

And Bre

Prana is life. You can think of 'Prana' as breath, like a thread or a chain that links and connects all the events of your life from birth - the beginning, to death - the end.

The breath is always there every moment, moving by itself like a river. In yoga we refer to the breath as 'Pranayama'. The word 'Prana' is comprised of two roots prana plus ayama. Prana means 'vital energy' or 'life force' and yama translates as 'control'. Therefore pranayama is to control one's breathing. Prana can also be referred to as energy.

According to one of the ancient texts called 'The Upanishads', the various levels of existence form a continuum, the physical, the pranic, the mental and the higher levels of our consciousness. These levels are layered one upon the other. If the mind wants to affect the body, it alters the flow of energy or prana. If the body wants to affect the mind, this too is accomplished through an effect on the flow of energy, which in turn has an impact on the mind.

Prana is said to be the vital link between psyche and soma - "vital" because energy is the very basis of life and vitality. The vital energy is referred to as the pranic sheath. The pranic sheath is said to have



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an extremely complicated anatomy and is composed of pathways called 'nadis' in which prana (energy) flows. As you can imagine Prana is a vast topic therefore for the purpose of this article I will keep it simple and we shall refer to prana (energy) as the breath. The average person uses their chest muscles rather than the diaphragm when breathing and such breathing is usually shallow, rapid and irregular. As a consequence, the lower lobes of the lungs, which receive an abundant supply of blood, are not adequately ventilated so the gas exchange which takes place between the air in the lungs and the blood is inadequate. Respiratory physiologists refer to this as a 'ventilation-perfusion abnormality'. With diaphragmatic breathing, such inequalities between ventilation and perfusion are minimised.

Have you ever noticed how the breath changes with our moods and the circumstances we find ourselves in. Short and shallow when we're tense or angry. Faster when we exercise or are anxious, slow and full when we are happy and relaxed and almost disappearing when we are faced with fear. The breath is a great tool, an anchor, to bring stability to the body and mind when we deliberately choose to become aware of it. We can tune into our breath at any moment during every day of our lives.

Much of the time we're not in touch with our breath - it's just there, forgotten. So one of the first things we practice in yoga is to notice without judgement, our breath, to be mindful and observe our breath. We notice how the breath changes with our moods, our thoughts, our feelings and body movements. We don't have to control the breath we can simply notice it and get to know it, like a long lost friend. All that is necessary is to observe, watch, and feel the breath with a sense of interest, in a relaxed manner.

With practice, we become more aware of our breathing. We can use it to direct our awareness to different aspects of our lives. For example, to relax tense muscles, or focus on a situation that requires attention. Breath can also be used to help deal with pain, anger, relationships or the stresses and challenges we can face in our daily lives.

The belly moves to the tune of the breath. When we are at ease, the diaphragm becomes the primary engine of the breath. As we inhale, this dome-like muscle descends toward the abdomen, moving the abdominal muscles and inviting the belly to gently swell. As we exhale, the diaphragm releases back toward the heart, enabling the belly to release toward the spine. Don't confuse this action with tensing and releasing the abdominal muscles, though. The rise and fall of the breath is initiated from the breathing muscles, while the belly muscles remain quiet, soft and unrestricted.

In a resting body the muscles of the upper

chest remain soft and unstrained during each cycle of breath. The real work occurs deeper in the ribcage, minimising feelings of heaving or gripping in the shoulders and throat. To promote this relaxed breathing pattern, consciously relax the eyes, mouth, tongue, jaw, throat, neck and shoulders, and visualise the breath sweeping into the deepest parts of the lungs as you breathe in and out. The breath is smooth, soft and rhythmic.

Although some breaths may be deeper or faster than others, in a resting body the alternating rhythm of the inhalation and exhalation feels like a lullaby – rhythmic, smooth, soft and uncluttered by jerks and jags. Consciously relaxing into this wavelike, oceanic quality of the breath deepens our sense of peace and ease. We want to aim for a long effortless and gentle exhalation. When we're stressed or threatened, our exhalations grow short and choppy. When we're relaxed, the exhalations extend so completely that they are often longer than the inhalations. Some yogis teach that in a body truly at ease, each exhalation will be twice as long as the inhalation.

To facilitate this pattern, when you reach the end of your exhalation consider whether you might be able to gently extend the breath by just another second, without forcing. A short pause develops at the end of each exhalation. In our most relaxed states, the end of each exhalation is punctuated by a short pause that leaves the body completely at rest and still.

