

# LONG DEEP BREATHING

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*The breath is a barometer for life's energy. It is our most constant measure of vitality. It is fundamental for our consciousness and controlling our moods. The first task of a yoga student is to cultivate consciousness about this most powerful technique.*

The quantity, quality and circulation of the breath create the foundation of a vital and creative life. It is a barometer of how much energy we normally run on and how much reserve capacity we have created for emergencies. The breath is both gross and subtle. The gross aspect is the blend of oxygen, nitrogen and other elements that chemically constitute the air. The subtle aspect is the **Prana or vital force** that energizes the mind, body and consciousness.

The technique we most often use in yoga is Long Deep Breathing. Nevertheless, in the societies in which we live, we seldom take the time to breathe deeply. Our habit is to breathe superficial, irregular and somewhat erratic, which often leads us to act emotionally in our lives, often characterized by having a weak nervous system and suffering from high levels of stress.

Our lungs are the biggest organs in the human body and their volume can increase up to 6,000 cubic centimeters. Besides supplying us with oxygen and eliminating carbon dioxide from the blood, the respiratory system helps to regulate the pH level in the body, eliminate water vapor, hydrogen and small quantities of methane that accumulates in our organism.

Normally, we use only 600 or 700 cubic centimeters of our lung capacity, which prevents the alveoli (the small pockets of air in the inside lining of the lungs), from carrying out efficiently their job of cleansing our blood. As a result, we are not able to receive the oxygen we need and irritating toxins begin to accumulate in the blood stream, which, in the end, can produce a variety of infections and disease.

By breathing deeply, you can expand your lung capacity eight times your normal capacity. If you become accustomed in your daily life to breathe slowly and deeply, you will gain in patience and tolerance. When you are able to breathe no more than 8 times a minute, the pituitary gland will begin to secrete with all the benefits that come from that, such as, greater intuition. If the rhythm is inferior to 4 times per minute, the pituitary gland activates in a way that meditation becomes automatic. The correct use

of the breath is a technique that should be cultivated by everyone. Perhaps we think that something so essential for life is the reason it is largely an automatic process. But the breath is both voluntary and involuntary. One part is due to our genetic makeup, our emotions and our background, and the other part is a learned process. The fact is, that when we learn to regulate the breath we modify our view of life and become capable of re-supplying the expended energy used up in the body. We are then able to increase the energy reserve that we have for emergency situations.

## TECHNIQUE

The purpose of Long Deep Breathing is that the lungs can expand and contract to their maximum capacity, thereby, producing an effective pranic and gaseous interchange. That means, that our organism can eliminate by exhaling the greatest quantity possible of toxins from the bloodstream (apana), and receive by inhaling the greatest possible amount of pure oxygen (prana).

In the act of breathing, the diaphragm, which is the muscle that separates the thoracic cavity from the abdominal cavity, does the majority of the work. Our lungs in a way obey this movement of the diaphragm expanding and contracting according to the nature of its movement. If the movement is towards our feet, air can enter into our lungs and if the movement is towards our head, air is expelled from our lungs.

**This movement of the diaphragm involves the whole trunk, from the pelvic region to the shoulder bone. It is for this reason that when we talk about yogic breathing in general, we are talking about three separate phases: abdominal, thoracic or chest and clavicular.** While we are learning to breathe more completely, this differentiation helps us to be conscious in each part of the process. With practice, the three phases overlap more and more and we are able to feel the act of breathing as it really is, one fluid movement.

## ABDOMINAL BREATHING

In this phase, we want the lungs to expand letting in approximately 60% of its oxygen capacity. For this reason, the diaphragm expands downwards gently pushing our abdominal organs forward and to the side. If the abdomen is tense, the organs will not be able to move slightly to accommodate the movement of the diaphragm and the process of breathing will be limited. That is why it is necessary to relax abdominal tension.

In order to feel what is going on, put one hand below the Navel Point. Relax the abdomen and as you inhale imagine an air pocket surrounding your entire abdomen area. Your hand moves slightly forward as you relax abdominal tension and permit that the diaphragm moves downward and displacing the organs.

To exhale, imagine that this air pocket contracts pushing all the air out bringing with it

the abdomen and its organs towards the spinal column.

#### Clues

- Try not to push with the abdominal muscles outwardly but don't abandon them either.
- Maintain a sense of a flexible containment.
- Remember that your body moves in a three-dimensional form, not in just a forward motion. It will help you remove tension from the lower back area.
- Don't try and force your breath capacity more than you realistically can in each moment. Don't be competitive, just the opposite, do everything with gentleness and patience.

### THORACIC BREATHING

In this phase, oxygen enters the middle part of the lungs and expands them 30% more. In order to do this you must widen the rib cage and permit the lungs to expand horizontally.

