

## Basic but highly beneficial yogic breathing practices

We take breathing for granted as it is part of our autonomic nervous system which controls many of our bodily functions without our having to consciously direct them. Breath is life – without breath there is no life. Therefore, if we enhance the breathing capacity and tidal volume (the normal volume of air displaced between normal inhalation and exhalation) we enhance and enrich life – our vital life force, known as prana and in turn, our energy for life.

When young, we breathe fully – right down into the abdomen and fully on a cellular basis through the skin, every cell pulsating with life. But then as life's stresses and strains accumulate into adulthood, we start to hold the breath in or out and our natural breathing pattern becomes disturbed in some way. Holding the breath in is associated with high blood pressure and all stress-related diseases and holding the breath out is associated with low blood pressure, depression and a lack of energy for life, to name but two of the types of altered breathing patterns – there are many more.

When you wish to listen to a quiet sound, you almost suspend breathing and when you are engaged in a hobby that you enjoy your breath is barely noticeable. In contrast, when you are tense or angry you are breathing from the front of your lungs and when you are crying, you can hardly catch your breath.

The breath and mind are inextricably linked. The state of mind and the breath are completely tied up with one another. It follows, then, that by controlling the breath you can learn to control your state of mind.

We use only about one fifth of the capacity of our lungs. But after practising breathing in the course of our yoga practice we:

- Calm and quieten the mind, reducing tension and calm the nerves
- Strengthen the immune system
- Improve concentration
- Increase the capacity of the lungs (tidal volume)
- Improve circulation of the blood, giving an increased oxygen supply to all cells of the body including nerve cells and resulting in healthier tissues and efficient metabolism
- Refresh both the body and mind/co-ordination of the mind and the systems of the body

Read on to see how simple the basic breathing practices are:

Check in breathing – lie in semi-supine position (with the knees bent, soles of the feet on the mat). Breathe through the nostrils with the lips touching together softly. Notice the touch of the breath to the body – where does it enter it and are

you breathing high up in the chest or lower down? Are you a chest breather or is your chest tight so that you are only breathing into your abdomen? Are you breathing shallowly? The diaphragm at the bottom of the ribs is the point of control in the act of breathing – it contracts and moves downward on the inhalation to make room for the air to come into the lungs and it relaxes and domes back up to its original position on the exhalation to push the air out. To learn complete breath, lie on the floor or in semi-supine (with the knees bent) and:

- i) place the hands on the upper abdomen so that the little fingers are roughly in line with the navel. Breathe in and notice the lift of the abdomen and the hands and breathe out and notice the lowering of the abdomen and the hands – movement is in response to the movement in the diaphragm [**upper abdominal breathing**].
- ii) place the hands over the rib cage and notice the widening and lifting of the rib cage on the inhalation and the retracting and lowering of it on the exhalation [**mid-chest breathing**].
- iii) place the hands on the upper chest just below the collar bones and notice the lift of the upper chest and collar bones on the inhalation and the lowering and retracting on the exhalation [**Upper chest breathing**].
- iv) Now try to breathe continuously, into each area in turn (hands can be placed on the upper abdomen again). Breathe in thinking “upper abdomen” then “mid-chest” then “upper chest” – this translates to a count of 6, there will be a momentary pause and then breathe out with your attention on the sinking (but not contracting) of the upper abdomen, lowering of the rib cage and lowering of the upper chest.

You can get more air in if you practice breathing in a seated position. To sit in a crossed legs position, find a couple of blocks – enough support under you so that your hips are lower than your knees – a blanket roll to put around the cross of your legs and a medium sized bolster to place into the back of your waist to contact the wall. This will help you to sit up tall. Alternatively, you can kneel up in vajrasana pose.



Vajrasana pose – you can place blankets between the backs of your thighs and lower legs or even a soft bolster in order that your spine can be extended up

### **Pauses are an integral part of the breathing cycle**

The pauses between the inhalation and exhalation are really important. They are natural but when our own disturbed patterns get fixed, particularly quickened

breathing, we lose those pauses. During the pauses the life force can become manifest in the body and a resource can be drawn from to bring vitality to the body.

**Practice** following the inhalation and exhalation and acknowledge the pause that occurs at the end of each action. This is an observational practice where mind and breath are working in synch – notice whether the pauses lengthen and you can enjoy a silence and stillness that is so key to maintaining the natural rhythm of the breath and the attendant health benefits.

### **Stress-busting abdominal breathing**

Lie down and place the hands on the upper abdomen. Follow the rise of the abdomen on the inhalation and the lowering of it on the exhalation. Ensure that the chest doesn't rise (you can check this by placing one of your hands onto the chest to ensure that it remains still). This type of deeper breathing slows the heartbeat and can lower or stabilize blood pressure. If there is a feeling of not being able to fill the upper abdomen with air, say the words "front, sides and back" as you breathe into the area and then exhale in a more passive action with a feeling of sinking down, releasing trauma and tension. This area around the solar plexus, a concentration of nerves is often thought of as the second brain of the body so this practice is effective in soothing the sympathetic element of the nervous system (fight or flight element).

There are many breathing practices available in yoga – called pranayama – which translates to mean **expansion of the life force**. The more you practice them, the more you notice the effect of them. Imagine you are a child going through a crying episode, during which your body is shaking and you are gasping and feeling really out of sorts. But after you had been pacified and have finished crying, you feel calm and notice yourself sighing as the tension that built up during the episode leaves your body. That relaxed feeling comes after practising yogic breathing exercises. However, you can feel very tired after crying and this **is not** the way you feel after practising yogic breathing. Imagine you are lying in soft sand on your favourite beach, the sun is giving off just the right amount of heat and you feel really well and full of the joys of life. That is how you could feel after just 5 or 10 minutes of practising yoga breathing!

*This is just a very short introduction to yoga breathing aiming to show that the practices can be really simple yet no less effective.*

*Polly*