Lingering in this sweet spot where the body is neither swelled or settled by the breath can be deeply satisfying and can evoke feelings of profound quietness and stillness within. The whole body breathes.

In a body that has been softened by ease and well-being, the whole body participates in the breathing process – not just the abdomen. Consider a sleeping baby – when he/she breathes in and out, the belly swells and releases, the hips rock to and fro, the shoulders bob, and the spine gently undulates to the tune of the breath. This offers a mini-massage for the muscles and organs of the whole body, and turns each breath into a soothing melody that further calms and quiets every cell within.

It is said that human beings breathe approximately 15 times per minute and 21,600 times per day and that our breathing influences the quality of our life, the length, or quantity of life is also dictated by the rhythm of the respiration. The ancient yogis, and rishis studied nature in great detail. They noticed that animals with a slow breath rate such as pythons, elephants, and tortoises have long life spans compared to those with a fast breathing rate, such as birds, rabbits and mice live for only a few years. From this observation they realised the importance of slow breathing for increasing the human lifespan. They concluded that those who breathe in short, quick gasps are likely to have a shorter life span than those who breathe slowly, and deeply. On the physical level, this is because the respiration is directly related

to the heart. A slow breathing rate keeps the heart stronger, and better nourished, and contributes to a longer life. Whilst this theory is interesting there is no scientific evidence to substantiate this.

There are some things that can hinder our natural breath for example; there are two items of clothing which can prevent us from normal breathing - leather belts and bras. If these items are tight they can restrict the breath so if you need an excuse to remove these items then this is it. But the physical obstacles are even more daunting: the hard tense stomach which encumbers every breath, the rib-cage as inflexible as a breast-plate; the diaphragm immobilised by the wind - itself caused by spasms - which has accumulated in the alimentary canal.

The first step is to relax all these muscles, which when permanently tense are designed more successfully than any corset to prevent normal breathing; and this is why relaxation is the open door to yoga.

Priority given to exhalation Yoga, maintains that all good respiration begins with a slow and complete exhalation, and that this perfect exhalation is an absolute prerequisite of correct and complete inhalation, for the very simple reason that, until a receptacle is emptied, it cannot be filled. Unless we first breathe out fully it is impossible to breathe in fully and correctly.

In yoga we focus on cultivating diaphragmatic breathing. This is easy, simple and beneficial however the 'habit'

of it has to be learned and consciously cultivated before it can become 'automatic' and authentic.

How to Become the Witness of your own Breath and Cultivate Diaphragmatic Breathing:

Begin by finding a quiet space where you will not be disturbed and give yourself at least 15 – 20 minutes for this practice. Wear comfortable and loose non-restrictive clothing.

You can either sit on a chair, on the floor (use a wall to support your spine if this helps) or you can lie down just as you would in shavasana (relaxation).

Place a folded blanket or small towel underneath the back of the head just to encourage length through the back of the spine/neck and chin toward the chest (do not press chin to chest).

If lying down use a bolster or rolled yoga mat or rolled blankets behind the knees.

Whatever position you choose, allow yourself to begin to settle and relax. Develop an inward smile and soften the forehead, eyes, jaw, mouth and throat.

Allow your shoulders to drop away from your ears and allow your whole body to soften and release.

Begin by noticing your breath, breathing in through the nose and out through the nose. Bring awareness to your nostrils and feel the cool air entering as you inhale, as you exhale feel the warm air leave your nostrils. Witness your breath – don't attempt to control or be judgemental, observe the

steady ebb and flow of your breath.

If you feel yourself drifting off to sleep – open your eyes or choose another posture e.g. seated.

Bring awareness - follow the breath to the throat, upper chest, the lungs, the rib cage, side, front and back.

Feel the abdomen move upward on the inhale and downward on the exhalation.

Become aware of the whole breath observing from your nostrils down to the pubic bone.

Place your right hand just above the naval and your left hand over the centre of your chest.

Your right hand will move with the inhale and exhale, your left hand should not move with the breath, if it does begin to focus on breathing into your right hand.

Completely empty the exhale and do not be in a rush to take your next inhale.

Begin to gently lengthen your exhalation. Once you have mastered this begin to lengthen your inhalation. Don't rush or force it.

Practice for at least 10 minutes to start with and practice daily until you feel comfortable. Once you have mastered the technique you can use this breath in your daily life and remember the your breath is always there to support you.

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