In order to feel this movement, place the hands along side the floating ribs, imagining them as wings. As you inhale, feel your hands expanding laterally as air enters your lungs. You will feel your ribs expanding and your lungs filling up even more. As you exhale, simply bring your wings in and let the air leave your lungs.

#### Clues

- It's important to maintain the space between your hip/pelvic region and the rib cage so that the rib cage can move freely.
- If at first it is difficult to feel this movement of the ribs, don't try to compensate by tensing the chest area or the shoulders. As you relax, you will be able to feel the movement.
- It's important to keep the vision of a three-dimensional body, feeling the ribs move forward, towards the sides and backwards.

### CLAVICULAR BREATH

This is the subtlest phase of the breathing process. The tip and smallest part of the lungs is found just below the collarbone in the chest. Here the final 10% of oxygen can enter to completely fill the lungs. So that air reaches all the way up to fill the upper parts of the lungs it is necessary to relax the chest muscles, the shoulder blades and the shoulders.

Place the hands below the shoulders in the upper chest area, imagine that the chest lifts and opens up, imagine a sun brightly shining in the center of your chest, like your heart, and allow your shoulders to soften as the air travels to the shoulder blades. As you exhale, just let the whole area relax and lower with all of the muscles returning to a natural state of rest.

#### Clues

- Try not to tense the shoulders or lifting up the chest and thereby tensing the stomach area.
- Remember that only a very small quantity of air can go in, so don't try to fill up more than is possible.
- If you straighten the cervical region of the neck by bringing the chin towards the rear, you will help maintain the shoulders relaxed and therefore you will be able to feel this movement of the upper chest.

## LONG DEEP BREATHING

Keep one hand below the Navel Point and the other hand on the rib-cage and unite the three movements: As you inhale, relax the abdomen permitting the air pocket to expand, then expand the rib-cage like wings towards the sides filling up the middle part of the lungs, and finally open up and lift the chest with a soft and subtle movement.

As you exhale, let each part return to the starting point; the chest goes down, the wings of the rib cage fold back in and the lower abdomen retracts towards the spinal column. As all the air goes out, relax the lower abdominal pressure and begin again.

### Clues

- Maintain the earth-sky connection keeping the spinal column straight.
- If you exhale completely, pushing out the last breath of air, the inhale will happen automatically and spontaneously with all of its phases. A good exhale, with calmness and consciousness, will aid an easier inhale and one in which is richer in every way.
- If you feel tension in any of the phases of the breathing process, simply relax, exhale, readjust yourself and try again.
- Remember that adding pressure won't help, just the opposite, it won't. There is no hurry.

### Benefits

- Balances the nervous system creating a harmonious relationship between vitality and relaxation.
- Increases the flow of Prana throughout the body.
- Acts like an anti-depressive as it stimulates the production of endorphins.
- Stimulates the pituitary gland, helping to develop intuition.
- Purifies the blood.
- Regulates pH in the body (the alkaline/acid balance of the body).
- Opens and activates the energy channels of the body.
- Helps to balance the emotions.
- Helps to change habit patterns.
- Helps to counteract addictive behavior.
- Generates a state of calmness in mind and body.
- It is a fundamental tool to enter into meditation.
- Brings the mind to the present as you watch the flow of the breathing process.
- Develops a calm perspective, patience, clear ideas and greater understanding.

# BREATH OF FIRE

## AGNI PRAN

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Breath of Fire is a breathing technique that is both invigorating and purifying, and is in itself like a kriya in Kundalini Yoga. It involves abdominal contractions, which are rhythmic and balanced. It is an incredible tool against feeling anxious, nervous, worry, fear, sorrow and sadness.

Yogi Bhajan taught us that a person receives in his life a determined number of breaths from the time of his birth to his death. Breath of Fire is considered one breath from the time you begin doing it until you finish. In a sense, Breath of Fire is a technique, which prolongs life.

This breath revitalizes completely your nervous and glandular systems purifying the blood in the process. When you do the breath in certain postures or with certain movements that exercise pressure on the different nerve plexus and glands, these areas of your body fill with vitality and energy.

As those parts of your body become healthier, the sexual fluids are freed into the blood stream and flow towards those areas affected so that they are able to keep their vitality. On a spiritual level, the body generates more prana and “Bindu” (the energy of Rajas and Tamas) is converted to “Ojas” (the energy of Sattva), touching our body and mind with its life-giving attributes.

In a brief period of time of just a few weeks of doing kriyas combining posture, movement, breathing, sound and body locks, the whole body will begin to feel a more electric and etheric energy as the electro-magnetic field balances itself through the work.

