



The Breathing Book

A Practical Guide to Natural Breathing

by Brad Thompson

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Introduction

To stay alive there are three vital needs that must be met. We need to eat food to nourish ourselves, we need to drink water for hydration, and we need air to breathe. It is possible to go without food for quite some time, two to three weeks at least. Water is a little more critical, we cannot go without it for more than two or three days. Air—two to three minutes without air and our life is over. Breathing is the most important intake of energy we need to do to stay alive. Yet most people go through their whole lives rarely focusing on their breath.

When was the last time you thought about your breathing? Really paid attention to it, and consciously tried to do better? Can't remember? You are not alone—most people simply forget about their breathing, taking it for granted. Consequently, they fall into poor breathing habits.

Every cell in your body needs oxygen to function properly. Poor or inadequate breathing contributes significantly to a wide range of health and wellness issues, increasing the impact that the stress of modern living has on our lives.

This book will help you better understand the physiology and mechanics of breathing. It will teach you to improve your breathing in areas such as capacity, control and flexibility. You will learn to restore your natural breathing, and adapt your breath to different activities. Discover how to conquer stress, gain more energy, exercise more efficiently, loose weight and think more clearly. You'll be surprised how easy it really is, and will be left wondering why we are all not taught this from a young age.

If you are 'kind of' breathing as you read this—then this book is for you!

One:

Born to Breathe

Why do we forget to breathe naturally?

'If you woke up breathing, congratulations! You have another chance'
— Andrea Boydston

I felt invigorated without fatigue or gasping for breath

— Jenny

“I did the breathing session while staying at a health resort, where my accommodation was a 10 minute uphill walk that left me breathless. Brad announced that he was going to teach a method that would make the climb easy. This was met with smiles of knowing disbelief from most of the participants. To our amazement, the first time we put the lesson into practise our whole group did the trek effortlessly. We could chat to each other on the way up, and arrived in record time. I felt invigorated without fatigue or gasping for breath. I still wonder how I had managed to get to 57 years old without knowing this”

To many people, the notion of breathing poorly is ludicrous. How do you not breathe well? Isn't it the most natural thing in the world? It should be, but in fact most people go through much of their lives unable to experience the comfort and pleasure of breathing naturally, let alone undertake any kind of exercise without struggling for air. Why is this?

From the moment we are born we are breathing machines. Observe a baby breathing and see how effortless and natural it is. If the baby is calm and happy, his or her little tummy moves gently up and down—if the baby is upset and crying then much more of the chest and ribs are involved. The baby does what is physiologically normal. It has learnt no habits, good or bad, it just breathes.

So when and how do we 'forget' to breathe naturally? When do we begin to unconsciously sabotage ourselves into breathing badly? What are the consequences of this? Many of the reasons why breathing becomes shallow or labored can be traced back to our childhood, when we started to develop our own unique patterns of functioning.

Childhood habits

Remember as a child being told ‘stand up straight— don’t slouch?’ Parents are well meaning in issuing this instruction, not wanting their child to develop poor posture. So you drew your shoulders back, lifted your chest, pulled in your stomach and tilted your head back, doing your best impersonation of a catwalk model or a body builder. This culturally accepted version of good posture—in fact, an unnatural, over-corrected posture—is responsible for creating such a false stiffness in the body that discomfort or pain is often the result, with breathing limited to the upper chest.

Childhood asthma has also become more and more widespread—one theory is that asthma may be exacerbated by the tendency of children to breath through the mouth. Infant mouth breathing could begin in a child who has a succession of head colds, blocked or constant runny nose. The nose is the natural breathing organ, and under normal, calm conditions should be doing almost all of the breathing. The filament hairs of the nose filter dust and impurities as we breathe, and the mucous membranes act as a thermostat to warm or cool air before it goes into our lungs. This natural thermostat helps to protect our lungs by filtering and preparing the air for absorption. This explains why in cold weather we often experience a runny nose. It is just our thermostat dripping!

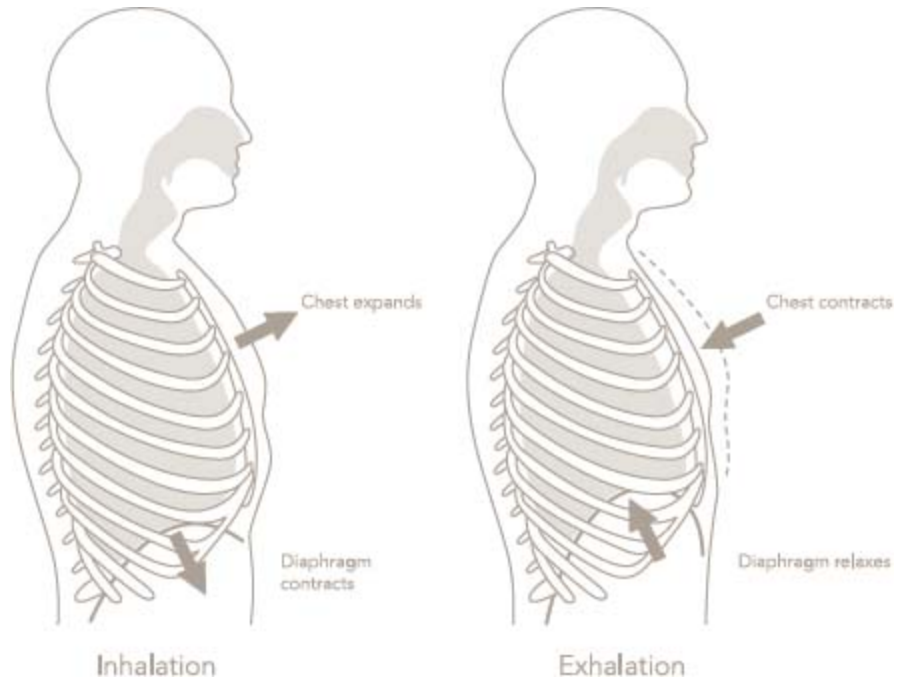
In eastern medicine mouth breathing is considered particularly unhealthy. If you are in the habit of breathing through your mouth, addressing this should be your first priority in restoring natural, healthy breathing. If your child is starting to develop mouth breathing habits then everything should be done to help them overcome this and breathe naturally through their nose.

The processes and mechanisms of the inhalation of air

The lungs are driven by the autonomic nervous system. This part of the nervous system is responsible for all the unconscious actions that the human organism must carry out moment to moment to ensure life goes on. When you eat you don't have to sit down and consciously control the metabolic processes that look after digestion—they happen automatically. Similarly, you don't have to concentrate on circulating blood around the body or creating the many chemicals that are required to ensure healthy functioning. This is your autonomic nervous system at work. It is this system that is the 'automatic pilot' looking after your breathing when you are not thinking about it—which is most of the time.

However, unlike processes such as digestion and metabolic function, it is possible to be conscious of and in control of our breathing. Most people are happy to forfeit control of their breathing to the 'auto pilot', unaware that they in fact have a choice. Many people with serious breathing problems— bronchial illnesses, cystic fibrosis, panic attacks, and people who have had lung surgery, and also many relatively healthy people who feel that their breathing is just not what it could be—do not realize that it is possible to do something about it.

During our waking, active life, we generally function in a vertical relationship to gravity; there is therefore a tendency for blood to pool in the lower lobes of the lungs. **Abdominal breathing**, which is to breathe in as if the air is expanding into your abdomen, draws the oxygen down into the lower lungs, ensuring the maximum efficiency in absorption. Abdominal breathing is **diaphragmatic** breathing. The diaphragm is the primary muscle in the action of breathing. Other contributing muscles include the intercostal muscles between the ribs, the abdominal or core muscles and the pelvic diaphragm.



The results were significant immediately

— Nicholas

“The breathing program helped me re-learn a lot of the good breathing habits that my body had forgotten. The results were significant immediately, especially the volume of air I could intake after doing the exercises. I compete in Tae Kwon Do, and for me the biggest gains were in my high level competition training, resulting in better stamina and less muscle fatigue.”

His breathing was so shallow and limited

Once I was working with a self-confessed gym junkie, a guy in his mid twenties who was obviously very proud of his body. He had the 'six pack abs' and looked good in a singlet, however his breathing was so shallow and limited that he would have had trouble blowing up a paper bag! He was so tight around his abdominal area because his muscles were so constantly and superfluously engaged, that he simply could not differentiate where his abdominals ended and his diaphragm began.

B.T

I was astonished to see him literally gasping for breath

Some years ago when working at a health retreat, I was walking up a small hill with a young athletic guy. He was in his early twenties, in his third year of a physical education degree, and was also a budding triathlete. He was by all accounts a fit young guy. The hill we were walking up was reasonably steep but small, and I made it to the top without really changing my breathing. I turned around and was astonished to see him literally gasping for breath, his chest and abdomen heaving from the 'exertion' of walking up this small hill.

Now he was a young athlete about half my age, I was breathing normally and he was sucking in air — I had to say something! In a very diplomatic way, I pointed out to him how 'stuffed' he seemed. He could see that I was breathing comfortably and said 'Oh you must be the breathing dude!' Apparently word had got out that there was a 'breathing dude' on site! I suggested to him that I could help him to improve his breathing and therefore his training.

He told me that as a child he had suffered terribly from asthma, a couple of times even ending up in hospital on a respirator due to the severity of the attacks. He had not had an episode for along time, and put it down to his exercise and training. I agreed, but it was still obvious that he had not learnt to let go of the poor habits associated with his childhood asthma. As we worked through the session he was amazed at the feeling of increased lung capacity, greater control and ease. By the time he left the retreat a few weeks later he told me that his breathing while running or cycling felt comfortable and not at all labored. He believed that he took about two and a half minutes off the time it normally took him to swim a kilometer, and also that he could lift heavier weights.

I had become very lazy with my breathing

— Marilyn

“The opening comments of Brad’s session were ‘we all breathe but not all of us breathe properly’. At the time I thought this was a rather crazy comment, however after doing exercises, I understood what was meant — I had become very lazy with my breathing. After the session I found I could get so much more out of exercise. By focusing on my breath I also had more energy and felt less wasted at the end of a session.”

In recent times great emphasis has been placed by physical trainers and exercise coaches on ‘core strength’. It has become the buzz word and solution for all ills—if you have poor posture, suffer back pain or are simply looking to ‘get in shape’ it seems building your core strength is the answer. In principle there is nothing wrong with this strategy; however, many people who are following their trainer’s advice and developing their core abdominals might be doing so at the expense of their breathing. The diaphragm is located very close to the abdominal muscles, and when these ‘core’ muscles become dominant the diaphragm becomes partially enmeshed with the core, and is unable to function independently.

