

Dancer Sydney Robinson finds home, the place where body and breath connect.

vitality



# THE POWER OF BREATH

**Mindful breathing opens new paths to enhanced presence and soothing release.** | BY DANIELLE FRAENKEL, PH.D. with JEFFREY MEHR, MA

**Y**ou'd think that learning how to belly-breathe would be easy for a dancer, but when I took my first yoga class decades ago and encountered the concept, the instructions seemed like a foreign language. For years my dance teachers had told me to stand up straight and tighten my stomach muscles. Their commands rang in my ears, especially during barre work. I heard words like turn-out and alignment, not breath or breathing, though I believe I would hear them in dance classes now.

In Graham Technique, I learned that contraction relates to exhalation and release to inhalation, signature concepts of Martha Graham's work. However, I focused on developing the movements of my spine, pelvis, and limbs. I had not yet grasped what I would now call the power of breath.

That changed when I studied in New York City with Jack Wiener at his School for Creative Movement in the Arts. There I learned how to use breath as a source of improvisation. My dancing blossomed as I discovered the relationship between breath and movement—allowing the dance to emerge from the rise and fall of my breath. I reclaimed the joy I'd experienced as a child, dancing with my sister to my parents' music on piano and musical saw. I discovered in Jack's classes an awareness of breath that people now call "mindful breathing"—being intentionally and non-judgmentally aware of one's breath in the present moment.

Staying alive to my experience in Jack's creative movement classes meant being mindfully aware of the connection between my breath and my dance. Although exhilarating, experiencing the present was not always pleasant. Unexpected thoughts and feelings showed up. For example, my parents survived the Holocaust. They were immigrants who had escaped, and lost everything. Often when I danced, a deluge of feelings about their suffering flooded me. But by staying alive to the moment—allowing the tempo of my breath to transform and match my current feeling—I was not overwhelmed. Instead my emotions were manageable.

I found it possible to gently awaken forgotten parts of my breathing body.

The integration of body-mind and spirit, housed in each inhalation and exhalation, freed me to remain present as, simultaneously, I embodied and witnessed the sadness and anger that surfaced. Having reclaimed parts of my self in the here-and-now, I would exit Jack's studio ready to face the challenges in my life.

Many practices include some form of mindful breathing, yet practitioners often encounter challenges like the ones I experienced in New York. Thoughts intrude, pass, intrude again. Letting the thoughts go may seem impossible, but gentle methods such as Somato Respiratory Integration™ (SRI) and LivingDance™ can counter restlessness, intrusive thoughts, and blocks.

Improvisations, where the inhalation and exhalation become the underlying pulse of dance, offer another way to experience mindful breathing. Anyone can do this because the process is grounded in movements that we see in infants. Inhalations generate movements that unfold and grow. Exhalations generate movements that fold up and shrink. Movements can be large or small, any tempo, in one finger or the whole body. Together, breath and the natural movement that emerges from it become dances, during which dancers remain mindful of breath and movement. Actively linking breath and movement in the moment not only leads to connection, but also creates a crucible for discoveries: from the personal to the spiritual and from the creative to the heightened ability to focus during meditation.

Bonding breath and movement allowed me to hold on both to the horror of my parents' struggle and to the fun my sister and I had as our smiling parents played the music for our childhood productions.

Together, Danielle Fraenkel and Jeffrey Mehr offer **LivingDance-LivingMusic**, a unique approach to dance/movement therapy that offers a spectrum of benefits, ranging from emotional growth and personal well-being to creative expression. [www.kinnections.com](http://www.kinnections.com)



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Mindful breathing can highlight areas where the flow of breath seems blocked—but all too often these places are hard to reach. Adding touch to the process brings an additional dimension to working with breath that often makes it easier to be mindful. Key to this process is the concept of *home*.

I often ask dancers to begin their improvisations by using touch to scan their bodies and find the spot where they can rest their hands and feel connected on both the inhalation and the exhalation. We call that spot *home*. My student Michele Iemolo says that by finding home before beginning her movement practice, “each move becomes more authentic and comes from a place of complete presence to the current moment. Finding home makes the movement a meditation.”

Leslie Hunter has found a supportive daily presence in the awareness of breath. “The simple tool of acknowledging breath has been useful in my everyday life,” she says, “particularly when I feel anxious. Taking the moment to be present, find home, and follow the flow of my breath is not only relaxing, but stress relieving and healing.”

Henry Titlebaum, age 47, wanted to improve his relationships to self and others, in both his personal life and tech career. The combination of breath, movement, and touch were likewise crucial, and he says he “learned how to use breath work to identify and work on my blocked areas.”

To bring Henry to this point I taught him how to integrate breath, touch, and motion,

locate home, and then connect his inhalations with movements that widen, lengthen, or grow, and his exhalations with movements that narrow, shorten, or shrink.

Henry discovered what it is to feel fully present. After nearly two years of group work, he can not only connect to himself, identify blocks in the flow of his breath, and use dance expressively, but also sees that he is much better at listening and empathizing.

Peter Appel says that the listening quality of this approach provided valuable feedback about his actual state of body and emotion. In his practice as a yoga instructor, he has been able to move in a more grounded and sensing way. “By using the warmth of my hands, my attention, and conscious breathing,” he says, “I found it possible to gently awaken forgotten parts of my breathing body.”

Invariably, for my students and my own dancing, touch and finding home lead to dances that alter our relationships not only to breath, but also to ourselves, one another, and life. The dances—creative movement meditations—provide a fluid form that allows us to stay alive to our breath and, when necessary, to attend consciously to blocks in our breathing.

The combination of breath, touch, and dance bridges from everyday breathing to the mindful breathing for which so many of us strive. Mindful improvising using this triune of kinesthetic elements leads to dance that taps our innate capacity to heal—dance that nourishes the soul. •

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## FROM HOME TO LIVING DANCE

**Grounded in the belief that dance itself is healing.** LivingDance~LivingMusic™ works with natural elements of dance/movement. When working with breath, we first identify *home*, the place on the body where dancers feel connected to both their inhalations and exhalations. Home becomes the dancer's source for connection and expression.

**To find home,** place your hands on your torso, breathe, and focus your attention on the area under your hands. Imagine that your breath has a story to tell and that your hands are listening—just the way you wished everyone listened to you.

**Once you feel connected,** allow the breath to be your music. Let it synchronize with your movement, opening, rising, or widening on the in breath, and closing, descending, or narrowing on the out breath. Start the movement small—first in your fingers, then bring in your hands and arms, leading eventually to a dance that engages all of you.

**When thoughts distract,** place the heels of your hands on your eyebrows, palms on your forehead, and let your fingers relax onto the top front of your head. As you breathe, focus your attention on the area under your hands. Pretend that you are sending your breath to your hands just as you did when seeking home. This position can become your source of improvisation, or when you feel connected and present, you can return to finding home on your torso and dance from there.