

Yoga for Better Breathing

by Tony Bishop, E-RYT



So what is the problem? It's mostly cultural and mental, especially within American society, where we're inundated with daily stress and the need for speed. Have you noticed how everything in your life is on a schedule? If you're like most of us, you have probably said something to the effect of, "I don't have time to breathe." Stop thinking about 37 things at once for just a moment, and realize how sadly true that statement is. We simply don't take time to breathe — really taking a breath.

If you're involved in any fitness or athletic activity, you have experienced the need for efficient breathing during a game or a workout routine. Good trainers will emphasize proper breathing practice when lifting weights, performing push-ups, pull-ups, running drills, passing or shooting a basketball, swinging a baseball bat or golf club, kicking a football or soccer ball, and particularly during a long-distance run while conserving energy levels. Many of us experience certain breathing limitations due to allergies, COPD, lung scarring and a myriad of other pulmonary issues. All of these situations can place tremendous physical pressure against our need for smooth, deep breathing — not to mention the self-imposed shortness of breath one can have during work-related stress situations and near panic-mode moments. It's the old fight-or-flight scenario rearing its unattractive head once more.

"Take a deep breath." Most of us have heard that before. Maybe at our physician's office, or at a stress reduction seminar, or quite possibly in a yoga class. But most people don't really know how to effectively take a deep breath, and most don't breathe properly at any given point in time.

As with so many problems (or "issues," if you're politically correct today), some of our basic solutions are steeped in the regular practice of yoga.

Yoga emphasizes breath in utmost importance. That makes a lot of sense from any perspective, given the fact that we cannot exist without breathing. A simple example is the difference in time requirements between two of the most critical elements in our physical being. How much time can we realistically live between the drinking of 16-ounce servings of water? How much between the inhaling and exhaling of a breath and the next inhalation? There really is no comparison, even though both are absolutely essential. Breathing is the very basic key to physicality. Yogic breathing during your daily activities — including your yoga class of course — can be life-changing and positive. Breathing is so revered within some practices of martial arts and forms of yoga that it becomes a priority in the "spirituality" of the practitioners, as the controlling of breath begets controlling the mind... aiding in deep meditative practice... and controlling the life of practitioners becomes synonymous with controlling the breath. I experienced the benefits of breath control first, many years ago with my Sifu, Master Royce Bunch, when practicing Sil lum Kung Fu and learning how breathing aids in building amazing physical power and flow. After all, God breathed into man "the breath of life." That is about as basic and powerful as you can get!

As I've mentioned in this column previously, give a real and honest try to yoga practice. It really is one thing you can add to your daily routine which is worth the effort. It affects everything positively, and really doesn't have any negatives as long as you honor your own values and commitments while having an open mind for real improvement. Yoga is there as a tool and a method for you to use. The first step is yours.

Let's observe the number one point of the first step: breath. In Hatha Yoga, our broadly based style at Hot Yoga, there are eight types of breath control (pranayama) taught and practiced. For the sake of simplicity and usability here, we will concentrate our energy upon Ujjayi, or victorious breath. This breathing method is a nice practice exercise for training yourself in slowing your breathing and avoiding hyperventilation. This breath is the base for all breathing during asana (yoga poses) flow and transitional static power/holding. We'll learn more about postures and power in future articles, but just know that your breathing affects how well, how deeply and how advanced you will perform your yoga sequence — or everyday activities, for that matter. There are a number of variations of the Ujjayi breath, including one which we use to build heat within the body for balance during Hot Yoga practice, but here is one you may practice at home to begin improving your overall health and lung capacity.

My Sifu always referred to the "baby's breath," and not the beautiful little blooms we add to bouquets for complementing an arrangement. He noted how we as human beings forget how to breathe. When watching a very young infant breathe, notice



how the belly rises as the entire body seems to fill with air during their inhale. It looks so effortless and calming. Because it is! We tend to grow up and out of this natural reflex and begin to take on quicker, shorter breathing as we zig-zag about during our busy day. Let's begin to change that and feel better as we get better... at everything.

This is our **July 'Pause for a Pose'**
The Ujjayi Breathing Method (first variation)

Begin in seated position, although this can be practiced standing also. Be sure you're comfortable. You can be in a chair or on the floor in cross-legged (easy) or hips to heels.

Place your first and middle fingers lightly on the soft area of the throat between the collar bones. Begin to inhale slowly through the nose as you retract/contract the muscles beneath your fingers. You are creating a throat lock (bandha) and breathing through the lock... somewhat like breathing through a straw. This brings healing air (prana) within, becoming a cleansing breath. By slowing the breath, you are beginning to train yourself in yoga breathing and will notice your lung capacity begin to increase considerably. Inhale until you feel the lungs are completely full, then begin to slowly exhale, still retracting the throat muscles, keeping the mouth closed to retain energy levels. You will note the sound of the breath is like a "snore" as you are softly controlling the inhale and exhale. As you perfect this technique, you may begin to employ slower breathing throughout your day as you match your breath to your movements. Take time to breathe! My motto is "Breathe always, hydrate often!"
God bless, and namaste!

About the Author:
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