

CHAPTER TWO

Breathing for the Joy of It!

*Breathe in Health and
Happiness*



When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still, and the yogi achieves long life. Therefore, one should learn to control the breath.

— Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (ancient text on yoga)



THE MIRACLE OF BREATH

Breath is life. We can survive weeks without food, days without water, but only moments without breath. When a baby is born the breath establishes life, and at the final moments of death the breath leaves the body. The breath bridges the external world and the internal world. In this chapter you learn how to take full advantage of this simple yet profound life-supporting act. The word *spiritus*, in Latin, and the word *ruach*, in Hebrew, both mean breath and life energy (Weil, 1995, pp. 203). When you bring in breath, you bring in life force.

The average person takes in a minimal amount of oxygen when breathing. The result of this type of breathing is tightness throughout the body, stress, and a lowered immune system. Other than musicians, athletes, and singers, few people are aware that the abdomen should

expand during inhalation to supply the cells with adequate amounts of oxygen. Learning slow yoga breathing dramatically affects the nervous system and the quality of life.

PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF PROPER BREATHING

- Improves stamina
- Improves digestion
- Improves circulation
- Strengthens the immune system
- Oxygenates the tissues
- Enhances concentration and focus
- Decreases anxiety
- Promotes a sense of well-being in body and mind

Proper breathing is a master key of health and positively affects the entire body (Krucoff, 2000).

“

Student Testimonial

“Practicing yoga breathing has made me calmer and more energetic. I do not get out of breath when I am rushing to class!”

THE YOGA BREATH

For thousands of years, yogis have recognized the power of the breath. They developed techniques to harness this power. Techniques of breath control are called **pranayama**. This word is a combination of two Sanskrit words, *prana*, meaning life force or breath, and *yama*, meaning control. To attain peace and enlightenment, yogis practiced many breathing techniques. Before describing the specific yoga breathing, it is beneficial to first observe your natural breathing cycle.

To gain awareness of your natural breath cycle, perform the following exercise:

- Lie down on your back with your knees bent and the soles of the feet fully rooted on the floor.
- Observe your natural breathing process.

- Do you take in a lot of air?
- Does the breath fill only your chest or does it flow into your abdomen?
- Does the air gush out all at once?
- Do you fully empty your lungs before taking in the next breath?
- Do you feel tension in the shoulders when you breathe?
- Do feel any constriction in your body when you breathe?
- Make mental notes of these observations.

THE DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATH

Once you have completed the observation of your natural breath cycle, it is time to learn diaphragmatic breathing, an important element in the practice of yoga.

- Find a comfortable seated position.
- Place your hands on the diaphragm with the fingertips facing each other and the middle fingers touching.
- Breathe in through the nose in a slow, steady stream.
- Visualize the air flowing into the lungs, inflating the diaphragm like a balloon.
- Feel your hands moving outward (**Figure 2-1A**).



Figure 2-1A

- Slowly exhale through the nose in a steady stream.
- The diaphragm will deflate like a balloon and the hands will move inward (**Figure 2-1B**).



Figure 2-1B

- For the next inhalation, place the hands on the side ribs. Initially the diaphragm will inflate; then observe the movement of the ribs outward.
- On the exhalation, feel the side ribs moving inward.
- For the third inhalation, place the fingertips on the collarbone (clavicle). Observe the diaphragm inflate, and then the side ribs expand. Finally feel the subtle movement of breath under the fingertips.
- On the exhalation, feel the collarbone release.
- Practice the three-part diaphragmatic breathing on the floor, on a chair, against a wall, in the car, walking to class, walking your dog, everywhere!!



Smile, breathe, and go slowly.

— **Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese monk nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize**

Qualities of the Breath

Fast Breathing



Shallow
Excites
Louder
Produces anxiety

Slow Breathing



Deep and regular
Calms
Quieter
Produces relaxation

Yoga Science

Andrew Weil, director of the Program of Integrative Medicine and professor of clinical medicine at the University of Arizona in Tucson, teaches breath work to all his patients and states the following:

“I have seen breath control alone achieve remarkable results: Lowering blood pressure, ending heart arrhythmias, improving the long-standing patterns of poor digestion, and increasing blood circulation throughout the body, decreasing anxiety and allowing people to get off addictive anti-anxiety drugs and improving sleep and energy cycles” (Krucoff, 2000).

UJJAYI BREATHING

The word **ujjayi**, in Sanskrit, means *victorious*. This type of breathing anchors the yoga practice. In fact, just practicing this breath without practicing the asanas brings vibrancy and vitality to the body. The ujjayi

breath combines the deep-flowing diaphragmatic breath with a sound that is created in the back of the throat. This sound, like a whisper, similar to the sound of the ocean or Darth Vader's voice in *Star Wars*, vibrates in the back of the throat. The sound of the ujjayi breath, like music, affects the ears, jaw, mouth, and eyes.

