

Practices: Breathing

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(see also <http://www.healthy.net/scr/Column.aspx?Id=136>)

It is a bit unusual to us in the western world to consider the importance of breathing techniques. After all, we are always breathing, aren't we? It seems a little silly to put extra attention to something we do naturally. Notice your own breathing. Isn't each breath actually very shallow? Does your posture or position encourage or restrict your ability to take full breaths? If you note carefully you will probably realize that you are utilizing one quarter or less, of your lung capacity.

The presence of special breathing practices in the ancient cultures has always been a mystery to people in the Western world. There are numerous beneficial physiological mechanisms that are triggered when we turn our attention to the breath and then increase it's volume. When volume, rate and attention level are all altered, dramatic physiological, and even emotional, changes can occur. As it turns out, unknown to science until very recently, the action of the lungs, diaphragm and thorax are a primary pump for the lymph fluid, a lymph heart. This mechanism may be more important to the lymph heart than body movements. In addition, the breath is the source for oxygen which is the key element in the body's ability to produce energy. And the act of relaxed, full breathing moves the function of the autonomic nervous system towards balance or homeostasis. (Please see the section on physiology in "The Most Profound Medicine" for a complete revelation of the mechanisms initiated by Qigong).

From the traditions of the ancients we know that breathing practices are important. Why would they continue to employ techniques that were ineffective? Empirical science, the scientific method of all original cultures, is based on trial and error. That which has value is kept and employed. That which is found to have little or no value is dropped. In the empirical approach, that which is kept, is "tried and true". Empirically breath practice is "tried and true".

We also know that these practices are important through clinical experience. Patients who have learned and used breath practice as a part of their daily personal system of self-applied health enhancement respond more quickly to treatment, no matter what type of physician they are seeing. Individuals who are well are able to remain more well, adapt to greater stress and have greater endurance when they keep breath practice in their daily self-care ritual.

Inspiration is the rush that one feels when over taken by spiritual energy, it is the force that impels one forward into life, and it is the divine influence that brings forth creativity and vitality. Inspiration is, also, "to breathe in ". The breath is a link to the most profound medicine that we carry within us. Within this nearly unconscious gesture, a breath, that we enact 1,261,440,000 (1 and 1/4 billion) times in our life span there is a simple yet profound healing capability.

Our first act when we emerge from the womb is to inspire. Our last act is to dis-inspire or expire. These breaths, first in and finally out, are like parentheses that encompass our corporal life. It is no surprise that the breath would be so remarkably linked to the power of healing.

Full Chest and Abdominal Breathing

This method is simply a deepening of the breath. Take slow, deep, rhythmic breaths through the nose. When the diaphragm drops down, the abdomen is expanded allowing the air to rush into the vacuum created in the lungs. Then the chest cavity is expanded, allowing the lungs to fill completely. This is followed by a slow, even exhalation which empties the lungs completely. This simple breath practice done slowly and fully, with intention, concentration and relaxation activates all of the primary benefits of therapeutic breath practice. In Qigong and Pranayama the breath is retained for additional benefit.

Application Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 6 to 10 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 6 to 10 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.
- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 15 to 20 repetitions, in 10 to 15 sessions per day.
- Getting started: 2 to 3 repetitions, once or twice per day. Remember to keep it easy and fun.

Every Seventh Breath Full and Relaxed

This method is similar to the previous method. However, this technique brings the consciousness of the breath and the benefits of breath practice to as much of one's daily activities as possible. Rather than the concentrated but brief effects of doing breathing exercises for a specific period of time this method spreads the benefits of breath practice, pervasively, throughout the day. Take a deep, full, relaxed breath. As you exhale allow yourself to deeply relax. Then breath as usual. As you exhale allow yourself to deeply relax. Then breath as usual. After seven regular breaths, initiate another deep and full breath.

The rhythm, every seventh or every twentieth breath, is best set at each individual's favorite number (seven happens to be mine). The point is not so much to count breaths as it is to become conscious of the breath and to initiate repeated deep breaths throughout the day. It could as easily be 10 or 12 full breaths per hour or a deep breath every 5 minutes. The primary feature of this particular technique is to spread the dramatic value of deep breathing throughout the whole day.

For example, a number of patients (health seekers) who have digital watches have set their alarms to remind them to take this breath. Another technique is to place colored sticker dots (available at office supply stores) to phones, mirrors, doors, etc. as constant reminders. Not only does the successful practice of this method give excellent physiological results but it also enhances consciousness or awareness.

It is very evident in the clinic that those people who become conscious enough to allow new health practices into their lives often have results that would be defined as dramatic by medical science. Note that the application suggestions for this breath technique tie it to awareness and consciousness. This is a truly extraordinary practice. When you master it authentically, you will literally be a new person. There is nothing but our inability to remember and our compulsive addiction to complexity and business that would keep one who is in need of healing from doing this practice constantly throughout the day. This method is truly the profound within the simple.

