

Hatha Yoga breathing

Before we can improve our breathing we must remember that the process existed long before we did - we have nothing to teach it. What we have to do is to prepare ourselves to receive its revitalizing strength by removing any obstacles that might hinder its good effects. Proper breathing depends on our eliminating tension, correcting bad habits, wrong mental and physical attitudes; the moment we get rid of these obstacles it will come into its own and bring us vitality and good health.

The corsets of 1900 are no longer in fashion, but there is still more than one item of clothing which prevents us from normal breathing - leather belts for men, girdles and bras for women. These must be as flexible as possible if they are not to hinder respiration. But the physical obstacles are even more daunting: the hard tense stomach which encumbers every breath, imprisoning the personality; the rib-cage as inflexible as a breast-plate; the diaphragm immobilized by the wind - itself caused by spasms - which has accumulated in the alimentary canal. The first step is to relax all these muscles, which when permanently tense are designed more successfully than any corset to prevent normal breathing; and this is why relaxation is the open door to yoga.

Priority given to exhalation

In the act of respiration, Westerners give precedence to the in-drawing of the breath. Yoga, on the other hand, maintains that all good respiration begins with a slow and complete exhalation, and that this perfect exhalation is an absolute prerequisite of correct and complete inhalation, for the very simple reason that, until a receptacle is emptied, it cannot be filled. Unless we first breathe out fully it is impossible to breathe in correctly.

Normal respiration therefore, begins with a slow calm exhalation carried out by relaxing of the inspiratory muscles. The chest is depressed by its own weight, expelling the air. This out breath must be as silent as every other action involved in breathing (you should not hear yourself breathe), and because it is silent, it will also be slow. At the end of the expiration the abdominal muscles help the lungs to empty to their fullest extent, by means of a contraction which expels the last traces of tainted air. The spongy make-up of the lungs does not allow them to be emptied completely - there is always a residue of impure air in the lungs. We must attempt to minimize this "residue" because with the fresh air provided by inhalation it makes up the actual air we breathe. The more complete the exhalation, therefore, the greater the quantity of fresh air to enter the lungs, and so the purer the air in contact with the alveolar surfaces.

The total volume of air which the lungs are able to contain is known as "the vital capacity". A more apt term cannot be imagined, and innumerable techniques have been thought up aimed at increasing this capacity. Before we can contemplate this improvement we must make use of what we already possess by carefully exhaling. Yoga recognizes three separate forms of breathing - diaphragmatic, intercostal, and clavicular. Complete yogic breathing combines all three, and constitutes the ideal technique.

Diaphragmatic breathing

The majority of men breathe in this way. The diaphragm subsides while the breath is drawn in, and the abdominal region swells. This is the least faulty method of breathing. The base of the lungs fills with air, and the rhythmic lowering of the diaphragm produces a constant, gentle massage of the whole abdominal content, and helps these organs to function correctly.

Intercostal breathing

This is achieved by raising the ribs through dilating the thoracic cage or chest wall like a pair of bellows. It is a form of breathing which fills the middle section of the lungs, allowing less air to enter than the abdominal respiration, and more important, involving far more effort! This is 'athletic' respiration. When combined with abdominal breathing it ventilates the lungs satisfactorily.

Clavicular breathing

Air is introduced by raising the collar-bone and shoulders. In this way, only the upper part of the lungs receives any fresh air. It is the least satisfactory method of breathing and is often characteristic of women.

Complete breathing

Complete yogic respiration incorporates all three methods, integrated into one single, full and rhythmic movement. The method is best studied while you are lying on your back, here is a brief description of the various phases:

- 1) Empty the lungs entirely.
- 2) Slowly lower the diaphragm allowing air to enter the lungs. When the abdomen swells filling the bottom of the lungs with air...
- 3) ...expand the ribs without straining, then...
- 4) ...allow the lungs to completely fill by raising the collar-bones.

Throughout this procedure, the air should enter in a continuous flow, without gasping. No noise must be made for it is essential to breathe silently!

It is of the utmost importance to concentrate the mind entirely upon the action of breathing!

