

## **The (im)possibility of Performance with(out) Fear. Part 3.**

### **Breathing and Beyond.**

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*In the previous two articles we've looked at identifying the enemy and then using physical coping techniques. This month we extend our ability to cope with nervousness by using two simple and efficient tools: breathing and visualization.*

#### **The Breath 1**

There is nothing more simple than breathing and yet we may “forget” to breathe, hold our breath or breathe shallowly when we tackle a difficult piece.

The first exercise is as important as it is simple. I suggest, after reading the instructions, you try it before continuing with the rest of the article. If you actually pause from reading right now to do this first exercise, the rest of the article will probably make more immediate sense.

- Sit comfortably on a chair*
- Put your hands on your abdomen for a count of five unforced breaths. Just follow the rhythm of your breath. Feel your abdomen inflate like a balloon and deflate as you exhale.*
- Next, put your hands on your ribcage for a count of five more unforced breaths. Feel the ribcage expand on the inhale and gently retract on the exhale. (I picture an umbrella slowly opening on the inhale and closing on the exhale)*
- Finally put your hands underneath the collarbone for five more breaths. Feel the movement in your body.*

How do you feel after this simple exercise? Do you feel any different in your level of energy? Do you feel any quieter? Breathing exercises allow you to remain in the present, to be mindful and attentive to whatever is happening.

#### **The Breath 2**

Here is a powerful breathing exercise: alternate nostril breathing.

Use your right hand (if you are right-handed). The thumb is used to close the right nostril and the ring finger to close the left nostril. You can tuck the two middle fingers into the palm of your hand or rest them on the forehead.

- Close the right nostril with your thumb and gently exhale. Then inhale through your left nostril.*
- Next, close your left nostril with your ring finger, exhale gently and inhale through your right nostril.*
- Repeat the alternate nostril breathing for as long as you want.*

Can you feel the effect of the calming breath? This breath helps alleviate headaches, migraines, and generally frazzled states of being. I use this exercise quite often when standing in the wings. It gives me something precise to do rather than dwelling on negative thoughts; it helps me stay focused on the present moment.

## **Mental Blocks**

Our final step is to deal with mental blocks - understanding where they come from and how we can reprogram the mind; how we can switch from a negative channel to a positive one.

An artist ready to give a performance cannot afford to succumb to negative ideas. Negative voices can especially be heard when the event is important; when important people are in the hall, when the hall is foreboding, when “it is the chance of a lifetime.”

I was first introduced to the concept of changing preconceived notions by composer Michael Colgrass. He was giving a talk at Carnegie Hall before a performance of one of his pieces. For him, more than the audience or the performing conditions, it was the hall itself - Carnegie Hall - that was foreboding. So he went into the Green Room at the intermission, took off his jacket, shoes and cuff links, did some yoga, and began to have fun imagining the reaction of the audience (if only they could see him). Then he put himself back together and went to stand in the wings. Not only had the exercise given him some energy, it had also changed his image of Carnegie Hall, from a place where you were supposed to be dignified, serious (and scared), to one where you could have fun.

Yoga in the Green Room of a concert hall might not be everyone’s cup of tea but the concept remains powerful: by changing the way you look at things, you have the ability to empower yourself. But (I can already hear some grumbling!)... How can we do it? Consider this. When we worry, we are using our imagination to our disadvantage: imagining (sometimes very vividly and with great power) what we don’t want to happen. Well, it is just as possible to use our imagination to our benefit, to use positive mental imagery and visualize our perfect performance? Try this simple exercise.

- Sit comfortably in a chair, close your eyes and allow relaxation progressively in every part of your body: eyes, cheeks, jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, back, abdomen, legs and feet.*

*•As you feel relaxation coming over your body, bring to mind a performance that could be stressful and start to visualize your perfect performance - how you want the performance to be, how you want to feel about it, what you want to share with the audience, and how you would like your audience to react.*

You may want to do this exercise several times, especially as your performance gets nearer.

This represents the power of the mind that works towards achievement.

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