Popular exercise regimes, such as Pilates, focus mainly on improving flexibility and developing core strength. Pilates teachers with a particular interest in the breathing instruct their students to keep the abdomen pulled in towards the spine. Many people continue to breathe this way in their everyday lives. This is not natural breathing, not how we were born to breathe. I am not criticizing Pilates as an exercise system, merely pointing out how the focus on the core at the expense of the diaphragm can compromise the ability to breathe naturally as we did as children. Breathing and Cellular Health

Breathing and Cellular Health

Every cell in our body needs oxygen to function properly, and if it is not supplied the metabolic processes of the cell are compromised. When that happens over a period of time we can start to show signs of ill health and imbalance, which if not addressed, can contribute to many of the health problems of Western culture.

Many people believe that because they do a fair amount of exercise, their bodies will be adequately oxygenated at a cellular level. Consider this however—for oxygen to be absorbed onto the blood the air needs to be in the lungs for about two and a half to three and a half seconds. Most people in their ordinary, everyday breathing are certainly not doing this. Nor are they when exercising aerobically. When running, cycling or swimming you will be getting a much greater volume of air into the lungs but generally at a much faster rate. In addition, the muscles that are doing the work will be drawing the oxygen they need for the exertion. The overall benefit may not be enough to ensure cellular health. The only way you can completely exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs is to practice slow, deep breathing on a daily basis in conjunction with aerobic exercise.

The reasons that we are led away from healthy, natural breathing are wide and varied, and it is often not until later in adult life that you may even realize that your breathing has become a problem. Our first priority in rediscovering the natural pleasure of breathing well should be to regain the light, expansive breath we knew as children.

Two:

Lessons from the East

The shortcomings of Western health and fitness philosophies

‘When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still’

— Svatmarama, Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Western exercise ethos focuses on fitness—being fit and strong is generally equated with being healthy. You have no doubt heard the expression ‘to get in shape’. The inference is that if your body looks good then everything is fine, as you are obviously fit and healthy. In fact, fitness and health are two quite different things. It is possible to be very fit, yet not be particularly healthy. The power of the mind and its integration with the body is just as important to real vitality and cellular health.

I can probably count on one hand the number of times I have been inside a gym, but one thing that has always struck me is that there is usually loud music blaring, or televisions above the fitness machines. You can be in the gym exercising your body while your mind is entertained or distracted. You can see people walking or jogging while listening to their ipods—again the mind is ignored in the process of getting fit. This then is the main difference between Western and Eastern exercise philosophies.

Eastern exercise disciplines unite mind and body synergistically. Traditional ‘fitness’ is not really spoken of; you are more likely to hear adherents of disciplines such as yoga, Qigong, Tai Chi and the martial arts talking about things like cultivation, self mastery or inner force. The meaning of the term ‘kung fu’ is in itself interesting; to most people it means simply martial art or fighting, but the literal meaning of kung fu is ‘skill’ or ‘time invested’ (‘to cultivate skill’).

Many Westerners misunderstand the value of traditional Eastern disciplines. They are often seen as easy forms of gentle exercise more suitable for older people, when the opposite could not be more true. Certainly, many of these arts are suitable for people of all ages, but for serious practitioners the training is often as challenging as for an Olympic athlete. The difference though is when the Games are over the grueling training stops. For most high level Eastern arts devotees, training never stops, but is sustained throughout a whole lifetime.

Qi

In China the cornerstone of health and wellbeing is the cultivation and smooth circulation of the **qi** (pronounced chi); which can be translated as the body's vital energy or life force. The notion of this invisible energy circulating around the body has been met with scepticism in Western medical and scientific circles. This attitude has changed somewhat over the last 20 to 30 years as technology has paved the way for research into the body's energy fields. Many studies seems to support the theories of qi circulation that are the foundation of ancient medical and health practices such as acupuncture and Qigong. There are now many Western doctors who have studied and practice acupuncture as part of a more holistic approach to patient care.

There is nothing really mystical about qi, or ki as it is pronounced in Japan or prana in India. It is the source of energy that comes from the sun that creates the potential for all life on Earth. Every living thing has this energy in and around it all the time. This principle of qi is so central to Eastern thought and culture that it permeates many areas of daily life. In Japan when two people meet and greet each other in the morning they will often say something like 'ohayo gozaimasu, ogenki desu ka?' Which literally means 'good morning, how is the vital life force energy flowing through your body today?' Children growing up and learning to speak Japanese are introduced to the concept of qi at a very young age.

In the west we have no equivalent word that describes the qi. However, more and more people are being introduced to the concept through the spread of Eastern disciplines. And at the very foundation of the cultivation of the body's qi energy is—breathing.

There are three vital elements in the cultivation of the qi:

- 1) Mental focus or mindfulness
- 2) Correct posture and smooth, flowing movements
- 3) Breathing

For anyone beginning one of these ancient spiritual, health or martial arts practices, learning about the breath is one of the first and most

important lessons. Interestingly, the prescribed breathing method generally required at beginners level and most advanced levels in any of these arts is described as 'natural breathing'. That is, the effortless abdominal breathing that, as children, we did without thinking.

Qigong

(pronounced 'chi kung')

Means 'the art of cultivating vital energy'. It is the practical exercises used in Chinese health and martial arts. There are many different styles and methods of Qigong, but all focus on developing the breath, and calming and focusing the mind. Qigong involves coordinating various breathing patterns with physical postures and smooth-flowing movements. The aim is to promote deep relaxation and to cultivate the qi for healing, improving health and combating stress. It is an important part of traditional Chinese martial arts training.

Breathing and Stress

Relaxation is crucial to the development of the qi, and it is the deep abdominal breathing that best promotes this, especially if the body is under stress of any kind. Generally when we are under stress, the abdominal area becomes tighter and more constricted as a way of unconsciously bracing the weak area of the torso. The diaphragm is thus hindered in movement and the breath is more limited to the chest area. This makes it very difficult to achieve a deep state of relaxation. It is one skill to be able to breathe to your abdomen when you are in a very passive state, but another entirely to be able to maintain abdominal breathing when you are under stress.

The practice of yoga, Tai Chi or Qigong does put the body under physical stress, but the slow flowing nature of these particular disciplines allows the practitioner to focus on keeping the breathing slow and relaxed at the lower abdomen. This lower abdominal area is the major energy centre in the body where the qi begins to accumulate. In China it is called the **dantien** and the focus is about 2 inches below the navel. In Japan it is called the hara and in India it is usually the base or root chakra.

The dantien

In Chinese there is an expression ‘qi’ follows ‘yi’. “Yi” means mind—so where the mind goes, the qi will follow. If the mind is scattered, so to will be the qi. By focusing on the dantien during qigong exercises, one is seeking to build strong dantien qi. This then enhances the nourishing of all cells in the body, keeping them functioning well and ensuring the elimination of toxins and the absorption of nutrients. Correct posture ensures the qi is able to flow smoothly without blockage, and connected movement encourages qi to flow to every part of the body.

When you become proficient at keeping the breath slow and relaxed at the abdomen while practicing your art, you will find that in other areas of life when under different kinds of stress you will be able to maintain your natural abdominal breathing and therefore remain calm and relaxed. This is the key to beating the symptoms of stress and avoiding its deadly consequences, which are some of the biggest killers in Western culture.

Slowness of breathing is a common teaching in all of the Eastern disciplines. As already discussed, air needs to be in the lungs for at least two to three seconds for the oxygen and carbon dioxide to be efficiently exchanged — therefore the slower you breathe the better. It is not easy for a novice to maintain slow deep breathing for any length of time. It requires mastery of a particular way of controlling the flow of air from the throat rather than from the nostrils. In yoga this is called ujjayi breathing. I call it simply **throat breathing**, and it is a practice common in most Eastern arts that helps the practitioner to a deeper level of meditation in practise. Throat breathing will be discussed later in the book.

Breathing and Meditation

The major benefit of slow, deep breathing is the promotion of relaxation, eventually leading to a meditative state. The mind must consciously focus in order to slow down the breathing, particularly in the beginners stage. It is this singular focus of the mind on maintaining very slow, relaxed breathing that can help the practitioner to attain a state of meditation. The many benefits of meditation are well documented, and we are only beginning to learn about harnessing the brain's capacity to heal. It is known that meditation can help in areas such as easing stress and hypertension, reducing high blood pressure, normalizing metabolic functions, improving concentration and increasing energy levels. Some research aims to show that meditation can change aggressive or antisocial behavior by reversing damage to the brain caused by smoking, alcohol or drugs.

Achieving a deep and lasting state of meditation can be very elusive, and it is easy to give up when success does not come quickly. In our modern life our minds are constantly engaged on the smallest and often most trivial of details. It is very difficult to shut off the constant chatter and think of nothing. Many people who have been unsuccessful with meditation can learn to meditate very quickly when breathing is their sole focus.

One of the challenges for people beginning to practice meditation is the tendency to lose concentration or fall asleep. They may be able to relax enough to slow down the mind and the body, but they are not able to remain focused, partly because there is not enough oxygen in their system. A little known technique among meditation practitioners is a breathing technique designed to flood the brain and body with oxygen before commencing to meditate. This is achieved by breathing very fast and powerfully for some minutes prior to slowing down and concentrating, and has the effect of creating a euphoric state of relaxation in the body whilst sharpening the focus of the mind.

Once the brain and body are flooded with oxygen, the process of meditation is much easier to achieve, even for those who find it difficult

to slow down and relax. Further on in this book you will learn how to do this in a very powerful breathing meditation.

***At 6000 metres breathing can become quite
an effort***

— Helen

“I drew from the breathing sessions and applied the techniques when climbing Mt Kilimanjaro in Africa. At 6000 metres breathing can become quite an effort, but belief in the techniques empowered me to walk to the summit regardless of the 20 degree wind chill factor. I use them on a daily basis, and will certainly draw on them when climbing to Base Camp in Nepal next April. I turn 60 in February 2008.”

Tai Chi Chuan

Tai Chi translates roughly as 'supreme' or 'grand ultimate fist', and is one of the major systems of internal kung fu. In its simplest form it is a slow motion form of martial Qigong that while gentle is still challenging to learn and practise. The movements are carried out while concentrating on breathing techniques and balance. Tai Chi is practised for its health benefits and improved concentration. At more advanced levels, Tai Chi has deeper philosophical teachings and is a complete system of martial arts training.

