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PARROT BREATHING LIKE WATER

Yoga in school

By Dr Natasha Picôt

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This invention of 'parrot-breathing' by an eight year old child, with whom I was apparently 'facilitating' breathing skills, may well reveal an intuitive understanding of mudras and their connection to the breath. The symbol of the parrot, reminiscent of the Goddess Tulsi and said to be the heralding of repeated good things happening, has been prophetic in the sense that my experience of teaching yoga to children has brought a recurrence of such pleasant surprises and creative innovations as this avian example.

Was it the Dalai Lama who said that "if every eight year old in the world was taught meditation, we would eliminate violence in the world within one generation?" Such prophetic words are a reminder of the importance of teaching the next generation how to live in peace with themselves and to take care of themselves and the planet. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, children need a great deal of courage and awareness to face some of the political and ecological, global challenges which surround them and of which they are all too often aware due to the internet.

"O brave earth-child
You declared battle to free earth's soil"

One such 'brave earth-child' who is testimony to the fact children should not be underestimated is Xiuhtezcatl

*"Have you heard of
parrot breathing?
You have to put your
thumb and pointing
finger together when you
breathe out
and you open the
parrot's beak when you
breathe in."*

Martinez, founder and youth director of the Earth Guardians environmental organisation. At the age of six he began speaking to crowds at conferences, making a plea for respecting the Earth as "a sacred thing", stating "yes, together we can do it, the power of one," in a gesture emphasising the yoga ethos of union and connection. Similarly, Guru Tich Nhat Hanh advises that "we must encourage schools to train our students in the art of living in peace and harmony. It is not easy to read, write or solve math problems but children manage to do it. Learning to breathe, smile and to transform anger can also be difficult... If we teach children properly by the time they are around twelve, they will know how to live harmoniously with each other."

The Misuse of Selfies

Frederick Matthias Alexander, of the pioneering Alexander Technique, recognised problems with sitting in desks at school as early as the 1930s. In *The Use of Self* he protested against "modern educational methods" stating that postural problems start mainly in school as children are unnaturally seated for a large portion of the school day, "slumping and slouching in chairs". This insight was formed before the advent of the even-more-modern television and computer culture which may cause further postural problems, leading to restricted breathing and the negative repercussions of thoracic breathing.

More recently, debates have been raging as mental health professionals address the issue of children's mental health and unreasonable pressures on children in today's society. This year the Children's Commissioner published a report into the use of social media amongst 8-11 year olds. *Life in Likes* gives a detailed account of the effects of social media and excessive use of computer games.

The report concludes that: "On the one hand, social media was perceived as having a positive effect on children's wellbeing, and enabled them to do the things they wanted to do, like staying in touch with friends and keeping entertained. On the other, it had a negative influence when it made them worry about things they had little control over."

One of the report's recommendations has been to: "Encourage parents to support their children to take part in other activities. This research shows that children who take part in hobbies, sports or other activities are less reliant on social media."

In a world of computer games, bombardment of advertising ricocheting around consumer culture and virtual reality social media profiles, further pressures of the education system impact on a child's wellbeing. Topical articles such as 'Sounding an alarm over children's mental health' outline the plea groups such as Cope (Challenging over-prescription of psychiatric drugs in education). Here a group of like-minded colleagues across education, healthcare and politics have created a mission statement which notes that: "We share the view that a caring and morally mindful society must protect and safeguard children by allowing them to develop their unique personalities and behaviours and try to avoid the first response of prescribing psychiatric drugs for behavioural difficulties." In the midst of these results and concerns by various experts, even tranquil lake-mind of the most peaceful yogi might feel a ripple of consternation.



Hope

Hope is at hand when we work face to face with children and experience the fact that they have a heartening capacity to develop effective tools and skills through yoga, which may arm them against the deluge of overwhelming educational pressures, cynical marketing ploys and distorted media images which threaten to engulf their sense of self in contemporary society. Yoga can help them become more robust, self-aware and create effective coping and self-care strategies. An increasing amount of studies testify to the impact of yoga on children's health, wellbeing and happiness in the classroom.

