

Discover the Practice of Breathing

By JJ Gormley-Etchells

It seems curious that we should have to practice breathing. But many a yogi would argue that developing a breathing practice is one of the healthiest things we can do. The reasons why merit our attention.

We appreciate that moving the body around in many positions positively affects our health. It should therefore come as no surprise that doing the same with the breath can achieve similar results. Just consider how your breath is affected the next time you're experiencing a stressful challenge. Today's fast-paced lifestyle presents all too many such circumstances, so for some of us accelerated breathing is the unfortunate rule, not the occasional exception. Still others may know the difference between normal and stressful breathing and feel compelled, without thinking, to invoke the palliative "take a deep breath."

It's important to remember some things about our asana practice. Practicing yoga postures balances the body by enhancing our flexibility and developing strength. When we are truly practicing yoga, we are in touch with our body. We know through discovery where the body is strong or tight and where it is more open or flexible. That knowledge is enormously valuable, indeed essential, to bring balance to our body. We then can turn to strengthening areas that are weak and bringing flexibility to areas that are tight. But moving toward a more balanced body is only one dimension of the path of yoga.

Another part of the path of yoga (of which there are eight in all) is the practice of breathing, called pranayama. Various breathing techniques, like variations in poses, tend to reflect the idiosyncrasies of the many different schools of yoga.

Some schools say that the right way to breathe is to expand the ribcage with the breath. Others argue that the breath should move the belly. Still others assert that the breath should move both the belly and the ribcage. These arguments can rapidly degenerate into greater and greater detail and subtlety of technique. For example, you might hear that the breath expands the ribcage from the bottom up, while another school may say from the top down. More often than not, one is left perplexed rather than lucid.

Having studied from many of these schools of asana and pranayama myself, I've developed one simple unifying principle. It is that we should apply the same discovery process that we employ in our asana practice to our breathing practice. That is, we must first observe what our breath naturally does—in other words, we must discover the habitual pattern of our breathing. In order to bring balance to our breath, we must begin to move it in a new way. This literally means creating a new pattern of breathing. We discover from our asana practice what our habitual way of moving has done to our body and that we must move in a different way to increase flexibility in the tight places and increase strength in the weak places in order to bring about balance to our physical body. Hence, our pranayama practice must also be looked at similarly and changed in order to bring about balance to this other system of the body linked with the nervous system as well as many other systems in the body. In fact, our breath pattern can affect what ailments we are likely to get as we age. For example, belly breathers are more likely to get ailments affecting the lower areas of the body: lower back issues, incontinence, bowel issues including: irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, etc.

Yet, while belly breathing is good for some things, it's not the breath of choice to do all the time.

Discovering that you are a "belly breather" is the first step, making a change is the next and this will begin to balance the pranic (energy) system of the body. When the pranic system of the body is in better balance, overall health and healing can take place.

One way I like to teach pranayama is to have students lie on their back with their knees bent, letting the body release and surrender. When they notice that point of surrender they then begin to observe the breath as a witness. Imagine the body is like a house with two or three floors, a basement, perhaps an attic; each house is imagined differently for each student. There can be front rooms, back rooms, rooms on the left, rooms on the right, hallways, etc. Begin to notice which floors of the house the breath easily moves through, which rooms feel like the door is wide open and the room is airy and clean. Then imagine which rooms are dark, musty, filled with cobwebs, or perhaps the door is completely closed and blocked to the breath. Once you discover what your house looks like (to the breath), begin to open doors and invite the breath in to previously closed-off rooms. Invite the breath in to peek at the rooms that feel musty or dark. Avoid pushing or pulling the breath. Instead just send an invitation out and see if the breath accepts. See if the breath will go into musty rooms and clear them out a bit. Feel as though you are playing with the breath. Anytime the nervous system becomes agitated, the invitation has been refused. In that case, permit your guest (the breath) to leave with dignity and even close off those dirty rooms once again. Perhaps another day you can try again, play again, by inviting the breath in again to do its job.

We can also discover where in the nasal passageway the breath is most apparent, and then adjust accordingly. We can also learn if we breathe more in the front body or the back body, and adjust accordingly. We can discover if we think of the breath filling the lungs from the top down or from the

bottom up and play with experiencing the opposite direction. We can detect if our inhalation or our exhalation is longer and begin to play with it. We need not make more than one change at a time. The point is to recognize our habitual pattern of breathing and then to make systematic changes over time. Playing with changing our breathing pattern helps to strengthen the physical breathing structures: the diaphragm (a muscle that can be stretched or strengthened), the tightness or flexibility of the muscles around the ribcage and/or the belly. Changing our breathing pattern also helps to "strengthen" the nervous system, making us stronger or better able to handle stress.

We can also begin to observe the ratio of the breath pattern. There are four components to the breath: the Inhale, Hold after Inhale, Exhale and Hold after Exhale. We can discover the approximate length of time for each of these four parts in our habitual breath pattern and then begin to make changes to develop the breath in to new patterns. A good teacher can help you discover an appropriate pattern for you as different patterns will affect many things including our mood, ability to handle stress, heart rate, etc. The breath can then be used to help heal the body.

Yogis believe that the breath is directly linked to the nervous system. The simplest manifestation is taking a deep breath to calm down. You may notice that taking a belly breath works even better, or breathing in the back of the body from the top down may seem even more beneficial. View your body as your own experimental vessel. And then suit and adapt your breathing technique to what best works for that vessel. But one thing is clear: the breath and nervous system are inextricably linked. A mind focused on the breath calms the nervous system, thereby reducing stress.

Western medicine may one day catch on and notice (or prove) what the ancient yogis already knew: the way one breathes can affect our body and nervous system alike, and therefore our susceptibility to disease, on the one hand, or our capacity to maintain good health, on the other.

Namaste,

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