MAYA BREUER:
Good afternoon I would like to welcome you all to the yoga alliance community saga. It's a pleasure to have my dear friend Jonathan with us today. As we begin, let us bring ourselves into a place of stillness.

If you are seated in a chair just place your feet on the floor. If you are lying down, make sure that you are lying flat. And just listen to the sound of my voice as we begin to practice the three-part breasts. We inhale below the navel above the -- fill the chest and exhale from the top down.

Inhale and we will do one, two, three. Exhale. Two, three, four, five, six.
Inhale, one, two, three, exhale two, three, four, five, six.

Once more. One, two, three,
Two, three, four, five, six.

Now we are all on our own. Letting the front body expand. And making sure we lengthened the exhalation

Feeling the breath

Meditate, there is nothing in all creation so like God as stillness. Once again, it gives me the greatest pleasure to welcome my friend Jonathan to the community Songhai and a little bit about Jonathan, he is a guiding teaching, community of Washington DC and he is a founder of the meditation teacher training in Washington. I met Jonathan a few years before he became the president of the Center for yoga and health. He leaves, and retreats trainings and classes all through Washington DC area and he works with individuals. I just am so happy to have you, Jonathan, please let us learn about this wonderful topic, meditation and nature. Namaste.

JONATHAN FOUST:
Maia, thank you so much. Some challenging times way back when. I like to jump right in and tell a little story. Just very briefly, just to share… There was a story of a young woman who was going for her early morning runs. She saw this older man who would always be sitting on the bank of the river every day. She asked him what he did and he said a lot of times I sit and think, but sometimes I just sit.

Because nature is such an incredible doorway to consciousness. I'm grateful to have this time with you. Maybe a little inspiration for teaching as well. I will share a few stories, we will explore a few meditation practices and you might be able to share with your students and we will have some time for questions. We will popping back and forth from sharing images of you, telling stories and back-and-forth. An essential question is, why do we practice? Why do we engage into yoga, meditation, all these self-discovery practices? When I was president of the center, I
got a call from a reporter from a fashion magazine who is looking for a reaction. She said, are you aware that Donna has just come out with the $300 yoga mat bag? What's your reaction? If you engage into this practice your life is going to change. When you think about why you practice, I would like to think of two big distinctions. One is the path of means or you could call it the path of self-improvement. We want to be a better listener or partner. All good stuff. There's also the path of liberation. About waking up to reality. One of the best definitions that I love is that spiritual practices about cultivating penetrating insights into the nature of reality. I love that line. No matter if we are here because we want to loosen up our hamstrings, but ultimately where it will lead us is to see more clearly. I would like to tell you a little story with some Images.

