

Breathing Lessons

Yogic breathwork—or pranayama—is an amazing tool for shifting your mood and energy level.

SOONER OR LATER, most of us feel a little depressed or anxious, and certainly all of us know what it's like to feel tired. There are many different ways of dealing with these feelings, from exercise to meditation, from medication to a long vacation in Hawaii. But you may not realize that you already have on hand a safe, effective, and inexpensive remedy for fatigue and all manner of mental agitation. What is this magical elixir? Your own breath.

As yogis have known for centuries—and as medical science is beginning to discover—the breath has amazing recuperative powers. By controlling the breath (a practice called pranayama), the yogis found, they could alter their state of mind. The three pranayama practices described here primarily create their effects by slowing and regularizing the breath. This engages what scientists call the parasympathetic nervous system, a complex biological mechanism that calms and soothes us.

How does slower breathing help? In stressful times, we typically breathe too rapidly. This leads to a buildup of oxygen in the bloodstream and a corresponding decrease in the relative amount of carbon dioxide, which in turn upsets the ideal acid-alkaline balance—the pH level—of the blood. This condition, known as respiratory alkalosis, can result in muscle twitching, nausea, irritability, lightheadedness, confusion, and anxiety.

In contrast, slowing the breath raises the carbon dioxide level in the blood, which nudges the pH level back to a less alkaline state. As the blood's pH changes, the parasympathetic nervous system calms us in a variety of ways, including telling the vagus nerve to secrete acetylcholine, a substance that lowers the heart rate.

Now please note that I'm not recommending that you try to breathe away *chronic* anxiety, fatigue, or depression. None of these conditions is easily or safely self-treated. In fact, tackling them by yourself, without professional supervision, could make them worse.



But your breath can be a powerful ally in coping with temporary physical and emotional states—whether you're despondent about an argument with a close friend, apprehensive about a job interview, or exhausted after a tough day at work.

CATCH YOUR BREATH

As with any treatment, the breathing remedy must be administered intelligently and judiciously to be fully effective. Each condition responds best to its own special breath. To calm anxiety, for example, you can purposely

lengthen your exhalations; to alleviate dullness and fatigue, you can lengthen your inhalations. And to lift yourself out of an emotional pit, it's most effective to equalize the lengths of your inhalations and exhalations.

If you want your breath to work as an extra-strength remedy, it's a good idea to do some preliminary practice before you try to apply these techniques under stress. First, spend some time with your breath when you're feeling in the pink, learning to closely watch its movements and tendencies.

When you first try to look at your breath, the experience may feel akin to that of a fish attempting to describe water. Your breathing is so habitual that you've probably never given it much attention, and therefore you have little sense of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways it can change. But if you continue to watch, you will probably begin to notice many different dimensions, physical and emotional, to the feeling of your breath.

You'll probably notice that watching the breath immediately initiates a chain of changes in it. First, it slows down. As it slows, its ordinarily rather ragged movements smooth out. And as the breath smoothes out, the space it occupies in the body increases.

When we breathe, most of us expand only a limited portion of the torso, generally in the front around the lower ribs and upper belly. Often, our breathing is restricted and shallow; ideally, it should be deep and full, so each breath cycle expands and contracts the height, width, and depth of the whole torso.

To experiment with consciously expanding your breath, sit in a chair with your spine erect—or, better yet, lie on your back on the floor. Put your fingertips lightly on your lower belly, just above the pubic bone, and try to direct a few inhalations into this space, expanding the belly each time. Once you can do this, move your fingertips to the spaces below your collarbones, placing your pinkie tips on the sides of the sternum and splaying the rest of your fingers out to the sides.

Then, for a few inhalations, see if you can gently expand these spaces. Be careful

to keep your throat as soft as possible as you do this, because there's a counterproductive tendency to tense it as you inhale into the upper chest.

Once you can move the breath into the lower belly and upper chest, try to awaken your entire back torso, an area that is terra incognita for many people. As much as you can, breathe into your back body, feeling how it balloons and then deflates with each breath cycle. Once you can feel this, experiment with filling all of your newfound spaces with every breath.

BREATHING ROOM

Sometimes just watching and expanding your breath for several minutes can have a surprisingly positive influence on your energy level and mood. But you can multiply this effect significantly by using pranayama—breathing exercises tailored to have an immediate effect on specific moods and conditions. Based on knowledge cultivated and refined by the yogis over thousands of years of practice, these exercises intentionally alter the speed, rhythm, and space of the breath.

Your breath possesses an innate intelligence honed over millions of years of evolution. Learn to trust its messages and all will be well.

One brief caution before you begin: Never, ever, overdo it in any breathing exercise. If you begin to feel uncomfortable, go back to your everyday breath. *Never* force your breath to do anything it doesn't want to do.

How will you know when your breath is telling you to stop? If the unpleasant feelings you started with become even more unpleasant, that's your cue. Your breath, believe it or not, possesses an innate intelligence, honed over millions of years of evolution. Learn to trust its messages and all will be well.

Traditionally, the practitioner does pranayama while sitting on the ground, with the spine long and erect. But those of us who aren't accustomed to extended sitting in such a position often find our-

selves aching and fidgeting after only a short while; this interferes with both our concentration and the efficacy of the breathing remedy. If this is the case for you, sit in a chair or, better still, try lying on your back on the floor.