Here's a selection of yoga techniques I have shared with children age 6–11 in two Nottingham primary schools, from Summer term 2017 to Summer 2018. I've outlined yoga strategies I have found enhance the physical and psychological wellbeing of the children, add to the classroom learning environment and lead the children to be stronger managers of their emotions. In addition to yoga in the general classroom situation, I summarise techniques designed for enhancement of wellbeing for sitting of final Year 6 Primary SATS.

The results testify to the claim that many children are often 'natural yogis' and that they are capable of not only mastering basic yoga techniques but also inventing and creatively innovating with them. In general I feel the children are often their own guru (teacher) and often highly sensitive and intuitively connected. It is claimed that 'toddlers, through school age, kids are natural yogis'.

Even though the words of sages are helpful guiding compasses, I will outline the results of child-centred, mixed-methods research, involving both quantitative and qualitative research tools, namely in the words of the children themselves after having interviewed them with open questions. In the case of SATS yoga, I will carry out a survey of various distinct facets of the practices they

experienced in order to create data which might serve as a platform for further research and more educators bringing yoga into the classroom.

One-to-One Yoga

Firstly, I summarise some of the insights gained by working on a one-to-one for a period of six weeks with a pupil in the final half-term of primary school. Initially the aims and reasons were decided collaboratively between the pupil and myself. We decided on the goal of gaining more control over behaviour and to be in charge of, rather than dominated by, anger-based choices and destructive outbursts which could spiral out of control.

The yoga consisted of weekly one-to-one sessions on a Monday morning incorporating various yoga techniques. Firstly, we collaborated with support staff to create a vision board of hopes and dreams. A symbol of a boxer, a lion and an omega sign (which meant strength to the child) as well as the affirmation 'never give up' were included. All these images were self-selected by the child with minimal adult input.

The vision board was on a lanyard, with spares available, and a larger version was placed behind the child's door at home as well as one readily available at school.

Techniques used were: abdominal breathing, enhanced by Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR); Bhramari (humming bee breath) to release stress; axe-chopping with Ha sound, to release emotions that the child identified as unsupportive; standing in Tadasana and building up from ten seconds to one minute.

We also continued a child-initiated discussion about a martial arts skill of emptying the mind and 'being like water' when feeling heated. This gave an inroad to connect the pupil's interest with mixed-martial arts with yoga, as clearly this links to yoga meditation and mindfulness

practices. A creative response to Bhramari was observed as the pupil experimented with using inhaled and exhaled sounds as well as different pitches and tones. Although all techniques were explored with enthusiasm and creativity, the abdominal breathing was the technique practised most consistently over the six-week period.

I did not seek to measure this on any external scale such as Boxhall targets, which were used more widely in the school nurture unit, but preferred to follow a self-evaluation with the person-centred approach mentioned earlier. In the words of the child, the positive results seemed as follows: "instead of stomping down that destroying road, leaving trails of smoke behind; running down the road, the happy one to freedom". The child's class teacher also noted a marked change towards the end of year which he described as "much calmer" and also noted the unprecedented experience of not having to speak to the pupil or check their behaviour for two weeks. A support teacher likewise noted the child is "much more peaceful" and noted the work would build on the 60 Mindful Minutes programme that the school already has in place.

My experience of working with this year 6 pupil was consistently one of small surprises as they demonstrated

astonishing insights into yoga techniques, a willingness to engage with them and a positive attitude throughout. For example, when I began describing beta and alpha brain waves, the child proceeded to create an effective visual aid using blue 'slime', by creating various 'wavelengths' with the malleable material to illustrate the point, before I had given an explanation. One wonders on such occasions, as is so often the case, who is the teacher and who the pupil? In reality the experience is collaborative.

SATS Yoga brought further repetition of interesting and encouragingly positive results. These sessions have been designed to calm the mind, enhance balance and wellbeing in body and mind, bringing awareness of the body-mind connection. This series of regular lessons over the term preceding the summer SATS exams aimed to equip children with breathing and other relaxation techniques that may help them alleviate and manage panic and anxiety as well as their own wellbeing, whilst maximising their potential in SATS. This can then help relieve tension, enhance concentration, improve self-belief and awareness, increase patience and focusing skills.