Application Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: As often as you like or your consciousness will allow.
- Health enhancement: As often as you like or your consciousness will allow.
- Disease intervention: This breath practice is a powerful healer. Turn your attention to this practice and you will experience immediate benefit.
- Getting started: Create a plan for remaining conscious of the benefits of this practice and staying consistent in application. 2 to 3 repetitions, once or twice per day.

Extending the Inhalation, Extending the Exhalation

Even with deep breathing there is still some lung capacity left following the exhalation. In this method the fullest extent of filling and emptying of the lungs is enacted. Breathe in until you think the lungs are filled. Then take in 3 more short breaths, to full lung capacity. Following the emptying of the lungs on the exhalation, expel three additional breaths. At both extremes, inhalation and exhalation, the benefit may be multiplied by briefly holding the breath.

Application Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 6 to 10 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 6 to 10 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.

- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 15 to 20 repetitions, 10 to 15 sessions per day
- Getting started: 2 to 3 repetitions, once or twice per day. Remember to build up slowly, more is not better.

Exhale to Compress the Organs

This method takes the exhalation of the full chest and abdominal breath to a radical extreme that dramatically shifts the pressure in the pelvic, abdominal and chest cavities. The exhalation continues, until it feels as if the body and organs are compressing toward the center. Absolutely every bit of air is expelled, the abdomen presses inward and the anus is pulled upward. It should feel as if the whole body is purposefully collapsing or contracting around the organs and the central core of the body. Momentarily, a deep desire to inhale will be felt. In a relaxed manner allow the diaphragm to drop and the air to rush in to fill the lungs. allow the lungs to fill all the way.

This method can be practiced in a concentrated way for 6 to 20 breaths or it can be done throughout the day as in the previous technique. It unleashes a powerful healing potential that is always with you but rarely utilized.

Application Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 6 to 10 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 6 to 10 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.
- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 15 to 20 repetitions, once or twice per day. Remember to build up slowly, more is not better.

Rapid Abdominal Breathing

The central activity of this breath technique, called *bastrika* in India, is the rapid expansion and contraction of the abdomen. The Breath enters and exits rapidly through the nose. On inhalation the diaphragm drops down and the abdomen expands. On the exhalation the abdomen rapidly contracts, as if to slap against the spine. The diaphragm rapidly rises and forcefully expels the breath through the nose. The inhalation/exhalation cycle is done 25 to 100 times and is followed by a large inhalation with a brief or the goal of the practice.

This method has a major effect on the function of the organs in the abdominal and pelvic cavities. There is a massive concentration of lymphatic tissue in these areas and because of the one way nature of the lymphatic vessels this vigorous activity moves large amounts of lymph forward toward the elimination organs.

Application Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 6 to 10 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 6 to 10 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.
- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 15 to 20 sessions per day.
- Getting started: 2 to 3 repetitions, once or twice per day. You will immediately be conscious of a significant effect from this method.

Abdominal Lift

This technique is a traditional yoga practice called *Uddhiyana bandha*. Stand with feet at about shoulder width, bend the knees slightly, bend forward, exhale completely, brace the hands above the knees. Either lift and hold the abdomen upward against the spine or rhythmically contract and release the abdomen while maintaining the exhalation. Complete by returning to erect position and inhaling before needing to gasp.

Applications Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 3 to 4 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 3 to 4 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.
- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 6 to 10 repetitions, 8 to 10 sessions per day.
- Getting started: 2 to 3 repetitions, once or twice per day. Remember to build up slowly, if you are weak, this can be too much exertion if practiced too vigorously.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Holding one nostril closed inhale and exhale slowly and deeply. Then hold the opposite nostril closed, inhale and exhale deeply. This breath is often done in preparation for deep relaxation or meditation. You will notice that usually one or the other of the nostrils is more open. If you breath on a small hand mirror, the patch of mist from one nostril will be larger than from the other. The ancient practitioners of Yoga in India were aware of the significance of this and employed this knowledge to enhance health and consciousness. Western science did not notice this phenomena until the 1800's. It has been found recently, through the application of current neuroscience, that the practice of alternate nostril breathing helps to balance the right and left hemispheres of the brain.

Applications Suggestions:

- Health maintenance: 10 to 12 repetitions, 2 to 3 sessions per day.
- Health enhancement: 10 to 12 repetitions, 4 to 6 sessions per day.
- Disease intervention: Start slowly and build up to 15 to 20 repetitions, 8 to 10 sessions per day or up to even 100 repetitions in a single session.
- Getting started: 10 to 12 repetitions, once or twice per day. Notice that this method is very quieting.