Western health regimes tend to be geared towards flexibility, strength and aerobic fitness. Eastern cultures focus more on the cultivation of the body's vital energy and the circulation of this energy—qi—to every cell in the body. And the very foundation of this is breathing.

Three:

How do you Breathe

Diagnosing your breathing.

'Our own physical body possesses a wisdom which we who inhabit the body lack. We give it orders which make no sense'

— Henry Miller

All my life I had struggled to breath

— Merryn

“I cannot begin to say what a turning point the breathing program was for me. All my life I had struggled to breathe. I had allergies as a child, and as I grew up I started breathing through my mouth and forgot how to breathe through my nose. After doing the session I realised the potential of breathing. I have since had my nose fixed, and can exercise and breathe to my full potential.”

Most people do not even realize they are breathing poorly, as it isn't something we generally think about or have any easy way of measuring. You have probably been breathing the same way for years, but have had nothing with which to compare your breathing. There are of course medical instruments to gauge the volume of air you breathe, peak flow, the ratio of oxygen to carbon dioxide and so on. But most people would not bother to see a doctor just to test their breathing. It seems to be doing the job, right? Well, maybe not!

Do any of the following patterns or 'symptoms' apply to you?

- Do you regularly breathe through your mouth?
- Is your breathing short and shallow in your chest area?
- Do you become breathless easily when walking up stairs or hills?
- Do you often become tired or lethargic?
- Do you often yawn?
- Do you get anxious or panicky?
- Are you overweight?
- Do you find it difficult to slow your breathing down?

- Do you feel tense or stressed and find it hard to relax?
- Do you get sick easily or suffer from low energy?
- Do you slouch or have poor posture?

If any one or more of these apply to you, chances are your breathing is just not supporting you as it should.

Mouth Breathing

The nose is for breathing the mouth is for eating - proverb

If you often breathe through your mouth, then this is the first thing you need to correct. If there is a physical impediment such as a deviated septum or a blockage in the airways, consult your doctor to see what options are available to you. It can be a relatively simple surgical procedure to correct minor abnormalities in the airways. If there is no reason other than habit for breathing through your mouth then I recommend you work on this yourself.

Each evening (or any time of day when it's convenient for you), sit down and concentrate on simply breathing through your nose. If necessary, use a band-aid or gentle skin adhesive to tape your mouth closed. You could do this while watching television or reading a book. After a few sessions with your mouth taped, you will find that breathing solely through your nose becomes much easier. You will need to remain vigilant in training yourself to breathe through your nose until it becomes completely natural and is your dominant pattern.

Many of the symptoms of poor breathing are related and interconnected:

Poor Posture. If you have a tendency to slouch and have developed a rounded back and shoulders, your rib cage will probably be quite stiff and rigid. This can lead to the diaphragm becoming 'squashed' and limit the breathing enormously. On the other hand if you have developed an exaggerated 'correct' posture, where the stomach is pulled in, chest up and shoulders back, this can be just as limiting to breathing by restricting diaphragmatic movement. Either of these two postural examples can lead to the breath becoming short and shallow in the chest area.

Breathlessness/Lethargy. Short, shallow breathing creates many systemic health and general energy problems. You might find that you become breathless as soon as you begin to exert yourself in any way. How easily you walk up hills is a good yardstick to how well you breathe. If you start to gasp for air through your mouth, then you have

some improvements to make. You may also find that you have a tendency to become tired and lethargic regularly for no apparent reason. This in turn may lead to immune deficiencies, increasing the risk of sickness.

Frequent yawning. Yawning is a deep, slow drawing of air into the lungs, often accompanied by a stretch of the arms or chest that provides an immediate injection of oxygen and a feeling of invigoration. When the body is tired or fatigued the inbuilt response mechanism tells it to yawn. When people start to learn to breathe well again, the yawn reflex is often triggered. This may be because there is a connection in the brain of increased oxygen to yawning. With more air in the lungs the brain gets confused, thinking 'more oxygen in the system— we must be yawning!' and so tells the body to yawn. The brain soon becomes accustomed to the new, pleasant sensation of being awash with oxygen and the yawn reflex diminishes.

Hypertension: If you have a tendency to breathe quickly and find it difficult to slow down your breath, you will probably also have difficulty relaxing and will be more susceptible to hypertension and the symptoms of stress. Learning the techniques of slow, deep breathing is a powerful tool in dealing with anxiety and stress.

Weight issues: A relatively little known benefit of breathing well is its positive effect on weight control. Think of the body's metabolism as a fire that is constantly burning within. The higher the metabolic rate, the hotter the fire. The hotter the fire the more calories are being burned. Now consider that air is the most important 'fuel' we take into our bodies to stoke the fire, and you begin to understand the direct link between breathing and weight loss. The positive effects of meditation on mood may also help to prevent the 'false appetite' and over-eating associated with stress. Improving diet and engaging in regular exercise are of course important, but the effects of improving breathing habits cannot be underestimated in the process of losing weight.

Breathing Test

How do you breathe? Try this simple test to gauge the volume and control you currently have over your breath. When you have finished, try to remember the results; keep in mind what your breathing felt like so that you have a yardstick to measure any differences as you progress.

Sit forward and upright in a chair, make sure that your feet are flat on the ground. Tilt your pelvis forward a little to bring your torso naturally upright. Place one hand at your lower abdomen and one at your chest. Close your eyes, and begin to breathe in and out through your nose very deeply and very slowly.

- Breathe slowly enough that you can feel the cool sensation of the air passing down the back of your throat. Don't strain trying to breathe too slowly. Make sure you are calm and relaxed and that you can maintain this breathing for some time.
- Notice where the air seems to go when it passes through the larynx and enters your lungs. What part or parts of your torso move or expand to accommodate these deep breaths? Don't try to do anything special or to breathe 'correctly'— simply notice what happens.
- Pay close attention to your abdomen—does it move? Does it expand and contract with each breath? If so, is it a big movement or a small one?
- Notice what happens in your chest. Does your sternum rise and fall? Do your ribs open and close with each breath? Is it a big or relatively small movement?
- What moves the most? Be very clear, do you seem to breathe more into your abdominal cavity or is it more into your chest?
- Keep breathing very slowly and deeply and notice what happens in your back. Does it move? If so, does it tend to arch or contract or is it expanding outwards?

- Begin to count or time your breath or use your watch to see how slowly you can comfortably breathe in and out. Make sure you time the in and out breaths separately, and count at least 4 or 5 breaths, breathing as slowly as you can.

Then relax and sit back in your chair.

So how did you go? Did you feel when breathing in that you wanted to breathe more deeply but something prevented you? Or did you strain a little trying to get that deep, satisfying breath? Did you breathe more to your abdomen or was it more to your chest? I have found that over 50 per cent of people doing this test will breathe more into the chest cavity. Of the remainder breathing into the abdomen, only a very few will say that they felt it was fairly even in both places at the same time.

I've already talked at length about the importance of the natural abdominal breathing we knew as children. However we should also be able to expand the chest and ribs, particularly when taking very deep breaths or doing aerobic exercise. We should in fact have the flexibility with our breathing so that it can effortlessly change to best support the activity we are doing.

I can maximise every breath I take

— Gill

“Who would have thought that an adult could be taught to breathe? Little did I realize just how ineffectual my breathing was. Now I can maximize every breath I take. The techniques have fascinated my friends too. Everyone around me is now slowing their breathing down and breathing with purpose.”

Do You Have Flexible Breathing?

Most of the time breath should be directed more to your belly, however occasionally you will be best served by breathing more into your chest, particularly if you are working aerobically. Can you do both? Can you clearly direct breathing into your abdominal cavity or chest cavity? Sit forward in your chair again and try this exercise.

- Place your hands on your abdomen and your chest, close your eyes and begin to take slow, deep breaths. If you breathed more to your chest last time try breathing more to your abdomen this time and vice versa.
- Then revert to breathing in your familiar way a few times. Switch back and forwards two to three times.

Can you do it? Is it easy to do or is it quite unfamiliar? Many people find it difficult. You may be able to do it, but find it requires real concentration or that you cannot breathe as deeply or as comfortably as when you did it your regular way.

Is it possible to learn to breathe as we did as infants, completely naturally and flexibly whilst also increasing capacity and control? There is good news—it's not that difficult!

Four:

Rediscovering Natural Breathing

Resetting your default breathing.

'Habit is a man's sole comfort. We dislike doing without even unpleasant things to which we have become accustomed'

— Goethe

Needing to relearn something that should be as natural and easy as breathing is an unfortunate indictment on the way modern culture facilitates our transition from naturalness towards awkwardness. It will be very empowering when at last you can take that deep, satisfying breath without the slightest strain, and recover the light easy breathing that is your birthright.

There are three lessons that must be learnt to rediscover the art of natural breathing. These lessons will teach you to reset your breathing to the default pattern—the 'factory setting' as I like to call it—in order to regain the natural breathing you did as an infant.

- First you will need to develop **diaphragmatic control**, and learn how to distinguish your diaphragm from core abdominal muscles. At this stage you will begin to soften the intercostal muscles and free your ribs, creating a feeling of greater ease and volume.
- Next we will focus on developing softness and lightness in the breath by learning how to breathe very slowly and quietly.
- Finally we'll look at posture—how to organize ourselves skeletally so that we can take our new improved natural breathing wherever we go.

Lesson One

Regaining Natural Control and Volume

Read each instruction in full carefully. Take your time and work through the exercises. Try to work through the whole lesson without a break, particularly the first time you do it. It should take about 60 minutes to complete. After you have done the exercises once, you can come back and repeat parts of the lesson until you feel you have really understood and integrated them. They may not be easy at first, but will get much easier as you progress.

Step One

Lie on the floor with your legs outstretched. Rest your hands so that one is below your navel and the other is on your chest. If possible, rest your elbows on the floor so that you are not holding any tension in your arms.

Close your eyes and pay attention to how you are breathing. Don't take deep breaths or try to do anything special, just observe how you normally breathe.

1



Step Two

Bend your knees so your feet are resting flat on the floor, comfortably apart. Begin to take very long, slow, deep breaths and pay attention to what happens through your torso. Is there more movement in your abdomen or chest? What happens in your back? What is the volume of the breath like? Be as clear as you can. Then rest for a moment.

Step Three

Take and hold a deep breath. As you hold the air in your lungs, try to push your abdomen out as far as you can, then pull it in as flat as you can. Repeat—push it out and pull it back in. Notice your chest is moving the opposite direction. As your abdomen pushes out, feel your sternum sink in and down; when your abdomen pulls back in, feel your chest lifting and inflating. Imagine a bubble of air moving up and down from your abdomen to your chest and back.