I have the great blessing to live outside of Washington DC with my lovely wife, Tara, and we live in the woods next to the Perdomo River. I keep three birdfeeders going pretty much year-round. Everything from these massive woodpeckers to the smallest little Rams. This is one of my favorite images. And a really cool thing about when you have a birdfeeder, sometimes people say that they are actually clock feeders and fox feeders. Because we have these foxes that come by. They eat the seeds that have fallen from the red feeders and they are there to pick off the little squirrels. One of the foxes started hanging out on the property a whole lot. I decided I'm going to see if I can befriend the sky. -- This guy. We would sit together maybe 10 or 20 minutes at a time. I was trying to tune into fox consciousness. And we often talk about how in spiritual practice when you begin to sense something below the line of awareness, something that's unseen or unfelt, to sense that as a wild animal hanging at the edge of the village, when you feel some discomfort, pain, sadness, physical discomfort, you can't chase it. I could not chase that fox down. I cannot seduce it in. But you can let it know that you see it. As that fox got there, I knew it was there. The same way we befriended the parts in ourselves, we started to become companions. And one day, this little creature showed up. And, with this little curious mind he started checking out the world. Then more emerged. And what was so amazing was how, because I had befriended this fox, I was allowed to hang out with the litter. So I got to watch them work on their play. I got to watch them hide mice in the woodpile and I got to watch it attack dandelions. And it was such a magical world to see these pups all growing up together. To have that close relationship with being at the edge of the woods was really quite transformational and watching these little guys grow up. Then recently, this last fall, the parents came right behind the house and they just hung out there for the longest time and we made a lot of eye contact. I got this incredible sad feeling inside and I could not explain it. It was almost as if they were saying goodbye. After that day, they were gone. I got to reflect on the teaching for me here. And really what I got to see was impermanence. This wonderful experience I've had of the preciousness of being with these little creatures and making friends with something at the edge of the woods. They are here and then they are gone. I got to see what I resist create stress and suffering. What I cling to to the degree I hang onto it, there's rope burn. And I got to see that so much of life is completely beyond my control. I'm just the witness. Of what's happening in life. I would like to offer a short little reflection. A little Zen pop quiz if you will. If you like, you can close your eyes and if you would, take three slow and full and deep breaths. Notice where you feel the breath on the inside right now. If you lead, let your awareness moved to some favorite sacred place in nature. It could be something back when you were a kid or something recent or someplace to go to that for you, has some significance. It might be helpful to sense if you can recall any imagery. You see this as a still image or moving image. If you turn up the quality of the light. Turn up the colors. It might make it more alive. Are there any sounds you associate with this memory. Any smells? As you let this memory become more alive in the mind, can you begin to sense that more alive on the inside? The felt sense of this memory. As you hold this memory close, just notice how your nervous system responds. If you would again,
you could take three slow deep breaths. You may have felt a shift in the memory. Someplace in nature that secret for you and there's no question that there is great healing in nature. When you look toward the elements of what it is that brings us so fully alive inside. They speak of tuning into the four elements. To reflect on fire. The sense of life force. The animation of the mind. The aliveness of prana. We are invited to reflect on water. The movement of energy. The circulation of life force in our body. We are invited to reflect on earth to connect with earth and a sense the solidity of earth. To sense the structure of things. We are invited to open our awareness to error. The vastness of things. The space in which everything can arise and everything changes. So, when you take time to consciously connect to nature you open to all the senses. And when you open to the senses you open to reality. Potentially, the author of the yoga Sutra, he planted this when he said the mind can be made steady by bringing it into contact with sense experiencing. So we have all these different traditions of forest bathing. The Buddhist teachings to find a tree in the woods and find a place where you will not be disturbed. To sit crosslegged. And draw your attention to what is happening as it's happening. I love going to the ocean. One of my favorite things is watching people watching the ocean. Most of the time I noticed they have their mouth open and they are drooling. They are doing the big sky meditation. They are automatically intuitively opening into that sense of space that is so vast. That it contains everything. Quite often I do a lot of work with people of connecting with the body doing somatic inquiry. I'm really quite stunned. When I might be doing a journey with someone and wrestling with their issues, I often times at the very end of the session will have them close their eyes and tune into that sense of listening deeply to the wisdom of the body. I asked them this question, what advice do you have to give yourself? And it's never, work harder. Buckle down. Tighten up. Quite often is some variation of, I need to take more time out. I need to take more time in nature. I need to listen to my body. To exercise, to sleep, hydrate, and slowdown. There is this phrase that says meditation is an accident. Meditation makes you accident-prone. Nature becomes an incredible tool for guiding ourselves and guiding our students back to this fundamental sense of reality. I'm always struck how in yoga, we have so many references to animals. The downward dog. The cat. The fish. The cow, cobra, turtle, pigeon, crow, scorpion, frog, peacock. My specialty pose is the reverse peacock if you can imagine that. Then we have these phrases like, feel like a lion in your practice. In all these different metaphors, and I actually think one of my favorites, at least for meditation is to be like an eagle. When we cultivate that sense of witness there's the beautiful sense of who we are as the observer. Let's caught by these filters of greed and hatred and delusion. Where I live along the river, I get to hang out with the Eagles pretty much every day. I watched them build their nests which was an amazing experience. And now for the last three or four years I get to watch them raise their little ones. I love this image. Doesn't that look like the perfect quintessential miserable teenager? Actually, the young ones, they look bigger than the adults because they have these long feathers that make it easier for them to fly. After about two years, the feathers dropped out and they get the more mature feathers. That's when their head begins to turn white. When it comes to turning in to nature, it becomes an interesting thing to use metaphors that can be really helpful for people. I would like to share with you a short meditation. This uses the metaphor of the mountain when you imagine yourself as the mountain. You become more aware of everything that is changing. You will see the clouds come and go. The shadows moved across snowfalls, snow melts. Birds come, birds go. Flowers come in the spring. And they fall away in the fall. If you like, you can close your eyes. We will just too a few moments. And you might again, take three and slow full breaths. Think of your favorite mountain. If there is a mountain that you have a connection with, and if you don't have a particular connection, you might imagine the most ideal mountain. And imagine what it's like to look at that mountain from afar. And imagine if you like that you could actually become that mountain. Imagine a steadiness, a presence. Watching the clouds come
and go. Watching seasons slowly turn. And you might imagine just as those clouds come and go so, all the different qualities of mind. How the wanting mind comes and goes. The judging mind the worried mind. The sad and depressed quality of mind. Doubt. Can you imagine yourself, if just for a moment has that sense of the mountain in the midst of all that changes in your life, can you sense a quality of changelessness. You might take three slow deep breaths. Open your sense of surrounding, your sense of touch. The light beyond your eyes. In the midst of all the changes, the steadiness of the mountain. If you like you can deepen your breath. If you like, you can open your eyes.