When the lungs are completely filled, breathe out, in the same sequence as when inhaling. Now breathe in again in the same way. You may continue for as long as you wish. It should not induce any discomfort or fatigue. You can practice it at any time of day, whenever you think of it, at work, walking, any time; breathe consciously and as completely as possible. Gradually you will acquire the habit of complete respiration, and your method of breathing will improve as you go on. It is essential to reserve daily, for a few minutes' practice, a special time convenient to yourself (the morning when you wake up is a good time, and so is the evening before going to sleep).

Whenever you feel tired, depressed or discouraged do a few complete breathing exercises; your fatigue will disappear magically, your mental balance will be re-established and you will set to work again with renewed will.

Inspiration like exhalation must be silent, slow, continuous and easy. Do not blow yourself up like a balloon or tire! Breathe easily without straining. Remember that the ideal respiration is deep, slow, silent, easy. Those engaged in sedentary work are liable to accumulations of blood or to develop congestion in one organ or another. The slowing down of the bloodstream produces wear and premature aging in the organism. With complete breathing, the bloodstream in our organs is prevented from slowing down to the point where it stagnates and degenerates from "stream" into "marsh".

Complete Yogic respiration

Remember, Inhalation is made up of three partial phases:

- a) Diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing induced by lowering and flattening the dome-shaped diaphragm.
- b) Intercostal breathing brought about by expanding the rib cage.
- c) Clavicular breathing from the top of the lungs, produced by raising the upper part of the thorax.

Each of these phases has its own merits, but yogic inspiration is only complete when all three are done in conjunction. How can this breathing be learned? Before attempting to combine them - that is to say before we can achieve in one single, smooth and continuous movement complete and easy filling of the lungs, thereby supplying them with reviving air, and expanding the pulmonary alveoli (all 70 million of them) - we must learn to dissociate the three phases. First of all we practice breathing from the diaphragm.

Diaphragmatic breathing

In order to learn to breathe correctly from the diaphragm - easily completely and naturally - it is wise to practice it lying down, since it is then easier to relax the muscles of the abdominal wall, which serve to hold us upright when we are sitting or walking. Later you will be able to breathe from the diaphragm whenever required - even when walking or running.

To insure complete comfort it is often a good idea to place a cushion under the knees: this diminishes the lumbar arch. Do not lie on too soft a surface, because although it is possible to breathe from the diaphragm when in bed, it is even better to do the exercises on some firm support - such as a rug laid on the floor.

When practicing it is a good idea to close the eyes: this helps to increase concentration.

Before you begin, be sure to breathe out completely a few times; either by giving a few sighs, after which you pull in the stomach thus contracting the abdominal muscles, in order to get rid of any remaining air, or, if alone in the room, by emitting the sound *OM*. This obliges you to breathe out slowly and completely - and since the sound should be uniform, you will be able to expel the remainder of the air at the rate required. sound a long and sonorous *OOOOOOOMMMMMMMMM*, vibrating the *MMMMMM* inside the skull, and concentrating meanwhile upon the various muscles of which the abdomen is composed. After a few long, slow, deep exhalations there is an automatic tendency to breathe in more deeply from the stomach. We are going to try to accentuate this tendency as far as possible.

It is important to empty the lungs thoroughly, thereby getting rid of the greatest amount of air. This piston-like structure is however not rigid, and unlike that of a motorcar is not flat, but convex rather like the lip of a casserole dish. The diaphragm has a rather rigid, flat central section - the aponeurotic - and is surrounded by a girdle of peripheral muscles whose contraction determines its downward movements: the diaphragm muscles are among the strongest in the human body, or perhaps we should say, they are designed to be the strongest, because their owner alas, may allow them to atrophy. We can also understand why complete relaxation is only possible once the lungs are emptied without forcible exhalation - because at that moment the diaphragm muscles are at rest.

Absolute relaxation, therefore can only exist during those few seconds of respite which we allow when we hold our breath with the lungs empty.

Having completely emptied the lungs and held the breath for a few seconds, you will soon realize that your breathing is attempting to start up on its own - therefore relax your stomach and allow the breath to flow. As air enters the lungs, the stomach expands and rises, because the dome of the diaphragm has flattened, and not because the muscles in the abdominal region have contracted. People believe, often in all good faith, that they are "breathing from the stomach", because they are flexing their abdominal muscles. In fact, the latter should be relaxed, and must remain so throughout the inhalation. The lungs gradually fill with air from beneath. the inhalation will be slow, easy and unquestionably silent. If you do not hear yourself breathing it means that your respiration has acquired the correct slowness. If audible it means you have inhaled with much too haste.