Over time, as our energy increases, the mind experiences a greater peace, thoughts become clearer and one feels a certain radiation circling the whole body. The stressful need to always be thinking and acting and then to be the “doer” begins to diminish as the mind becomes more receptive and open to understanding that there is an automatic connection between our objectives and the events and experiences that come to satisfy those same objectives in our life. The sensation of a natural unity amongst all things begins to emerge as a clear reality for us.

Little by little, the tendency of the mind to look towards the outside, towards the

physical and the mental, begins to disappear and one lives in a Sattvic state – spacious, impenetrable, without the sensation of “I” or of “mine” being present.

## TECHNIQUE

In order to learn the technique, begin with a slower abdominal movement. As you exhale, the abdomen and the Navel Point lightly contract moving towards the spine and somewhat upwards, and as you inhale the abdomen relaxes forward as the diaphragm lowers filling up the lungs.

The progressive intention of this abdominal movement, in and out, creates both an active inhalation and exhalation. The sound of the inhalation and the exhalation should be the same. As you learn the technique, maintain a moderate speed listening to the rhythm you are creating and try to merge into that rhythm feeling it occupy all of your senses.

When you have acquired sufficient practice with the technique, the diaphragm will move like a piston, raising up and lowering down approximately 2-3 times per second rhythmically, balanced and continually.

### Clues

- It is important to align the spinal column and apply neck lock, Jalandhara Bandha. If you are able to imagine the shoulder blades moving downwards, this will help you open up your chest area without tension and aiding Jalandhara Bandha.
- As you practice Breath of Fire, remember that the rest of the body is relatively static.
- The breath is dynamic (2-3 breaths per second), but begin with a rhythm that is comfortable until you gain mastery of it.
- It is fundamental that the inhalation and the exhalation last the same amount of time and are of the same intensity.
- Once you have practice, you will be able to do the technique as fast as you want or as soft depending on the exercise.

## COMMON MISTAKES

Scientific tests measuring the brain waves and blood chemistry in the body, and testing the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide, have shown that Breath of Fire isn't the same as hyperventilation. There is no reason for the exercise to produce a hypocalcaemia or rigidity in the hands, feet or face, dizziness or vertigo. These are signs that you are not doing the technique correctly and it is better to stop the practice until you have more instruction.

It's possible that you might be doing one of the following things:

- Breathing using the opposite technique. Many people learn to breathe in a way that is contrary to the natural process and contract the Navel Point in during the inhalation, which reduces the abdominal space (and therefore limits the movement

of the diaphragm) and the amount of air that can enter our lungs. This pattern is common amongst smokers and those people who suffer from anxiety.

- An exaggerated pumping of the abdomen. If the contraction of the abdomen is too strong, it can affect our capacity to do Breath of Fire correctly. If you force the abdominal movement too much, you could cause lumbar pain as the diaphragm itself inserts into the upper lumbar region (L-2, L-3).

Even though you are doing the exercise correctly, it could happen that after a series of exercises you feel the same sensations of light-headedness, dizziness or other symptoms; in most cases, they are really just the body adjusting and the blood eliminating toxins. One way to avoid these sensations is to concentrate at the forehead as you do the breathing exercise and you will find that they will go away quickly.

## COUNTER-INDICATIONS

- During pregnancy.
- The first days of the menstrual cycle.
- If you suffer from hypertension.
- Elderly people or children under the age of 8 years old.
- If you are a drug user.
- People who suffer from mental or psychological diseases (schizophrenia, paranoid behavior...etc.) even though they are taking medication.

## BENEFITS

- Aids the heart and the blood circulation to rapidly eliminate toxins from the system.
- Expands lung capacity.
- Stimulates the solar plexus and thereby permitting a greater and freer flow of energy.
- Strengthens the nervous system and balances the hemispheres of the brain.
- Stimulates gland secretion.
- Increases physical endurance.
- Useful in breaking addictions.
- Cleanses harmful effects from drug use, cigarettes, alcohol or other toxic substances.
- Produces alpha rhythms in the brain.
- Contributes to greater mental and physical energy throughout the organism.
- Controls stress.
- Charges the electro-magnetic field.
- Helps to synchronize biorhythms in the body.
- Used in different kriyas, prevents disease and strengthens the immune system.
- Increases by 60 times the positive effects of the exercise.
- Produces a rapid change in the chemical composition of the blood.
- Produces a powerful massage, both physical and energetically, of the lower chakras, the vagus nerve and all internal organs.
- Elevates the energy from the second and third chakras to the fourth chakra, the heart center.

- Helps to counteract the feeling of lethargy either on a physical, emotional, mental or energy plane.
- Creates a concentrated mind, intelligent and neutral.