MAYA BREUER:
Just wonderful, and really powerful. I want to ask a question, we live in a culture where impermanence is never discussed. We start out and we assume, and we keep listening for those clips that say yes, we are going to live until 80, we are going to live until 90 or 100. There's something lost because impermanence is not every day language. Can you talk about the importance of impermanence? How it's an important as other aspects of the spiritual practices that we work on?

JONATHAN FOUST:
Is so powerful because when we remember impermanence, really interesting things begin to arise. I'm always struck by something the Buddha legislative said, -- the Buddha allegedly said. One thing he said, everyone is looking for happiness. In exactly the wrong way. We are looking for happiness through sense fulfillment. We are staking our entire life on things that are destined to change. These teachings of impermanence is so powerful. When you begin to recognize that anything of causes and conditions is subject to change. When we can remember that. For example, in hanging out with those foxes every day for a couple of months and suddenly they are gone… I can just see that it was my relationship to impermanence that was creating my stress and suffering because I felt so sad. I felt depressed for a while. I did not want it to change. Anything that is changing, you don't wanted to and anything that isn't and you do to the degree that you resist there's going to be some form of rope burn. What I find is that when we recognize impermanence and embrace it, then there can be this explosion of the heart. The sense of gratitude. The delicacy of what a gift to have those moments for those little foxes. What a gift to have this time with your loved ones because the truth is, everyone is going to disappear in no particular order. It's brutal but it's also liberating.

MAYA BREUER:
How does meditation support us letting go? Letting go because we are here and bombarded with do this, do that, learn these, practice test, learn this. How do we get the noise quiet and how does meditation take us through that? So many people ask me, I still feel a challenge after I get off the mat and stop the mentation. How do we carry that with us?

JONATHAN FOUST:
As I like to joke, if you practice yoga and meditation you will feel better. You will feel your sadness better, your depression… Your rage better. All of that. We are developing self-awareness and self diagnosis. The two questions of mindfulness is, what exactly is happening right now? Can I name it? Oh, this is grace. And the next question is, how can I be with that? The beautiful parallel I find from this, I like to think of it as focus, flow, and let go. Focus is climbed -- focuses confrontation. It opens up to the fact of everything changing. Can I really let it go and let it be? Sometimes what we need to calm the mind is needing that focus. We need that concentration because when we are absorbed, there's this quality of calming. And quite often,
it's a little paradoxical, but you might be scattered, but what you might need is focus and concentration. That could be where your dear -- where you're hanging on for dear life with the posture and then you're open to flow and letting go.

