

Yoga Imagery in Preparation for Chemotherapy

by Mary Louise Skelton

The use of imagery in healing reaches back several thousand years across many cultures. One of the most important cultures, and perhaps the best known to us as yoga students, is India. To mentally focus on the image of a full moon or an effulgent light in the heart center and experience calmness, or to focus on the image of a bright sun and experience arousal, certainly helps us understand that psychological factors can and do significantly affect the physiology of the body.

"Only within the last three decades have researchers and clinicians in Europe, Japan, China, and the United States begun to explore systematically the role of imagery as an important factor in determining an individual's health or illness, and perhaps, life and death."¹ One important area of research (and now medical practice) by Martin L. Rossman, M.D. of Mill Valley, California, concerns the mental aspects of healing—how we can use our imagination and will to cooperate with our body's desire and ability to heal.

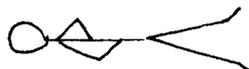
When I first spoke to Sarah she was just leaving for the hospital to have a mastectomy. The previous week she had been informed that she had a malignancy, and as one would expect, her reaction was one of total horror. A Professor in a Graduate School for Nursing, she was very health-conscious and dutifully had her yearly gynecological exams and mammograms. She said, "I feel like I've been hit in the face." She wanted to talk with me about the possibility of using imagery to reduce the oftentimes terrible nausea that accompanies chemotherapy.

I met with Sarah a week after her surgery to discuss what might be her approach to the upcoming chemotherapy. While listening to her concerns and fears, I observed her breathing, and I noticed that her voice was unsteady and a little high pitched. Her biggest fear was that she had lost con-

trol; she desperately needed to feel that she was, partially at least, in control of what happens to her.

Obviously Sarah needed a means for relieving her anxiety. I spoke with her about the interrelationship of the mind and the breath. We talked about how a disturbed mind could affect her breathing, and how disturbed breathing could affect her mind. A vicious cycle of anxiety could ensue, not only making her feel a loss of control but possibly preventing her from having a clear perception of the situation.

Since we were sitting on a low, comfortable couch, I asked her to lean back, close her eyes and mentally observe where she begins her inhalations. It didn't take her long to recognize that her breathing was very shallow and confined to the upper chest. I suggested that she practice the following:



Left palm on upper chest; right palm just below the rib cage.

I told her I always place my little finger over the navel and then spread the fingers. She liked knowing specifically "where" to place the palm. Then I asked her to feel the rise of the abdomen while inhaling and the flattening of the abdomen while exhaling. It took a conscious effort on Sarah's part to begin breathing diaphragmatically, but I could see that she understood what should happen. I suggested she practice an even rate of breathing to help her feel in balance. Example: Inhale 5, Pause Exhale 5, Pause

Or if she wanted to attain a deep state of relaxation, she could focus on making her exhalation longer than her inhalation.

Example: Inhale 4, Pause Exhale 8, Pause
or: Inhale free, Pause Exhale 8, Pause

I told her to practice this diaphragmatic breathing as often as she could until we met again. I was prepared to leave when she again mentioned imagery. After all, this was why she wanted to see me in the first place. I wasn't trying to avoid discussing imagery, but I felt that her anxiety level was so high, we should reduce that aspect first. I told Sarah the following: In yoga we have the concept that there is a fire in our bodies located in the area where I had her place her right hand.



The seat of the fire is near the navel, and the flame shifts depending on whether we are inhaling or exhaling. On inhalation there is a downward movement of the breath, creating a draft that forces the flame downwards. It is the flame that can burn

(continued on page 7)

Models for Meditation According to Indian Tradition

(continued from page 4)

member a gathering where a young woman, a Brahmin, felt very ill at ease when Krishnamurti criticized the caste system and Brahmins in particular.

Comments on Questions for Reflection

Meditation must elevate the mind. That is its basic purpose. This involves an ascent of the individual's mind. The object or question is very important. Since God is the highest, because God is perfect, successful *dhyana* on God will link one to perfection.

Is belief in God a must for the success of *dhyana*? The previous discussion would provide the logic for the answer, "yes," to that question.

What happens to the "I" in *dhyana*? Upon the arrival of his guru, a student said, "I am meditating." The guru answered, "No, you're not."