Do this several times as you hold that same breath. When you breathe out pull the stomach in flat and breathe through your nose. Rest a moment and then repeat several times. Do it as smoothly as you can, slowly and evenly without straining. Spend five to 10 minutes doing this until it becomes light and easy, then rest with your legs outstretched and your arms down.

Notice what effect this has had on your breathing. You are actually beginning to move your diaphragm up and down, and in holding your breath you have increased the air pressure in your lungs. This creates an internal massage sensation that will free up your diaphragm and soften your ribs.



Step Four

Roll over onto your hands and knees. Keep your back straight and parallel to the ground. Do the same thing in this position. Take and hold a deep breath and move the imaginary bubble up and down several times. Push your abdomen down gently; then pull it back up as flat to your spine as you can. Watch that you don't move your back or your pelvis, only your abdomen. Repeat the whole process four to five times and then rest on your back.

It may not be easy at first as we are usually trying to keep the abdomen pulled in flat and tight. This is one of the main reasons we lose control of our diaphragm.

4



Step Five

Roll onto your hands and knees. Sit down on your heels and rest on your forearms. Have your knees close together so you can feel your abdomen pressing against your thighs, and place the palm of your right hand at the right side of your lower back around the waist area. If this is not easy or comfortable you can do the same thing lying on your back and holding your knees so your thighs and stomach are together.



Take a deep breath and begin to do the same movement of the imaginary bubble up and down. See if you can push your stomach against your thighs and then pull it back in. Notice what happens in your back. Can you feel your lower back beginning to expand or bulge out a bit? If you are on your knees you may feel it with your hand—if you are on your back you might feel your lower back spreading out against the floor. Do it several times and then rest on your back.



Step Six

Bend your knees again so that your feet are resting flat on the floor. Breathe. Can you feel your back more involved now? Does it seem to expand and flatten out against the floor instead of lifting up and arching? Your lungs are not just in the front of your body, they also expand into your back. When you practice this a few times you should easily feel that you can breathe into your back.

Step Seven

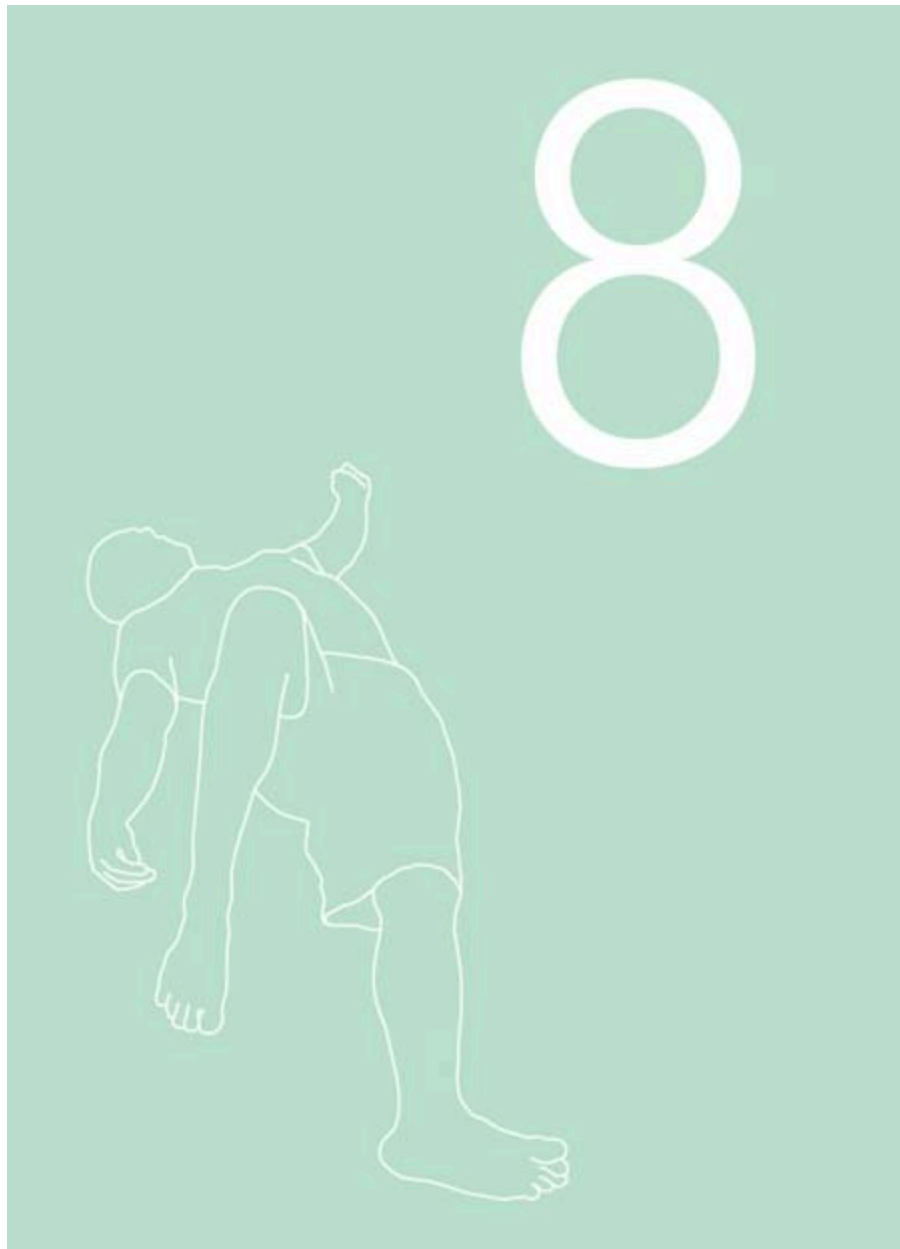
Extend your right leg, keeping your left leg bent. Slide your upper torso around to the left so that your left hand is down near your left foot. Reach your right arm up on the floor diagonally above your right shoulder so you can feel the whole right side of your ribs expanding. Keep your face towards the ceiling and relax. Now take a deep breath and move the bubble up and down in this position. Really push your tummy right out and pull it back in flat to your spine.



Imagine drawing the bubble up to your ribs under your right arm pit and pushing down to the right side of your waist. Do it slowly and smoothly a few times. Then move it faster. Make quick, light movements pulsing the bubble up and down. It should be getting much easier to do. Rest on your back with your arms and legs extended. Close your eyes and pay attention to the feeling now. Does your right side feel bigger, or longer, or maybe lighter? Take some deep breaths. Does the air seem to flow more easily to the right side of your lungs? Does your right lung feel more spacious now?

Step 8

Do the same thing on the other side. Bend your right foot, sliding your body around to the right and reach your left arm up on the floor diagonally above your left shoulder. Hold a deep breath and move the bubble and down, slowly at first and then more quickly and lightly. Then rest lying flat. Take some deep breaths and feel how different your breathing is becoming.



Step 9

Bend both legs and rest your feet flat on the floor. Put your left hand at the left side of your chest and your right hand at the right side of your abdomen. Close your eyes and imagine that you are going to move the bubble between your two hands. That is, across the diagonal from the left side of your chest to the right side of your abdomen. Think about it clearly and feel how you could begin to generate this diagonal movement.

9

What you are doing is engaging one side of the diaphragm and abdominal muscles more than the other. When you have done it a few times on one side, change your hands and do it on the other diagonal. Then rest on your back..

When you are ready, take a deep breath and try. Make sure you are still moving the bubble up and down but now slightly across the diagonal. It's okay if you need to move your torso a little to create the feeling; with a little practice you will start to clearly feel the imaginary bubble moving across the diagonal.

Step 10

Bend your knees, feet flat, and place one hand at your lower abdomen and the other at your chest. Take and hold a deep breath. Try to move the imaginary bubble up and down rapidly. Start at a slightly quicker rate and gradually build up the tempo. Try to feel the movement more from your centre and not so much from your abdomen or chest. Do it several times and then rest. This is your diaphragm moving, and with practice you will begin to gain direct control over this muscle. You will know when you have as the diaphragm can do a fast 'twitch' movement but the abdominal muscles cannot.

10



Step 11

Bend your knees, feet flat, hands at your abdomen and chest. Now try to softly expand your abdomen when inhaling and contract when exhaling. Do not move your chest at all, only your abdominal cavity. Feel this light, easy, natural breathing and keep doing it until it becomes your dominant pattern. This is how you should be breathing 90 per cent of the time. Now try the opposite pattern and breathe just into your chest without moving the abdomen.



Keep your stomach pulled in flat and really expand your ribs. This keeps your diaphragm still and puts the emphasis on your intercostal muscles. See if you can alternate it. Try to breathe exclusively to your abdomen and then to your chest. Keep practicing that until you can clearly differentiate diaphragmatic breathing to your abdomen and intercostal breathing to your chest. It will feel like you have two separate air tanks! Rest on your back.

Step 12

One last time bend your knees feet flat. Place your hands so one is at your lower abdomen and one is at your chest. Close your eyes and imagine that your whole torso is like a big balloon. Try to breathe very slowly and deeply into your lower abdomen, your chest, both sides and your back at the same time. Think of breathing to your centre and feel the expansion in all directions at the same time. Breathe in a very calm relaxed manner and practice this until it becomes easy and natural. Then extend your legs and return your breathing to normal.

12

See how light and easy and pleasurable it is to breathe as a child does. Stand up, walk around and feel how you breathe back on your feet.

See how light and easy and pleasurable it is to breathe as a child does. Stand up, walk around and feel how you breathe back on your feet.

I have improved by at least 20 per cent

— Jim

“I found the breathing program absolutely amazing. I had no idea of how inefficient our breathing becomes as adults. My recreational pursuits require a lot of aerobic and cardio work, and learning how to breathe properly has helped me a lot. I estimate I have improved by at least 20 per cent — a very big jump.”

Once you have practiced this lesson four or five times the improvement should be very noticeable. If you still feel the need, continue to practice parts of it every day until you feel you really understand it. Ultimately you should not need to repeat this lesson indefinitely; do the exercises enough times so that you completely restore your natural breathing, and review them every now and then to keep the change. You are now ready to focus on gaining more control by slowing your breath right down.

Lesson Two

Mastering Throat Breathing

Throat breathing is a very powerful tool to promote deep relaxation, increase the oxygenation of the blood and help you to gain real skill with your breathing. This is an ancient technique found in Eastern disciplines like yoga, Qigong, Tai Chi and the martial arts, and is the cornerstone to a high level mastery of breathing.