If your floor isn't carpeted, be sure to pad it with a folded blanket, and support your neck and head on a small, firm pillow. Lie with your legs straight, heels a few inches apart, or bend your knees over a yoga bolster or firm pillow; this setup helps release a stiff back and relax a tense belly. Lay your arms on the floor out to the sides, angled about 45 degrees to your torso, and close your eyes. Covering the eyes with an eye pillow is especially helpful. (These are widely available for about \$15 at yoga studios and online; you can also make your own by partially filling a sock with rice and sewing the opening shut.)

When you're comfortably set up, begin watching your everyday breath for a few minutes, fixing it in the foreground of your awareness. Then, for another minute or so, mentally count the length of both

your inhalations and exhalations; for example, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, and so on (or, if you prefer, "One *Om*, two *Om*, three *Om*"). Don't be

surprised if your exhalations are slightly longer than your inhalations; that's quite common. Once you've settled into your breath, you're ready to try one of the specific exercises below to counteract anxiety, fatigue, or depression.

ANXIETY PRESCRIPTION

You can work with anxiety by focusing on your exhalations and lengthening them, deliberately and gradually. For example, if your everyday exhalation lasts six counts, draw each one out to seven for a few breathing cycles, then to eight for a few cycles, and so on, until you find a length that suits you.

Once you've comfortably increased the length of your exhalations by a few counts, turn part of your attention to the

subtle sound of them. You'll notice that each one makes a soft "ha," like a gentle sigh. Try to make this sound—and your exhalations—as soft and even as possible from beginning to end. Pause briefly at

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the end of each exhalation, resting peacefully in the stillness. Continuing like this, watch your breath as steadily as you can for 10 to 15 minutes.

FATIGUE FIX

To work with fatigue, settle into your everyday breath. Then, after it has slowed down and smoothed out, begin to pause briefly after an exhalation. Rest peacefully in the stillness.

After a few seconds, you'll feel a kind of inner ripple; it's the swell of your next inhalation, building like a wave approaching the shore. Don't take the inhalation immediately; instead, allow it to gather and grow for another second or two. Then, without effort or resistance, gratefully receive the breath.

Continue to explore lengthening your exhalation retentions for 10 or 15 breaths. Then begin to lengthen your inhalations gradually, just as you lengthened your exhalations in the previous exercise for anxiety. Finally, shift part of your focus to the sound of your inhalations, a slightly whispering sibilance the yogis think of as "sa." Try to make this sound—and your inhalations—as soft and even as possible from beginning to end, and continue to watch your breath as steadily as you can for 10 to 15 minutes.

DEPRESSION DECOMPRESSION

Working with depression can be a bit tricky. Be cautious about how you apply the breathing remedy when you're feeling blue. Forcing the breath can quickly exacerbate your lousy mood.

As with any breathwork, start by settling into a comfortable position and

allowing your everyday breath to slow down and smooth out. Then count the length of your next inhalation. When you release your exhalation, match its length to that of the inhalation. Continue in

this fashion for a minute or so, balancing the length of the inhalations and exhalations. Then gradually—just once out of every three or four cycles—add another count to each inhalation and each exhalation until you reach a number that suits you. The yogis call this equal ratio breathing.

For depression, the effect of the breath on your mood is the best indicator of how long you should continue the exercise. Start out with a particular time goal in mind—say, 10 minutes—but be ready to shorten that by a few minutes if you feel your depression lifting. On the other hand, you can continue on past your goal for a few minutes if you feel you need to.

FRESH AIR

How often do you need to practice to make the breathing remedy effective when you really need it? There's no pat answer; it's a practice like any other, and the more you exercise your ability to watch your breath, the better you will become at doing it.

Try to schedule a regular 10-minute breath-awareness practice during a quiet part of the day. (For many people, early morning is best.) But if that seems like too much of a commitment, it's simple enough just to close your eyes and take 60-second conscious breathing breaks at random moments in your daily routine. You might find that these breaks are almost as energizing as a coffee break—and they have a lot fewer side effects. In fact, you may find that conscious breathing not only soothes your emotions and boosts your energy; it can also make your life richer, fuller, and more fun. ■

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BREATHING MEDITATION **minding your breath**

If you find breathwork enjoyable, you might want to try using it as a way to explore meditation. Here's how:

The first step is to take up your breathing as an exclusive object of attention: Focus your attention on the sensations produced as the lungs, naturally and without interruption, fill up and empty themselves.

Simply allow the breath to flow—let the breath happen, rather than making it happen. This art of allowing is vital in the practice of meditation. The free flow of breath brings with it great peace and calm. It prepares the mind to flow freely.

Of course, when you direct your attention to the breath, you may find that the mind prefers to be anywhere else but there. In this meditation technique, the practice is to return to the breath each time you are distracted. Little by little, the mind will learn to settle down and feel steady, calm, and peaceful.

Once you have spent some time focusing on your breathing, gradually enlarge the scope of your awareness so that it becomes more comprehensive. Begin to include all bodily sensations—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—and the wide variety of mind states that accompany them. Let yourself become increasingly familiar and at home with bodily life, emotions, and the thought process itself. You are learning the art of self-observation, while being in touch with the fact that you are breathing in and out. The skill you're developing is the ability to widen and deepen the capacity to receive your own experience with intimacy and a lack of bias.

You can also use your breath to help you be mindful during the activities of your day. Turning to your breathing from time to time can ground you in these activities. The breath is always with you, and you can let it assist you in cutting down on unnecessary thinking that distracts you from the here and now.

Adapted from "Breathing Lessons," by vipassana meditation teacher Larry Rosenberg, from the September/October 2002 issue of Yoga Journal.