A sample SATS yoga session

Activations to Music: to rid the body of stressful pent-up feelings and encourage a positive, fun atmosphere. Facilitate by incorporating the children's own spontaneous movements.

Start by shaking hands, feet and whole body, releasing shoulders, shoulder-rolls, hand waves, clicking, body-percussion. Improvise yoga dance to joyful music. Open up the shoulders; shake 'stress' out and 'let go', shout, clap, stamp, yawn, stretch, sigh to music. Alex Ohm's Every Ocean is ideal for this dynamic phase as it's both upbeat and affirmative, with lyrics encouraging breath-awareness. Write a positive word describing yourself in the air, trace your finger round it, write it big, small, fast and slow, etc. Say the word in different voices.

Stretch and let go: Butterfly Breath. Bringing arms into wings, stretch out and round with full breath cycle, stretch and release shoulders back and down. Breathe in, lift 'weights' overhead and let go, bringing arms down and breathe out.

Forms/Asanas: which relieve stress, relax, stretch and vitalise the body and improve balance, spinal alignment and general posture, which can lead to more 'space' to breathe, particularly by aligning the shoulders, and the cervical and thoracic spine. To strengthen and build confidence: Warrior sequence with the archer. Hero (Virabhadrasana) 1, 2 and 3. Visualise success in SATS in these asanas and as a target.

Combine with affirmations: to train the mind to expect successful results and raise expectations as well as to diminish the impact of negative self-talk and comparing culture. Children can make up their own affirmations in addition to the ones you offer as a choice.

'I am strong', 'I can do it', 'I overcome all obstacles', 'I focus', 'I am brave', 'I face challenges with courage', 'Let it go', 'I ace SATS'.

Breath and balance: choice of balances: Eagle (Garudasana) to see higher perspective/get inspiration from the sky; Dancer (Natarajasana) for flexibility; Tree (Vrksana) and swaying palm tree for strength.

Hasta mudras and other hand movements: Petal breathing: open and close hands separately with breath, Lotus breathing (Padma) two hands together make a lotus flower, open and close fingers, raise and lower with breath. Focus and release are a particular favourite and children enjoy creating their own hand movements, like the parrot breathing mentioned earlier. Circle the index finger around the palm of one hand, to soothe heart meridian/nadi.

Stress spheres/beanbags and mascots might also be used as these have been shown to be effective tools for off-loading worries and aiding restful sleep. Tense and release squeezing action has a PMR effect.

Awareness and Relaxations: halo polishing (circle interlaced hands above head): Marmeta Viegas's Relax Kids series, such as The Wising Star and Pants of Peace: 52 Meditations for Children provide a variety of relevant scripts.

Energising: Egyptian (standing) Salute to the Sun (Surya namaskar).

Calming and balancing: Salute to the Moon (Chandra namaskar). Abdominal breathing.

Releasing: Woodchopper (Kashtha Takhanasana) raise imaginary axe above head and shout HAAAAAH as the axe is released down to chop imaginary wood.



Mandalas/yantras: may wind down a session by concentrating the mind and encouraging a focal point and visual reminder of affirmations as well as self-selecting colours which encourage a positive feel-good factor. They also help encourage a sense of order and harmony which can help calm chaotic worries, clarify thoughts and encourage a sense of balance through their symmetrical forms and sacred geometry.

This SATS Yoga series was run over six consecutive sessions incorporating different aspects of the suggested elements above. A short post-exam survey involving 44 year-six pupils followed. The results were as follows: 84% of the selected children thought that fast, improvised activations and yoga dance to music helped with their SATS. Of the same 44 children, 41% thought the slower yoga helped; 85% of children said the breathing had a positive effect on SATS, 50% thought the hand movements helped and 39% said the affirmations improved their confidence. As mentioned earlier, various studies have researched the constructive effects of children's yoga in schools. It's worth noting that yoga teacher and author Liz Lark highlights the Guna qualities of nature and that these might affect how a child experiences. She says a yoga teacher should be aware of different ways these can be balanced through yoga practice. The importance of knowing whether a child is tamasic (slow moving and inclined to daydream); rajasic (stimulated, fiery and dynamic); or sattvic and balanced could have a dramatic impact on the correct differentiation of practice to suit the children's individual needs. Also the timing of the sessions may play a part. The Satnayanda school has been known to suggest dynamic yoga is suited best to mornings and more pacifying yoga to late afternoon.