Step One

Sit comfortably in a chair and begin by taking some strong, deep breaths through your nose. Exaggerate the sound so the air moves audibly in and out through your nose. You might feel your nostrils contracting in a little as you inhale. The sound should be quite nasal. Let your breath become a little softer and more normal, but continue with the nostril breathing. Then see how slowly you can breathe in and out doing this.

1



Step Two

Relax for a moment. Take in a deep breath, hold it and swallow. Feel where your throat contracts when swallowing. Release the smallest amount of air and stop the flow by contracting that same part of your throat. Keep doing that until your lungs are empty—release a tiny amount of air and then stop using your ‘throat valve.’ release and stop and so on. When your lungs are empty rest a little and then try again. Feel how you can release the finest trickle of air, making a sound like a gas leak. When you can stop and release the air from your throat, try to let it flow continuously as slowly and as finely as you can.

2

What you are doing is closing the glottis and the false vocal cords over the larynx to squeeze the air out of your lungs very finely.

What you are doing is closing the glottis and the false vocal cords over the larynx to squeeze the air out of your lungs very finely.

Step Three

When you can control your throat breathing on the out breath, try to do it as you breathe in. You need to feel the inhalation from your throat very slowly and softly. Practice breathing in and out from your throat quite audibly at first. I sometimes refer to it as 'Darth Vader' breathing because of the sound made. Some people may find it a little bit elusive at first. Do not give up if it doesn't work straight away; keep trying to find it on the out breath first, and the in breath will follow.

As it becomes more familiar try to make the breath quieter and finer, until it becomes just a trickle of air. You might find that every now and then you have to take a couple of normal breaths to feel comfortable. With practice you will gradually be able to slow your breath right down like a yogi or a Qigong master.

3

Sit upright with your feet flat and your back straight, and see if you can combine the natural abdominal breathing from Lesson 1 with the fine, quiet throat breathing from Lesson 2. Continue to practice throat breathing regularly because in the next chapter we will focus more on the throat breathing in a few more formal breathing exercises.

Sit upright with your feet flat and your back straight, and see if you can combine the natural abdominal breathing from Lesson 1 with the fine, quiet throat breathing from Lesson 2. Continue to practice throat breathing regularly because in the next chapter we will focus more on the throat breathing in a few more formal breathing exercises.

Lesson Three

Understanding Natural Posture

It's interesting to look at the word posture—post as in a wooden fence paling, or as in a soldier standing at his post. So we could say that the inherited criteria for 'good posture' in Western culture implies false stiffness and the imposed tension of drawing the shoulders back and pulling the stomach in. Little wonder up to 80 per cent of people suffer some kind of back pain, and many more cannot breathe properly!

To be able to take your improved natural breathing from Lesson 1 with you wherever you go, you need to ensure that your posture does not sabotage you. By now, when sitting or standing, you should be able to breathe naturally to your abdominal cavity and also into your chest. Stand up for a moment and try to do this. Make sure that you are standing normally, and see if you can breathe easily and effortlessly down to your abdomen a number of times without moving your chest. Then see if you can change your breathing so that it is more to your chest and not your abdomen. Can you do it? Is it as easy as was lying on the floor in the first lesson? Or is it more difficult?

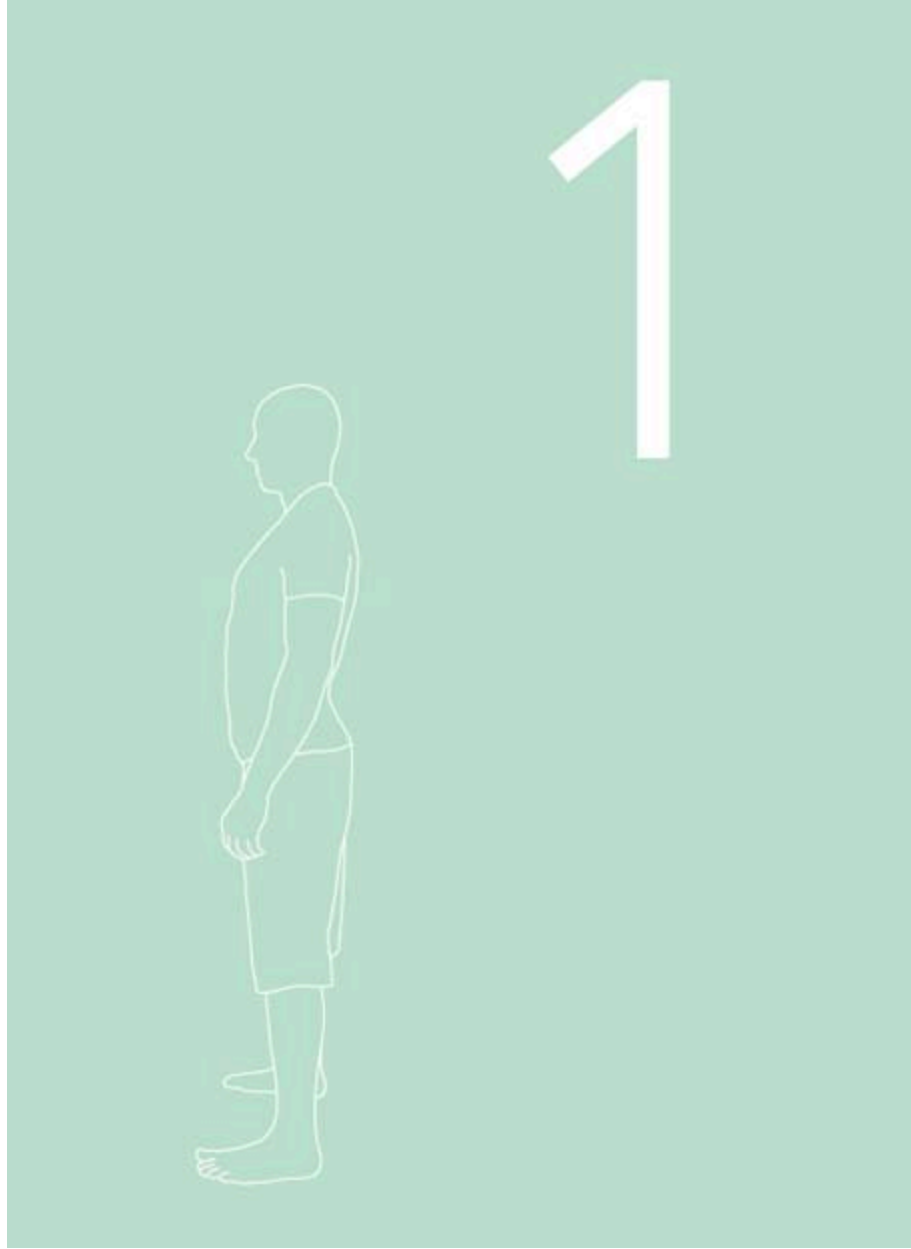
People who have the tendency to be more slouched or round shouldered will generally find it a little more difficult to breathe into the chest when standing upright. Those who have the pattern of standing up 'straight' by drawing the shoulders back and pulling the stomach in will often find it more unfamiliar to breathe down to the abdomen.

To be able to breathe easily to the upper and lower cavities whilst sitting, standing or moving, requires that the skeleton is as well balanced as it can be with the least amount of interference from the muscles. For many people this is not easy to do, as our culture has a preoccupation with musculature. The great teacher and pioneer of somatic learning Dr Moshe Feldenkrais once said words to the effect 'When the bones are well organized the muscles can make their own arrangements!'

So how do you organize your skeleton for upright movement more efficiently, without using unnecessary muscular effort?

Step One

Stand naturally and relaxed, side on to a full-length mirror. Turn your head and observe your side profile. Do you stand with your knees locked or hyper-extended? Does your pelvis seem to be forward or leading you? Do your spinal curves seem exaggerated? Notice your side profile. Does it equate to the mental image you have of your posture? That is, do you feel straight and upright but look differently to how you feel?



Step Two

Try to arrange yourself skeletally so that your pelvis is over your feet, your chest is over your pelvis and your head is over your chest. If you have an exaggerated lumbar or thoracic curve, can you try to reduce it? Use the mirror to see if you have it. It may not be easy and will probably feel very unnatural. Breathing will be the last thing on your mind! Relax. Don't try to force this imposed postural 'correctness'.

Step Three

Lie on the floor, legs outstretched and arms by your sides. Close your eyes and concentrate on the shape of your body on the floor. Does it reflect what you observed whilst looking at yourself in the mirror? Bend your knees, feet flat on the floor about a shoulder-width apart. Notice when you do this how your lower back will tend to flatten a little. Roll your pelvis forward, away from your upper body so that you feel your lower back lifting or arching a bit from the floor. Roll your pelvis back to flatten your lower back again.

Keep doing this until it becomes smooth and easy. Use enough effort to roll the pelvis lightly, but do not clench your abdominal muscles or hold your breath. Do it slowly so that you can begin to feel your head being invited to join in the movement, effortlessly mirroring your pelvic movements forward and back. Spend some minutes refining this and then extend your legs and rest. Notice if there is anything different about your body's relationship to the floor now.

Step Four

Bend your knees once again. This time try to roll your pelvis from side to side. Make sure your feet and knees are a good shoulder width apart and that your knees remain more or less vertical to the ceiling. Explore how you can roll your pelvis left and right so that one side of your bottom lifts off the floor and then the other. Reduce the effort and spend some minutes until it becomes smooth and light. Extend your legs and rest.

Step Five

Bend your knees again. Alternate between rolling your pelvis forward and back for a minute or so, and then side to side. Do not rush. Simply roll your pelvis as effortlessly as you can in the four cardinal directions; forward and back allowing your head to follow and then to the left and right. You will feel that you are outlining a cross or a plus sign on the floor under your pelvis. Rest.

