

## **BREATHING**

### **WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BREATH IN YOGA?**

Breathing is synonymous with yoga. It is the foundation of meditation, asana, and relaxation, and is integral to each. During meditation, the breath provides a point of focus and holds our awareness in the present moment. During Asana practice, not only does the breath keep us anchored in the moment, but it also keeps us anchored in our body. During relaxation, we learn to use the breath to enhance the process of letting go. Integral to all of these practices, yoga teaches us that the breath has the power to change our experience of the present moment.

### **WHAT IS PRANAYAMA?**

The fact is, the breath is so important in yoga that there is a dedicated time to just practice breathing! Yogic breathing exercises are referred to as 'Pranayama'.

At its core, yoga is actually energy work. Consciously breathing, moving, meditating and relaxing all impact our 'life force' energy system to enhance our entire well-being. As life force energy (prana) is carried on the breath, breathing exercises directly impact our life force energy system.

The word pranayama is broken down to two words, 'prana' (meaning life force or energy) and 'yama' (meaning control or restriction). Thus, pranayama is the regulation of life force energy (which of course we apply through regulation of the breath).

There are many pranayama techniques in yoga. We can impact the otherwise natural flow of breath by applying a count to the breath and extending or shortening its flow. We can interrupt the flow of breath by adding pauses such that for a given moment there is no movement of breath at all. We can adjust how quickly and how deeply it flows, to where it flows, and from where it flows! We can block a nostril or restrict the throat. We can breathe softly or energetically, and can draw in a thin stream of breath or invite a rush of breath. Of course, this just touches the surface of pranayama. As your yoga experience develops, so too will your exploration of the wonderful world of pranayama.

### **WHAT IS DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING?**

While the practices of pranayama are vast and wide, the most important and called upon practice is conscious diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is a major breathing muscle that sits like an arched platform separating the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity. When relaxed the diaphragm arcs up toward the chest space (imagine the horizon line of a mountain) just underneath the base of the rib cage. In this relaxed state there is plenty of room for the abdominal organs below, and the lungs are mostly empty. When the diaphragm contracts, the arc flattens down in a direction toward the abdomen (imagine a flat table top), and the breath rushes downward into the lungs and they expand. This downward movement diaphragm compresses the abdominal organs and they have nowhere to go but outwards, protruding the belly. This is the natural, relaxed mechanism of breathing, and is known as

diaphragmatic breathing, or yogic breathing. It is in operation when we are in a relaxed, easy state.

However, in a situation of stress or fear, this breathing pattern changes and other smaller breathing muscles become big players in the process of breathing. On an inhalation, there is a greater 'upward and outward' lift of the chest, and the downward movement of the diaphragm into the abdominal region is decreased. In response to stressors, on an inhalation the belly will usually draw in as the chest lifts. Keep in mind, we are not designed to breathe like this on an ongoing basis. Our body calls on this mechanism in response to threats. Breathing in this way is associated with the release of stress hormones into our system that prepare our body for 'fight or flight'. When the threat is no longer apparent and we are safe, our breathing is designed to settle back into a diaphragmatic flow. However, with modern pressures of life, it is the case that for very many people today, the 'stressed breath' has become the manner in which they breathe on a regular, ongoing basis – it has become their natural breathing pattern. This in itself comes with its own dire consequences in the long term, impacting us physiologically, thus physically, emotionally and mentally.

In yoga, learning to breathe diaphragmatically sets us up for restoring balance on all levels within. It relaxes us physically, quietens the nervous system, and enables the body to go back to looking after itself – repairing and returning to homeostasis.

## **PRACTICING PRANAYAMA**

It is important to remember that when practicing breathing techniques in yoga, if you feel any discomfort in any way, simply return to your natural breath. You can return to the pranayama practice if and when it feels right to do so.