Similar to the diaphragmatic breath, the ujjayi breath also consists of three parts. When inhaling through the nose, the breath first fills the diaphragm, then the rib cage, and then the upper portion of the chest. The inhale and exhale are equal in length, which relaxes the nervous system. Additionally, the ujjayi breath brings strength to the diaphragm and the core muscles while increasing the internal temperature of the body. Yoga practitioners consciously use the ujjayi breath to build strength, discover balance, and establish a rhythmic flow to the asana practice.



When utilizing the ujjayi breath throughout the entire practice, especially in the transitions between asanas, the whole yoga session becomes a moving meditation.

Follow the sequence below to experience the ujjayi breath.

- Find a comfortable seated position.
- With your mouth open, take breath in through your mouth and make a “ha” sound as you inhale and exhale.
- Now, close your mouth and create the same “ha” sound in the back of the throat, as you inhale and exhale through your nose.
- Make the inhale slow, smooth, and steady.
- Create an exhale that mirrors your inhale, slow, smooth, and steady. This balanced rhythm of the breath soothes the nervous system while calming and relaxing the mind.



Breathing in I calm the body and mind

Breathing out I smile

Dwelling in the present moment

I know this is the only moment

— **Thich Nhat Hahn**

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

This *pranayama* breathing technique in Sanskrit, called *nadi shodhana*, cleanses and balances the energy channels of the whole body (**Figure 2-2**). It also dramatically soothes the nervous system while stimulating both hemispheres of the brain. In this process, both nostrils clear, the blood receives more oxygen, and the mind becomes calm and lucid. Follow the sequence described to experience alternate nostril breathing.



Figure 2-2

- Sit comfortably on the floor or on a chair extending the spine and opening the chest.
- Take the index, middle, and ring fingertips of the right hand toward the palm (**Figure 2-3**).
- Gently close off the right nostril with the thumb.
- Inhale slowly and smoothly through the left nostril.
- Pause.
- Close off the left nostril with the baby finger while removing the thumb from the right nostril and exhale slowly and smoothly.

- Inhale through the right nostril.
- Pause.
- Remove the fingers from the left nostril as you exhale.
- Repeat this sequence by inhaling through the left nostril.

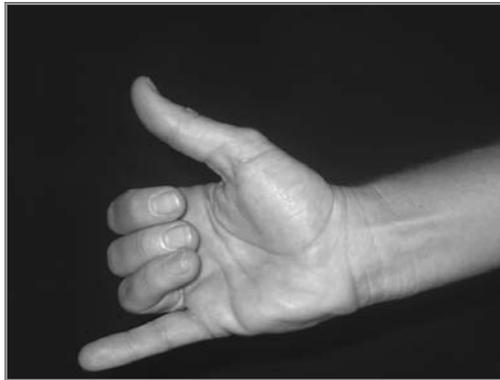


Figure 2-3

Several variations of hand positions and breathing rhythms slightly alter the effects of this process, and all variations work! When practicing this *pranayama* technique, visualize a life force plus the breath flowing into your body and brain.

VISUALIZATIONS FOR PRACTICING THE YOGA BREATH

Yoga combines breath awareness and movement. Each breath during a yoga practice possesses the ability to transform. Keeping the focus on the breath enriches the yoga experience! The breath is the most important aspect of the practice.

Experiment with these visualizations:

- Visualize the diaphragm as a balloon. As you inhale, the balloon inflates. As you exhale, the balloon deflates.
- Inhale health, light, and joy. Exhale toxins, tension, and resistance.
- Inhale length and openness. Exhale tightness and constriction.
- As you breathe in, notice areas of tension. As you breathe out, release the tension.
- Use the inhale to observe. Use the exhale to accept.

- Use the inhale to lift and expand the pose. Use the exhale to go deeper into the pose.
- Think of the breath as a circle. Connect the inhale and exhale seamlessly.
- In yoga practice make the inhale and exhale mirror each other in length, texture, and quality.

If the breathing becomes labored or short, lessen the intensity of the pose and reestablish a smooth and steady breath. Remember, like the asanas, yoga breathing takes practice. Observe, explore, and experience joy!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. List four benefits achieved with proper breathing.
2. Define:
 - a. *Pranayama*
 - b. Ujjayi
 - c. *Nadi shodhana*
3. Record your observations after watching your natural breath cycle for three minutes.
4. Describe two visualizations to use with the yoga breath.
5. What makes the ujjayi breath unique?



YOGA MOMENT

Observe yourself tense, nervous, or upset in a situation. Consciously turn your attention to slow diaphragmatic breathing. Record your observations.