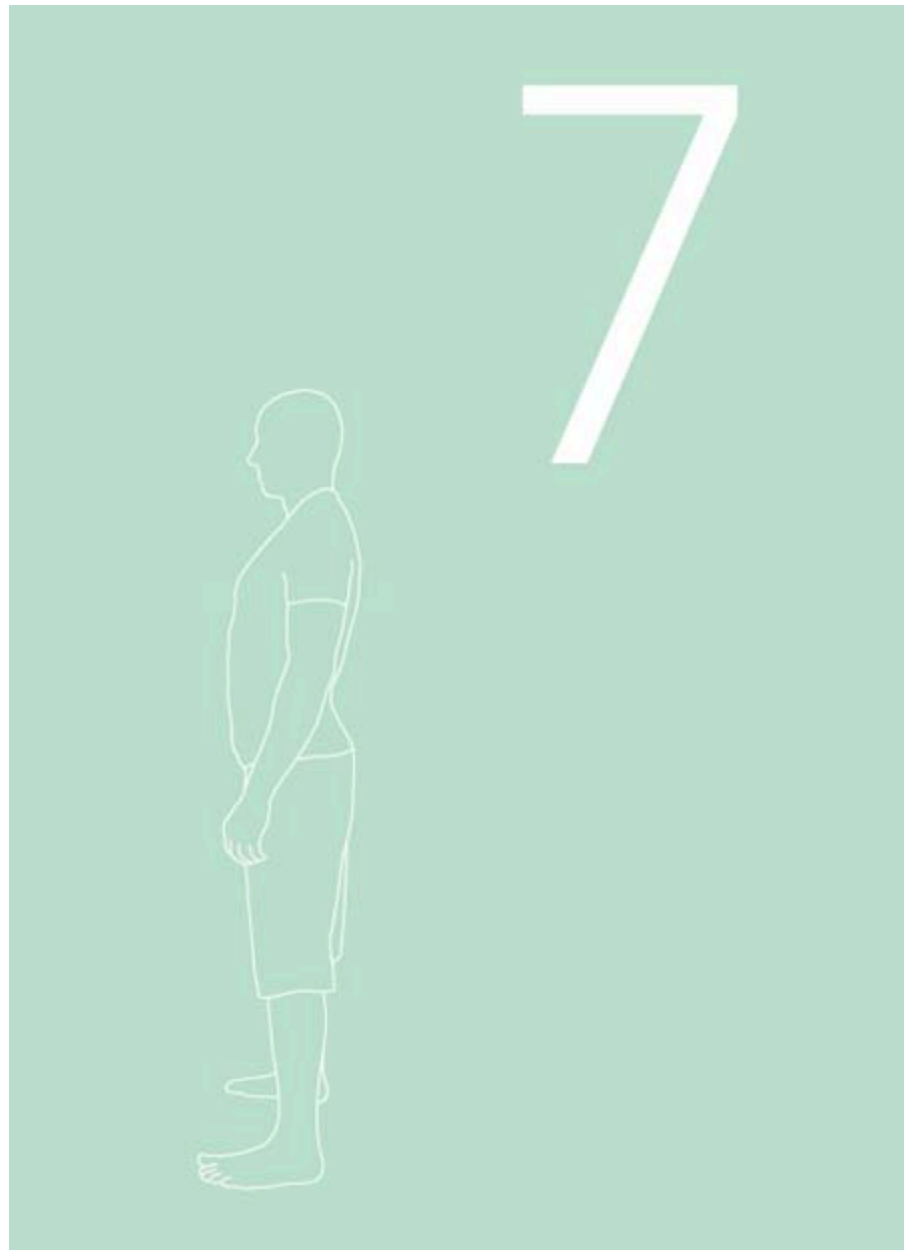
Step Six

Bend your knees again and try to roll your pelvis around in a full circle so that you touch the four points of your cross. At first there may be some irregularities in your circle and the movement may not be smooth, but keep trying and watch that you are not straining. Do this lightly so that your head can follow the circle of the pelvis and your breathing is not compromised. Move a few times in one direction and then back the other way. Then extend your legs and rest. Pay attention to the contact of your body on the floor now. Is it different to how it was in the beginning? Is there more of yourself on the floor now? Does your lower back feel flatter?

Step Seven

Stand up and feel your bones in gravity again; do they feel different somehow? Walk around a bit and then stand side on to the mirror again. Rather than lifting yourself up against gravity, imagine hanging yourself from the crown of your head like a puppet. Try to soften your knees and arrange your pelvis so it is over your feet. Bring your chest over your pelvis and lengthen the back of your neck so your head is over your chest. Does this feel a little easier now than it was before? Look in the mirror; do you look different? More upright perhaps? Can you try to breathe softly to your abdomen a few times? Can you breathe more into your chest? Has that improved?

Repeat this lesson until your bones have learnt how to stand more upright without the muscles doing more than they need to. You will then find that your natural breathing accompanies you wherever you go.



When you are standing naturally upright you may feel that you are almost leaning slightly forward. This is because most of the time you are probably leaning slightly back. In Western culture we have the tendency to lengthen through the front of our body; to be better organized through our skeleton we need to do the opposite and try to lengthen more through the back. This can take some practice but a little awareness goes a long way. Make a habit of observing yourself at different times during the day to catch yourself 'doing' your habitual standing pattern. Just make a small shift to your new more natural

uprightness. The more you do this the easier it will become a natural, habitual pattern, and you will be well on your way to ensuring that you do not revert to poor breathing ways.

Continue to practice the lessons of this chapter until they have become second nature to you. Some people will improve faster than others so don't get frustrated if it does not work straight away. Just play with the lessons consistently at your own pace and you will surely rediscover the pleasure of natural breathing. Then you will be ready to progress to learning how to become really skillful with your breath and how to apply it to different activities.

The Feldenkrais Method

An educational system centered on somatic learning. It aims to expand and refine the use of the self through neuromuscular awareness. Feldenkrais can be used to relieve chronic pain or injury. It is also popular among athletes, actors and dancers, as well as anyone who wishes to enhance power and fluidity in movement.

Five:

Skillful Breathing

Advanced techniques and practical exercises.

'Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time'

— Mark Twain

After completing the lessons in the previous chapter you should be breathing with greater ease and comfort, and with increased capacity and lightness. To maintain this and make it your natural, normal way of breathing, you need to apply what you have learnt to some practical exercises, and find ways to integrate these into your everyday routine.

We are going to now focus on some more formal lessons and applications in breathing. You will then be on the path to becoming a skillful breathing master!

Reverse Breathing

This is a really useful technique that will help you derive more power from your breath. Reverse breathing is often practiced in martial arts, and can be adapted to disciplines such as weight training or any activity where lifting or pushing something heavy is required. It has the effect of dynamically bracing the abdominal area whilst releasing pressure at the same time.

For example, how would you normally lift a heavy box? You need to protect your back, so many people would automatically contract their core muscles; they would almost certainly also be holding their breath. Most of the time this would not be a problem, but if you are lifting something with enough weight, there is an increased risk of internal injury—this is how people often sustain a hernia. When exerting force in lifting or pushing, you need to be able to brace through the core area whilst slowly releasing pressure by exhaling. Reverse breathing can be used here with great effect.



- Sit forward in your chair with both feet flat on the floor. Place one hand on your lower abdomen and the other on your chest. Simply cough lightly a few times. Feel what happens at your abdomen. Does it expand outward a little bit as you cough? Or tighten and contract? Try to create the feeling of your abdomen expanding as you cough.

Many people will automatically do this when coughing or sneezing as a way of protecting the back. Have you heard of someone sneezing and 'throwing' their back out? It's not that uncommon!



- Now try this pattern of reverse breathing; sit upright in your chair and place your hands on your abdomen and your chest. Breathe in, contracting your abdomen and expanding your chest. As you breathe out, sink your chest in and push out your abdomen. It helps if you do it fairly quickly at first with a powerful breath; breathe in to your chest as you flatten your abdomen, and then push out your abdomen as you exhale. Imagine you are actually breathing in and out from your navel; when you inhale you are pulling in your navel, then blow the air out from your navel so that it expands outward. Gradually slow your breathing down and try this reverse breathing pattern with your throat breathing as well. Practice until it becomes easy and familiar to you.



- Stand facing a wall. Have one foot forward and place your hands against the wall at about chest level. Prepare to push against the wall as if you are trying to push start a car. Breathe in, and as you begin to exert force, slowly exhale using the throat breath, expanding your abdomen. Feel how this creates a powerful brace through your core area, bridging the power of your legs, pelvis and hip joints with the strength of your shoulders and arms. Try it with the other foot in front. Practice until it is natural and easy.
- Try lifting something reasonably heavy and do the same thing. As you lift, exhale and push out your abdomen. With a little practice you

will find that it becomes the automatic, dynamic and more powerful way to support your abdomen and lower back.

Another useful application for reverse breathing is walking up hills or going up flights of stairs. Walking up hill is a more aerobic activity than walking on flat ground, and you will feel your breathing getting heavier and more into your chest.

- As soon as you begin to walk up a hill or stairs, start to do the reverse breathing. Inhale into your chest and exhale pushing down and expanding the abdomen. Breathe in and out through your nose where possible (you may have to breathe through your mouth to get the air in and out more quickly as required). You will notice an enormous difference in the power and energy you have walking up hills as you use the reverse breathing to create that bridge between the upper and lower parts of your body, 'turbo charging' your hill walking.

You should practice these techniques until they are easy and natural so that you can use them without thinking.

Breathing Meditation

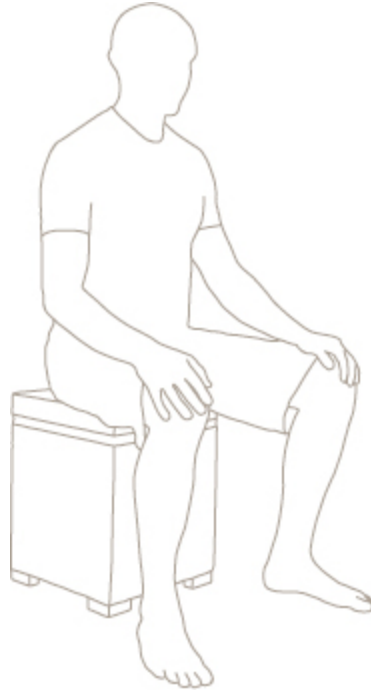
Meditation is, according to the dictionary, 'continued or extended thought; reflection, contemplation or spiritual introspection'. It develops the ability to consciously control and direct the focus of the mind to illicit deep relaxation and profound wellbeing. Its importance to the human organism cannot be overstated, especially in the light of new discoveries in the field of biology that show the state of the mind can have as much influence on health as our genetic make up.

It is unfortunate that many people view meditation somewhat skeptically, are 'too busy' to meditate, or believe it is something only Buddhist monks do. There are also those who have tried meditation once or twice, but because they found it difficult to quiet the mind or did not begin to 'levitate' on their first attempt simply gave it up. It is not easy at first to stop the mind's internal chatter—to empty the mind of all thought and have merely blackness. Most people would be consciously thinking 'nothing ... nothing ... nothing'—which is of course something! The next lesson is a very powerful practice in which you will learn to make breath your focus during meditation. Perhaps for the first time, you will be able to understand how valuable meditation can be.