MAYA BREUER:
I was asked to be in a flow, and how they can bring the practice to community of colors or communities that have not traditionally been involved in the practice of mindfulness and meditation. I would love to… What do you think? To learn what you think about, how we take that in.

JONATHAN FOUST:
That's a really great inquiry, and just to quote a wonderful teacher, he gave you this example. When he talked about the massive exodus with the boat people from Vietnam, that people were just setting off these rickety boats into really intense weather and a lot of piracy.

What he notice to that, if there were really bad storms, or if the boat was overtaken by Paris, if there was one calm person in the boat, the boat would remain calm.

The question becomes, how can you be the calm person in your boat? I love that story. What I also love… It's up to us to figure out how to get calm. The marketplace is overwhelming. Again, quoting the Buddha, be a light unto yourself that we have to take responsibility for our own awakening. If prayer or a faith-based approach it is… Really embrace that. I was raised a Quaker… The great teacher of Martin Luther King and Gandhi and on and on, generally would happen each of them was a searing event. His children were not safe. When he went inward through prayer and contemplation, utterly depressed and utterly enraged, somehow it transformed the world. It's up to each of us to find out what that is and take responsibility for that and we are going to fill our cup where we are overflowing.

Anger will be somewhat effective in the world, compassion and wisdom has another degree of effectiveness.

MAYA BREUER:
It all really depends on who the individual is, or what the community is comprised of? And where you are? I like you saying that prayer and faith, that's the doorway. That's the doorway in. It gives me hope for my people to find their way, not that there were is any meditating. But it could be accepting what people use to help soothe and calm.

JONATHAN FOUST:
The beautiful thing I love and yoga, when you look at all the doorways to union. What's so funny when all of these different paths, they will easily get drawn into the direct path. Devotion, that's the direct path. Purification of the mind, that's the direct path.

And why think it's so important that we really sense our character structure. What's the path that really draws us. You find what resonates for you and give yourself to it fully. And the self responsibility of it.

MAYA BREUER:
I love that too. I tell people and that has been my past. Let's all take a breath then. And exhale and we had a comment that coming. The person says, I am a birder and it's so wonderful to be
out in nature.

That's a really exciting thing. I want to turn this back into your hands in these last minutes. We have seven minutes. I would like you to just... Breeze and bring us home.

JONATHAN FOUST:
This is my favorite technique when we were walking outside. Their standard of walking meditation. Every little sound or vibration, you can hear the quality like nomadic life, negative space. Touching her feet as they left. The next minute, focus all of your attention on smell. But try rotating through the senses. What can happen sometime is so ordinary as walking can become this feast of incredible sensation. As all the great teaching say, the doorway is found within. But the more absorbed you can get into sensation, the more you will come into contact with what is here and true. I love that technique. Let me share with you, one of my favorite readings, going to throw a couple of images out here as well.

Look carefully, he says, pay attention. Notice. He says, keep looking. He says, stay curious. He says, there is no end to seeing. He says, everything is alive. Shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees, wood is alive. Water is alive. Everything has its own life. Everything lives inside of us. He says, live with the world inside of you. They matter is that you care. It matters that you feel. It matters that you notice. It matters that life lives through you. Look. And feel. Let life take you by the hand. Let life live through you.

MAYA BREUER:
Let us focus for one moment on the breath. I want to send loving energy to my friend Jonathan for this heartening and insightful sharing on nature and meditation. Feel your breath. And allow the breath float away. I want you to know that many people are sharing thank yous and this is very special with you.

Let us just go within and we will and this today by chanting and allowing the breath and exhale. Allow, and exhale. Allow the breath and exhale. Bring your palms in front of your heart and let us join our voices and a chant the sound... Inhale... Peace, peace, peace. I honor the light within you. Jonathan, and all.

JONATHAN FOUST:
What a delight to have this time with you.