It is essential to breathe in as well as out through the nose.

the stomach should rise gently like a balloon being blown up, and the muscle structure should remain supple: should you wish to control the movement you may place your hand on your stomach near the navel, at the same time resting the elbow on the floor. In this way it is easy to follow the expanding movement of the stomach. While this is going on, place the other hand against one side so that you can ensure that the ribs remain completely still, and so realize that the abdominal and thoracic breathing are completely separate.

Should your ribs still move while the stomach is rising, they should be immobilized by girding the thorax with a belt placed near the lower part of the sternum, in the pit of the stomach. Fasten the belt when the lungs are empty, to the required girth. While you breathe in the breathing and your diaphragm will be forced to flatten and your stomach to expand.

While you are breathing in, you should be conscious of what is going on in the warm depths of the thorax; you will soon find you are conscious of the movements of the diaphragm, and you will be able to separate the two phases and dispense with the belt.

Breathing from the ribs

We are now going to learn thoracic or costal breathing.

As its name implies, this is the action of expanding the thorax which leads to the inflation of the lungs by conducting air into them. This time we work sitting in a chair or on the ground, it does not matter which. Empty the lungs completely and keep the abdominal muscles contracted: in this way it becomes impossible to breathe through the stomach. Throughout the inhalation you should keep the stomach contracted in order to prevent any breathing through the diaphragm.

Needless to say those who used the belt to keep the ribs from moving, should remove it for learning thoracic breathing!

Place the hands on the sides a few inches away from the armpits, in such a way that the palms can feel the ribs. Point the fingers to the front. Breathe in, attempting at the same time to push out the hands as far as possible with the ribs, that is, not in front of you but towards the sides. After a few attempts, you will feel the exact position.

You will notice clearly a greater resistance to the entrance of air than you did during the abdominal breathing, which allowed entry to the largest volume of air with a minimum of effort.

Despite the resistance a fairly large quantity of air will enter during thoracic breathing.

Breathe about twenty times from the ribs only.

Clavicular or high breathing

In this type of breathing, you must attempt to raise the collar-bones while the air is being inhaled.

Immobilize the abdominal muscles, in the same way as you did when you were learning thoracic breathing, and keep the hands upon the sides in the position described previously. Now try to allow the air to enter by drawing the collar-bones up towards the chin,

without however raising the shoulders, which will anyhow be almost impossible if the hands are kept on the sides.

You will feel air entering, but you will also be aware that a very small quantity does so, despite a considerable greater effort than involved in thoracic breathing.

This is the least efficient way of breathing, but woman habitually do it. If you watch women breathing, eight out of ten will show no signs of breathing other than a distinct raising of the collar-bones, while their brooches or necklaces rise and fall. this is a form of breathing also used by nervous subjects and those suffering from a degree of debility or anxiety. It is only useful or to be tolerated when it is integrated onto complete yogic breathing, and only takes on meaning when it is preceded by the other two phases of this breathing.

Learn complete Yogic breathing

Yogic breathing as we know, incorporates the three types of partial respiration.

In the first stages of learning, it is best to lie flat on the back. Begin by breathing slowly and deeply from the stomach, and, when you feel that it is impossible to raise the stomach any further, expand the ribs, and allow still more air to enter the lungs. When the ribs are fully extended, raise the collar-bones so that yet a little more air can enter. By this time you are filled to the brim with air! Avoid any tensing of the muscles of the hands, face and neck, particularly in the last stage (clavicular) of the breathing. The three movements, as we have already pointed out, should be done in a "chain link" system, keeping them entirely separate and visible to the outside observer.

FAULTS: Having allowed the stomach to fill with air by flattening the diaphragm, people sometimes cut short the entry of air at that moment, drawing in the stomach in order to allow the air to rise (or so they think) to the apex of the lungs.

*This is posted to **tpin** by [Rich Szabo](#) (jazztrumpeter, bandleader and active member of tpin). Rich played lead with Maynard Ferguson who uses this breathing technique.*

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