One of the reasons why many people do not experience a deep state of relaxation during meditation is that their brains are not adequately oxygenated. The first steps to achieving a profound state of inner calm, is to charge the brain with oxygen. This requires at least two to three minutes breathing as fast and as deeply as possible. After doing this powerful breathing, the practice of any kind of meditation should be much more focused and rewarding.

- 1) Sit forward in a firm chair with your feet flat on the ground and your pelvis rolled slightly forward so your back is straight. Sit naturally upright with your hands resting comfortably on your knees. Begin to breathe powerfully in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe fast and strong down to your abdomen. Then breathe into your chest. Try to breathe out through your mouth, making the sound of a wave breaking on the shore. Continue doing this for at least 20 to 30 breaths which should take three to four minutes; keep breathing deeply and filling your lungs completely, then emptying

them completely. When you have done your 20 to 30 breaths (the longer the better), gradually return your breathing to normal. You will feel an amazingly intense feeling of tingling, deep relaxation and well-being spread over your whole body.



- 2) Practice throat breathing very quietly and softly, like a trickle of air flowing finely in and out of your lungs. Breathe like you are filling a balloon with air; expanding your abdomen, chest, sides and back all together at the same time. You learnt to do this in Lesson 1 of the previous chapter. You should find with a little practice that it becomes easy to breathe very slowly into your 'balloon'. Stay focused, keep breathing very finely and slowly and listen to your breath. Try to keep going for at least two to three minutes to begin with.

It's interesting at this point to actually time yourself to see how slow you can breathe in and how slow you can breathe out. Most people should be aiming to take between 15 to 20 seconds to breathe in and then the same for the out breath. It may take some practice to really master throat breathing but it is worth it; the feeling of deep relaxation and euphoria that comes from doing this meditation regularly is better than any drug!

Try to inhale and exhale for approximately the same length of time. Many people find they can breathe out slowly but are then gasping on the in breath. If this is the case, don't breathe out quite so slowly. With regular practice some people will be able to breathe in and out in 1 minute. Imagine sitting down to meditate for 10 minutes and taking 10 breaths! Start off with 2 to 3 minutes and build up to 5 to 10 minutes.

I often do this in the afternoon if I start to feel a little drowsy, particularly after lunch when the brain is not quite firing as the body's energy has been diverted to digestion. This is the perfect time to close the door to your office, sit forward in your chair and take some time to recharge your brain with oxygen. Try it—you'll then literally fly through the afternoon.

The breathing meditation is also the perfect preparation for anything that involves using your mind, such as going into an exam, giving a presentation or public speaking. It helps to calm your nerves and flood your brain with the oxygen needed to function at its peak. You can try it lying on the floor, or on the ground under a tree, or on the beach listening to the waves. Try it if you are waiting in a queue or stuck in traffic. Do this breathing meditation every day, even if it's only for two to three minutes. It is easy to practice and the feeling you derive from it will be wonderful.

I realised I could use some help

— Laurie

“Learning to breathe wasn’t something I expected to need at age 50. I had meditated and thought I knew about belly breathing, but after hearing Brad describe a fit person who was out of breath walking up a hill, I realized I could use some help. I think of this whenever I am hiking, and now have much more staying power. I remember to breathe this way in stressful situations, and have become a much calmer person.”

Dealing with stressful situations

Once you have improved your breathing, and regularly practice meditation, you should find that you do not become as anxious or stressed in challenging situations. You will have a much more solid platform of inner calm on which to call upon. If necessary, you can practice the deep, diaphragmatic throat breathing as slowly as you can. If it is a very stressful moment, try doing the fast, powerful breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth, and then slow down to the throat breathing.

Yi Chuan - Standing Qigong

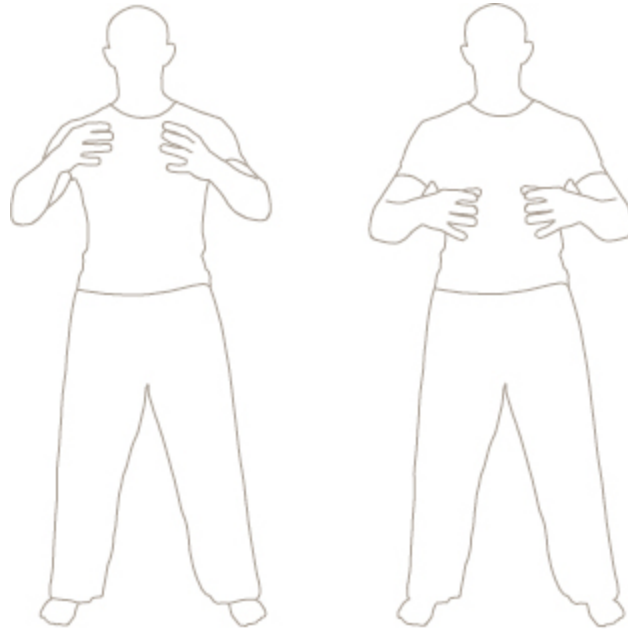
Qigong literally means ‘the art of cultivating vital energy’ and is practiced for the promotion of health, relaxation, healing and long life. It is as much a part of Traditional Chinese Medicine and health practices as it is of martial art training. **Yi Chuan** or **Standing Qigong** is the basic foundation of many styles of Chinese martial arts; yi means mind and **chuan** can mean form or practice. So it is a standing breathing meditation for training the mind and developing correct posture.

Yi Chuan is a static, quiet practice that will help you to relax, change and improve your posture, and infuse your cells with oxygen. Once you have progressed through the different lessons within this book, you are ready to learn this ancient but very simple and powerful practice.

Developing the correct posture is essential and will take constant monitoring and correction. Try the following checklist:

- 1) Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart. Bring your weight forward toward the balls of your feet, and bend your knees a little. Have your knees slightly open over your toes, as if you are sitting on a small horse.
- 2) Gently tuck your pelvis under so that you can lengthen or flatten your lower back but do not contract your abdominal muscles. Keep your belly soft. Your pelvis should be directly over your feet.
- 3) Keeping the length in your lower back, bring your upper torso slightly forward so that you are not leaning back. This will bring your thorax over your pelvis and may feel unusual. Most people tend to lean back so be mindful to monitor this. Try standing next to a mirror so you can check by glancing sidelong.
- 4) Imagine you are being suspended from the crown of your head and your whole body weight is hanging like a puppet. Your chin should be slightly toward your chest.
- 5) Relax your shoulders and slowly bring your arms up to chest level in front of your body in a round shape. Touch your thumbs and fingers together like you are holding a cup or a small bowl and then separate your hands and fingers about six to eight centimeters apart. Your

elbows should be relaxed slightly below wrist level, your fingers open and a little spread, the shape between your hands now as if you are holding a ball. Be totally relaxed, not stiff or tense.



- 6) Bring your shoulders slightly forward so your scapulas are not prominent at your back, and allow your chest to sink in and down. You are lengthening through your back and sinking in the front of your body; be constantly mindful of this.

Go through this checklist and practice until you are familiar with the sequence. Check in the mirror to ensure you are completely upright. You should envisage a line from the crown of your head, down through your middle in your side profile, shoulders, waist, pelvis, knees to about 60 per cent forward in your feet. All the while remain completely relaxed; it will take some practice but the results for your posture will be worth it.

- Once you are reasonably comfortable with your standing posture, settle into it and close your eyes. Begin by bringing your attention to your lower abdomen to a point about 4-6 centimeters below your navel. Focus on this point and imagine a ball of white light; (this point the **dan tien** and it is the major energy centre in your body). Try to stay focused on your dan tien and once again go through the posture check list.

- From your dan tien, begin to focus on your breathing. Breathe naturally to your lower abdomen and not to your chest. Use the throat breathing to take fine, long, and slow breaths down to your dan tien; it should be quiet, soft, deep and relaxed. Try to slow the breath down so that you are breathing in for about five seconds and breathing out for five seconds or so. Relax into your stance and breathe.



- There are four things that you need to keep focusing on:
 - your mind at your centre
 - the ball of white light at your dan tien
 - your posture and horse riding stance
 - your breathing—soft, deep natural breathing down to your abdomen.

Shift your focus back and forth between these things; centre, posture and breathing. With time and practice you will realize that they all meld into the one point of focus.

At first you may begin to feel strain very quickly, as you are not used to using your legs and arms like this. It's not uncommon for your legs to begin to shake and for your arms to feel very heavy. Do not stop at the first sign of strain but persist. Focus on your breath and try to relax. For this exercise to be of real value, you should build up to at least 10 minutes of practice each day. I find it helpful to count the breaths; if you

are breathing in for about five seconds and out for five then 50 breaths is about eight-10 minutes. Perhaps start with five to six minutes and build up to 10 minutes or more. If you are serious about cultivating your qi, you should build up to 20-30 minutes.

- When you have held the exercise for as long as possible, very slowly and smoothly lower your arms down to your sides. Stay completely relaxed and focused. When your arms are down, slowly open your eyes, straighten your knees and step in.

Feel how calm and at peace you are; how warm and comfortable you seem. Notice how your peripheral vision is much more expansive. You can cultivate this feeling with regular practice.

Consistency is the key. Yi Chuan or Standing Qigong is a practice that should be done every day. First thing in the morning is generally the best time. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and do your practice before you do anything else; you will feel like you are charging yourself up for the day.

Later in the day sit quietly and do your breathing meditation for five to 10 minutes. You will soon feel more alive and alert than ever before. Make these practices into habits that you can't live without; it's very easy and requires no special equipment, clothing or space. You can do them when you are traveling or under stress in the office or in the comfort of your home or garden. Just do it!

Six:

Breathe For Life

***Incorporating skillful breathing into your
daily routine.***

'Our bodies are our gardens, our wills are our gardeners'
— *William Shakespeare*

He had to stop and catch his breath

I once taught an older gentleman who had one lung removed due to cancer. When I saw him he was quite frail, and simply breathing was an ordeal. He was a barrister who still maintained his practice in the city, and would catch the train into town with a colleague. He told me that often when he was walking up the steps to the platform he had to stop and catch his breath, causing him and his colleague to miss their train.

He had been a smoker for many years, and after the surgery was left with just the left lung (which is slightly smaller than the right due to the heart). After the session he felt that he was breathing to the capacity of his left lung, and felt much more confident and comfortable. He was very happy with what he had learnt and assured me that he was going to make the practices a part of his day. About 6 weeks later I received an email from him which read 'Thanks Brad, I haven't missed a train yet!'

