offer ourselves a great kindness that makes us feel cared for. "It sends our mind a signal that right now, in this moment, we're OK," she says.

She describes it like a plane coming to the a landing. Before the plane can touch down, the pilot needs to execute a message "Wilco/over/ It's safe to land here." Having the embodied sense of being supported by the ground of being safe to ease into bodies, we can start to lay down the areas of tension. "And our mind can begin to shift into a new communication. I'm OK here on the ground."

The more familiar we are with how and where we hold tension, the easier it is to notice "how we are holding our bodies in the world, and how we are treating ourselves." she says.

This is where Deep Listening becomes a tool for life. We're building resilience "over time, making more space and capacity to stay open with whatever arises."

The Power of Softness

Releasing our tension requires softness.

It does not require lowering of the senses to whatever may come up. We don't need to figure everything out, or to be overwhelmed by the sensations we feel. We don't need to be overwhelmed by our thought or feeling but very uncomfortable thought or feeling. If we can trust the present moment, we can open more fully to what we discover. It's like allowing our breath to come in. We don't have to do anything. We simply need to welcome it.

— Jillian Pransky in Deep Listening

Pransky's Softness practice, then, utilizes simple, simple words or phrases that seem to bypass thinking and land right in your body. She calls it a "spacious body" and "Effortless Ease." She asks you to "Imagine the breath flowing in through the front of your heart and out through the back of your heart. Floating through your chest. Softening you."

And she refers to the body, breath, and the earth as "family." During our sessions, as I lay in repose, she would ask me to imagine my breath flowing through my family, and I would picture my dad's bed but hear Lisa's voice. Her voice also is going on, flows through—the breath, and the solid support of the earth itself—are always there, steady and real, for every single one of us.

"Similar to the way we learn to rely on the support of the ground, becoming aware of our partnership with the breath strengthens our experience of connectedness. Of not feeling alone/ abandoned/ lost/ etc. "The breath is always there for us, without question. It is our life partner. Really, it's family."

And this feeling of belonging, of safety, helps you to stay soft. To stay open. To let in the grand while knowing that you are also strong and stable, supple and responsive to whatever comes. You are listening, deeply.

Try These Four Practices

1. Listening Softly

Imagine you could breathe directly through your heart. Imagine this is where the air flows in and out of you.

Let your breath flow freely in and out through your heart. Let your breath soften you. Uncovering layers of you. Allowing room for you to unfold. All of you.

Your breath tenderly receiving everything it comes in contact with. Welcoming your deepest feelings openly, unreservedly. Welcoming all your feelings. Your joys and your sorrows.

Your breath is a gentle listening space.

Your breath listens wholeheartedly to all that it moves, staying with you no matter what arises. Your breath is always present. Always listening.

Listen to your Infinite breath as it flows in and out of your heart. Your breath will teach you how to listen.

Listen softly. Listen to yourself as your breath listens to you.

2. Letting Go of Tension

Helping the person muscle to release tension, is weightless to its optimal state, is an important step in deep listening, according to Jillian Pransky. This is done through supported long-held poses that open the front of the hips, and by welcoming the breath into the body.

The poses in the tangent and stronger of the Hip Stress muscles, connecting the lumbar vertebrae to the femur on both sides of your body. It helps stabilize the spine and support your internal organs and muscles. Tension in these muscles can be felt as "tightness" in the hips, but is also linked with almost every sension, from trending to relating to walking and running. And, it's intimately connected to the breath, sharing space with the diaphragm and contracting when you feel afraid or anxious. Pransky says, "Tension in the hip muscles can create an expansive tension that compresses the front of the hip, contracts and shortens the psoas."

"Our gut environment has to feel safe. If it's squeezed because of our six-pack abs, if it's squeezed because we don't want to feel it, if it's squeezed because the pelvic floor is tense, it is constantly from walking and riding and running and driving and sitting, then all of that inhibits our ability to calm ourselves," she says.

"When the belly can soften, when we provide a place for the breath to move at ease, we create an environment where we can feel safe. We can feel our emotions, we can feel our sensations, we can relaxes so our other mental reality for more insight and wisdom are then available in a way that they're not when we're rushing around and not seeing a bigger picture."

3. Soft Belly Breathing

Sit in a comfortable position on the floor or in a chair. Close your eyes, if you wish. Take a few long breaths, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth.

Let your body land on the ground. Let your breath arrive in your body.

As your breath flows in, feel it move down into your belly. As your breath flows out, let your belly be effortless.

On your Inhale, think, "soft," allowing your belly to receive your breath.

On the out breath, think, "belly," letting go of any holding and resistance.

Inhale, "soft."

Exhale, "belly."

Each inhale, imagine your belly being cared for by the breath. Each exhale, let the breath loosen any mobility. Let your breath make room. Let thoughts, sensations, sensations rise and fall in and out of a spacious belly.

Since our belly is our emotional center, when we soften it, a variety of feelings, thoughts, images, and memories may bubble up. Welcome all that rises and falls. If you find yourself in contemplation, or if you find yourself in a state of deep relaxation, or if you find yourself in a state of sleep, let your mind gently back to the flow of your breath.

After 5 to 10 minutes, place your hands on your belly. Feel your breath entering your hands. Little by little, expand your awareness into the space around you.

Close your practice by setting an intention to stay connected to your breath and your belly as you move slowly out of the meditation.

4. Appreciate the Open Sky

Use this inner practice while looking at an open sky.

Stand outside or in front of a window, or gaze at a photograph that features an expansive sky.

Pause and sense where your body meets the ground. Soften excess gripping in your face, neck, and shoulders. Feel yourself landing completely.

As you bring your attention to the flow of your breath, gaze into the openness of the sky.

Follow your exact three breaths as they come to from the open around you and expand into your body. Follow them as they move from the space inside you back out into the world around you.

Notice the confluence of your breathing flowing from outside in and inside out.

Feel how your breath connects you to the space around you.

To finish, notice your feet on the floor and imagine your breath—and your heart—in the shape of the sky. Move into your next moment grounded and open.

About The Author

Kelle Walsh

Kelle is a contributing editor for Mindful magazine. She writes and edits from her home in Boulder, Colorado, where she practices yoga and tries to be as mindful as she can in her life. In the past, she served as managing editor and associate digital editor for Yoga Journal. A longtime mindfulness practitioner, she has written about yoga and meditation for publications including Reader's Digest, Life and Gaiam.com.

See author's posts

Read More

COMPASSION

Mindful Racial Healing with Yoei Scruggs-Hussein

Meditation tools and mindfulness for exploring race and racism with the love and compassion needed for deep, systemic change. **Read More**

YOEI SCRUGGS-HUSSEIN · FEBRUARY 10, 2021

CALM

A "Just Like Me" Practice to Expand Your Circle of Compassion: 12 Minute Meditation

The meditation will offer practice in a quiet drive and contains about differences, shame, fear, sorrow, and the self, and to simply see if you can be with what's there in a kind and curious way. What you are hearing into here is the awareness that. **Read More**

STEVEN HOCHMAN · FEBRUARY 8, 2021

Get the latest on everything mindfulness

Our free newsletter delivers updates on the science of mindfulness, guided mindfulness meditation practices from leading teachers, special offers, and rich content to support your mindful growth.

Enter your email

Sign Up

© 2021 MINDFUL.ORG, INC. DBA MINDFUL.ORG