

Breathing

Our breath has amazing therapeutic powers. By controlling and slowing the breath (a practice called pranayama), we engage the parasympathetic nervous system, a complex biological mechanism that calms and soothes us. The practice helps promote both bodily health and mental clarity.

Our goal is to stop distractions and make our minds clearer and more lucid by focusing on/controlling our breathing. Our breathing is so habitual that most people never give it much attention, and therefore have little sense of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways it can change. But if we begin to listen, we will notice how multi-dimensional our breathing really is.

Breath-Awareness

Choose a quiet place and sit in any position that is comfortable. The most important thing is to keep your back straight to prevent your mind from becoming sluggish or sleepy.

Sit with your eyes closed and turn your attention to your breathing.

Breathe naturally, preferably through the nostrils, without attempting to control your breath. Try to become aware of the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. Concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else.

You will probably notice that your breath is uneven. It may be quick or slow, smooth or harsh; sometimes it stops for a moment and then begins again. You might notice that parts of the lungs receive the breath easier than others. As much as you can, notice these qualities of your breath without interference or judgment.

Don't worry if your mind is busy at first. Each time you discover that your mind has wandered and is following your thoughts, simply return your thoughts to the breath. Repeat this as many times as necessary until the mind settles on the breath.

Spend at least 5 minutes focusing on your natural breathing.

Repeat this practice for a few days before adding in the next steps.

Once you are comfortable with breath awareness, begin to incorporate even-breathing techniques.

Even Breathing

Spend at least 1 minute focusing on your natural breathing, as detailed in the previous section.

After observing your breath, begin shaping the breath to make it smoother and more regular. Without hurrying, gradually guide your breath from its naturally rough gait toward an even rhythm. Make every part of the inhalation just like every other part of the inhalation, and do the same with the exhalation.

The part of the rib cage that usually does our breathing, is right at the bottom of the breastbone. All the rest of the lungs are neglected. As you continue to breathe smoothly, begin to distribute your breath evenly so that you fill the whole lungs. Take your attention to the corners of the lungs where the breath rarely penetrates, and open those spaces to receive the breath more fully.

Placing your hands on your ribs as you breathe can be a helpful way to better notice the even rhythm of your breathing.

Spend at least 5 minutes focusing on your even breathing.

Repeat this practice for a few days before adding in the next steps.

Once you are comfortable with even breathing, begin to incorporate ocean breathing techniques.

Ocean Breathing

Spend at least 1 minute focusing on your natural breathing, and another minute evening your breathing as detailed in the previous sections.

Imagine your belly as an ocean and your chest as the shore. Your breath becomes a wave washing up from the depths of your belly onto your chest and then falling back again. Let the wave of your breath wash back and forth from belly to chest, chest to belly, again and again.

Keep your belly soft and deep—resting back towards your spine rather than pushing aggressively outward—and keep your chest wide and bright. Though the chest and belly will move slightly with each inhalation and exhalation, their basic shape should not change.

Your breathing will naturally increase in volume. Don't suppress that increase, but don't actively encourage it, either. You're not trying to ingest more air, but instead to increase the quality of your breath and your sensitivity to it.

Spend at least 5 minutes focusing on your ocean breathing.

Repeat this practice for a few days before adding in the next steps.

Once you are comfortable with ocean breathing, begin to incorporate victorious breathing techniques.

Victorious Breathing

Spend at least 1 minute focusing on your natural breathing, another minute evening your breathing, and another practicing ocean breathing as detailed in the previous sections.

For this practice, you are simply adding a slight closure at the root of your throat. Narrowing the throat by half-closing the epiglottis will give your breath a loud rushing wind or ocean tone.

First, just sigh, and notice the slight constriction in your throat that occurs. That's the area you need to control.

Next, open your mouth and inhale softly, noticing where the breath touches your throat. For most people, that will be deep down at the base and back of the throat. Again, that's the spot you need to constrict slightly.

After you've zeroed in on this area, close your mouth and inhale, letting the breath touch your throat there. Once you can inhale in this way, practice exhaling with the same constriction of the epiglottis.

Listen to the tone of the breath as you inhale and exhale, and make that tone as even and smooth as you can, without any catches or wavering.

Spend at least 5 minutes focusing on your victorious breathing.

Additional Information

Iyengar, B. K.S. "Light on Pranayama: The Yogic Art of Breathing " 1985

Farhi, Donna. "The Breathing Book: Vitality & Good Health Through Essential Breath Work" 1996

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