B.T

How do you feel about your breathing? If you have been diligently practicing the lessons in this book you should feel a big improvement by now. Some people will gain immediate improvement and some will take longer. Don't feel discouraged if it doesn't happen straight away; I have taught this program to thousands of people over the last 15 years and without exception, everybody improves the quality and function of their breathing.

How will you know to what extent better breathing has improved your quality of your life? To gain lasting benefit you must make focusing on your breath a part of your daily routine. Many people do not want to take the responsibility, are 'too busy', or are looking for a quick fix. Unfortunately it just doesn't work that way. You might work through the exercises in this book and feel an improvement, but unless you continue to work on it your old habits will probably resurface.

Compare your body to a beautiful garden; if that garden is not continuously maintained it won't be long before it will be overrun with weeds. It is an ongoing, never ending process. What you are working on is a thing of beauty, so it should not be a chore but a pleasure. Many people derive immense enjoyment and satisfaction from keeping their gardens in pristine condition. Your body and your breathing should be the same; you need a daily routine to bring about a tangible long-term improvement in your health and vitality. It is not difficult, it doesn't take long and believe it or not, it is very enjoyable!

Suggested Daily Routine

You should have worked your way through the exercises in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#), and feel and understand the improvements that have taken place. Once you have done this, then the exercises in [Chapter 5](#) can easily be factored into your daily routine for ongoing, continuous improvement and health benefits.

Mornings. Before you get out of bed, practice holding a deep breath and moving the imaginary bubble up and down. Do this three to four times. When you get up, before you do any other kind of exercise or have breakfast, practise the Yi Chuan Standing Qigong. Make sure that you go through the checklist for your posture and then settle in for at least 10 minutes. If that is too difficult at first then build up to it, but you should be able to do at least 5 minutes to begin with. You should then feel more energized and more motivated to do some other exercise.

Afternoons. Sometime later in the day, especially if you start to feel tired and drowsy after lunch, practice the sitting meditation. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and sit upright in a chair. Start by charging your brain with oxygen by breathing fast and powerfully and then slow down to the throat breathing and breathe into your whole 'balloon' for at least 3 - 4 minutes (5-10 minutes if possible).

Get into the habit of practicing these exercises everyday, and you will certainly experience a real improvement in your breathing and overall health and wellbeing.

You should start to notice a much greater lightness and ease in your everyday breathing, and a general improvement in breathing related health issues. If you are consistent in your practice (remember we're only talking about 10 minutes in the morning and 5 to 10 minutes later in the day) you should start to feel an increase in your energy levels and a significant decrease in tiredness and lethargy. Your response to stress will improve as you apply these slow, deep breathing techniques.

If you are serious about losing weight, then breathing exercises will very favorably complement diet and other regular exercise as the increase in

oxygen will help to invigorate your metabolism to burn fat. Nutrients from the food you eat are more readily absorbed into cell walls when bound to oxygen molecules.

There are many other specific health issues that can often be dramatically improved through natural breathing and the practice of the exercises in this book. Insomnia, poor digestion and skin conditions, mental health issues and even sexual function can all be changed.

Breathing and Aerobic Exercise

I am often asked, 'How should I breathe when I run?' In any aerobic activity, what you are trying to achieve with your breathing is relaxation under stress. That is, to get into a comfortable, easy breathing rhythm as you exercise. Ideally you should feel that your airways are open and expansive and breathing is easy and natural without feeling labored or strained. Your level of fitness will play a significant part, but removing the limitations such as poor posture, a tight diaphragm and intercostal muscles, and improving the awareness and skill of breathing can significantly improve performance in aerobic exercise.

Again, the improvement that will come from practicing the lessons in this book, especially learning to slow the breath right down during the meditation and Qigong, will help you to relax and breathe comfortably whilst exercising. Of course, when you are doing an aerobic activity like running, it's unlikely you will be able to breathe exclusively through your nose as the air needs to move in and out much faster. In this case it is fine to breathe through your mouth.

Another question I am often asked in relation to exercise is—should we breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth? Many people are instructed to do this in certain exercises. My initial reaction is why? Why would you breathe out through your mouth when you can breathe in through your nose? I tell people to ask their instructor or trainer this question to see what they say, because I've never heard a satisfactory explanation. Some trainers simply and honestly answer that they have never really thought about it. If you can inhale through your nose then you should also be able to exhale through the nose. Only when you are working hard enough that you need to breathe in through your mouth do you need to breathe out through your mouth.

Breathing and Insomnia

If you find it difficult to sleep, or regularly wake up at night and have trouble going back to sleep, try the following. Lie on your back and practice the fast powerful breathing from the meditation exercise. Try to focus on your throat breathing. Try this for two to three minutes, then let your breathing return to normal. Breathe slowly and naturally and feel your whole body tingling and melting into the bed. Hopefully the next thing you are aware of is waking up in the morning!

Conclusion

In a nutshell, here are the simple steps to better breathing and a healthier life.

- Stop mouth breathing. Do whatever it takes, even taping your mouth closed as you sit and read or watch TV. You will never rise above the health problems associated with poor breathing if you continue mouth breathing as your everyday pattern.
- Restore natural breathing. That is, make diaphragmatic breathing—breathing to your abdomen—your normal pattern.
- Increase lung capacity by practicing deep breathing exercises such as the Standing Qigong and meditation on a daily basis.
- Develop the skills of breathing in ways that best supports all your different activities.
- Practice having your breath more to the foreground and not lost in the background. A little awareness goes a long way.
- Take the time to enjoy the sensation of breathing. The simple pleasure of drawing life giving air into your lungs and feeling the benefit to your mind and body.

Finally, let me remind you to take the time to enjoy the sensation of breathing. Experience the pleasure of drawing life-giving air into your lungs, and acknowledge the benefits of natural, easy breathing to your mind and body.

His ability to remain calm, detached and in control

There are many ways you can apply these lessons and integrate them into your life. I once taught the program to a very busy, successful businessman who came back to see me some months later to learn more Qigong. He told me of a unique way that he had discovered the reverse breathing technique. He often had meetings with clients in which there was a lot at stake, big money deals and pressure to make the right decisions. He would become very nervous, and as result his palms became very sweaty, his breathing became shallow and tight in his chest and the timbre of his voice changed.

So one day in such a meeting he began to breathe slowly and quietly from his throat using the reverse pattern. He took deep breaths up into his chest pulling his diaphragm up, and then when he exhaled, he slowly pushed the diaphragm down, expanding his abdomen. He said that breathing deeply to the chest gave him the feeling of charging himself up and then becoming very powerful as he solidly pushed his abdomen out as he exhaled. He felt that he was “squashing the butterflies in his stomach”. He said it made a huge difference in his ability to remain calm, detached and in control.

It served to remind me that there are many ways that you can make breathing better and more skillfully serve you in your life.

B.T

About the author



When I was young I was fascinated by anything to do with martial arts. I remember sitting glued to the TV watching episodes of The Samurai and Phantom Agents during the Christmas holidays. Many kids in my neighborhood would make swords and star knives, and dress up as ninjas to go on sunset stealth missions through the neighbor's backyards. I remember thinking to myself 'one day I'm going to do that stuff!'

Then later in my teens along came Bruce Lee—he inspired a whole generation such was the impact of his kung fu movies. For me though, the real inspiration to begin my journey of self discovery came from watching the series Kung Fu starring David Carradine in the late 70s. The idea of being able to be an evolved, spiritual person with the ability to gracefully deal with a whole gang of thugs without raising a sweat appealed to me greatly.

So I began my training. I started with a grounding in Shaolin Kung Fu strengthening and simple Qigong practices. My teacher was a very skilled martial artist and I practiced everything he taught me diligently, but he was always talking about his study and practice of Tai Chi. Back then I didn't even know what it was. I first saw Tai Chi being practiced in a park in Chinatown in San Francisco. It was the morning after Chinese New Year and the chaos of the previous night seemed light

years away as I watched a group of Chinese people gliding gracefully and yet powerfully through the movements. I approached one of the older practitioners when he had finished, excitedly asking him if that was Tai Chi. He replied calmly and with an air of secrecy 'ah it's just exercise ...'

I knew it was what I had been looking for. I immersed myself in the training and because of my foundations made good progress. At that point it was late 1982, and when I had the opportunity to go to Melbourne and set up a school I didn't hesitate; this was going to allow me to live and breathe Tai Chi and Qigong.

I founded and ran the Tai Chi and Qigong Academy in Melbourne for 10 years, having at different times around 2000 students. I was able to train full time, and to go to China to learn from some of the best masters of internal arts in the world. These were good times; I had an excellent team of instructors and we were dedicated to improving our skills and bringing the best possible tuition to our students.

In 1988 I was introduced to the Feldenkrais Method, and again it was one of those pivotal moments in my life where I knew 'I had to do it'. Developed by the famous Israeli physicist Dr Moshe Feldenkrais, the Feldenkrais Method is an ingenious system of somatic learning that provides people with the means to learn how to live in their bodies more skillfully. I joined the first Professional training held in Brisbane from 1990 to 1993 and graduated as a Practitioner that year.

By then I had moved to the Gold Coast and had set up a new Tai Chi school and Feldenkrais practice. It was here that I had the opportunity to become involved with the Golden Door Health Retreat in South East Queensland. It was just about to open and they wanted me to teach Tai Chi exercises to the staff; I then came on board teaching Feldenkrais classes for the guests.

Over the years I had noticed that many people who started to learn Tai Chi would have difficulty breathing deeply and naturally to their abdomen. It was also hard to teach them to slow their breathing down so they could experience the deep relaxation that should accompany the practice. Here I had the opportunity to explore ways of combining Feldenkrais lessons that focus on improving breathing, together with the basic practices of Qigong. For over 13 years now I have taught

these techniques to thousands of people from all walks of life and all levels of fitness and wellbeing.

This book is the result of the many years I have spent cultivating, training and teaching these specific techniques on breathing. It is intended to be an easy to follow, practical manual for anyone regardless of age or level of fitness who would like to significantly improve their breathing. Whether you have a particular problem with your breathing such as asthma or a bronchial illness, or have had lung surgery; or if you are a fit, sporty person or even an elite athlete, there are techniques and practices in these pages that will be of benefit to you.

Brad Thompson

I would like to Dedicate this book to Rael the Messenger of infinity. You taught me how to dream. I would also like to acknowledge the genius of Dr Moshe Feldenkrais and thank Master Brett Wagland, who would never call himself a master, for his friendship, dedication and generosity.

B.T

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