A selection of year six children's additional comments, as individual feedback on the written surveys, follows:
 "It helped me believe in myself" "I prefer doing it in my head" "It made everyone laugh" "Thank you for helping me find my inner calm" "It helped calm me down and creating new moves was fun" "It made me feel confident" "It's awesome"

Classroom Yoga

Any of the above techniques may be used as multi-purpose classroom tools that might be taught in shorter bursts or boosts of yoga, space permitting. I have learned that being a facilitator is far more effective in these settings: being the 'guide on the side, rather than the sage on the stage' to coin a widely-known teachers' saying.

Classroom yoga can help discharge pent-up frustration from being seated for long periods, act as a brain break or time for reflection, creating a child's own inner sanctuary 'safe space' or 'special place'. Moving then 'freezing' into a yoga form is something children particularly enjoy. Awareness of good posture being crucial to proper breathing is often observed as another benefit of yoga, which children respond positively to and enjoy commenting on their progress with this. Breathing techniques which children can safely use are Bear Breath (Abdominal Breathing), Halo Breath (Circle arms over head with interlaced fingers), Crocodile Breath (Breathing in Makrasana), Lion Breath (Simsana) with lion claws stretched out, Humming Bee Breath (Bhramari) and Woodchopper (Kashtha Takhanasana), particular favourites with children in the classroom setting. There are a plethora of inspiring books which may be used in a classroom setting. Movements which circle the shoulder back in a backstroke-like rhythmic pattern are particularly helpful. They encourage healthy upper back care in a situation which might otherwise bring the shoulders and scapula forward for an excessive amount of time, as they reach over their desks.

As in SATS Yoga, children often enjoy listening to music whilst engaged in classroom yoga and they are largely enthusiastic about making up their own movements around these basic principles. The infinite creativity and curiosity of children is ignited as agni when bringing the blessing of yoga into the classroom.

"Yoga calms me down and lets out all the bad emotions," year four child. "Yoga breathing makes me feel like when you just get up on a sunny day and the rays of light are making lines through the window," year three child.

"I like the bee-breath because it sounds relaxing, like formula-one racing or the Grand-Prix!" year three child.

References and notes

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I believe the children are our future



Brother Bob

For growth and progression it could be worth considering where we, as an organisation and as individuals, reflect on the words from the Whitney Houston song: "I believe the children are our future." Can we ask where this phrase sits, in our actions and reflections.

In principle, it is obvious: as the old die, so the young must carry the banner forward. However, I believe it is not that simple, as the question that must be asked is 'what banner?'. Take for example, elephants in Africa. The hunt for ivory has meant that the older elephants, those who guided and passed on information, such as where waterholes are in dry periods, was lost. The young elephants had no guides (note I add guide, not a rules instructor). Hence the young elephants never grew past adolescence, and mayhem has, to some extent in some areas of African elephant herds, become the norm. This is change, but not for the better.

So although change is inevitable and must happen if we are not to stagnate, our changes must be built upon both new ideas and reflections of wisdom from the past.

Just because an idea is new, it does not necessarily mean that is a good idea, until it has been tested and found to be beneficial to the individual or organisation.

So how do we ensure positive progress, I would suggest it is by youth listening to the experience of the aged, and then applying it to their own new ideas and practices, refining and testing, an attribute that comes easily with the youthful enthusiasm for change.

In all aboriginal cultures, age is respected, and likewise

is youth; it's a two-way working experience. Never one way is right. We do not leave the old behind, nor do we restrain youth, but encourage youth to enable all.

The Book of Changes tells us that change is inevitable, but encourages us not to be blown headlong in a gale, nor to retreat to harbour when the wind blows in our faces, but to tack across the wind, still making progress even in the most adverse conditions.

Lao Tsu in his Tao te Ching chapter 51 says "Guiding without interfering is the primal virtue" and it is something we would all do well to consider when reflecting on our individual and collective changes.

Perhaps words from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, when asked to "Speak to us of Children", sits well here.

"You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth."

Clearly the arrow cannot fly without the bow, sounds like teamwork to me.

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