

Quality Breathing Can Change Your Life

by Jennifer Buergermeister © 2007

Sometimes we forget the importance of a simple breath. To breathe means that we are moving air into and out of the lungs in a process to stay alive and well by utilizing our oxygen intake. Obvious, yes, but are we doing it correctly? In most cases, no! This is why yoga is so important in improving and changing the quality of our lives. It is done so by changing the quality of our breathing.

Respiration, the quality of motion in the chest and diaphragm, is essential for deliver of oxygen to the entire body. If we do not get enough oxygen which is unfortunately being depleted in our atmosphere to meet the body's energy demand, it will result in a reduction or cessation of cellular functioning, ending in aging and dis-ease. Less obvious is the importance of the quality of one's breathing to maintain health and wellbeing. Everyone has experienced circumstances that can help put the different breathing types into perspective.

Think about the last time you were angry or frightened. The breath became short, rapid and high up in the chest. It may have been a gasp, sigh of relief or a sob of grief. During exercise we require more breath to meet the oxygen needs of a workout which can be short and rhythmic. By contrast, a yoga class induces breath to be long and rhythmic which requires diaphragmatic breathing where oxygen can be absorbed and sink into the cells.

Diaphragmatic breathing focuses on lung expansion in the lower, gravity-dependent areas of the lung where oxygen exchange can proceed more efficiently. In addition, the organs receive a much welcomed massage from the efficiency of diaphragmatic breathing since it pushes the abdominal organs down and forward, improving circulation. Diaphragmatic breathing also has the potential to be a therapeutic tool for today's many health concerns such as hypertension - a leading cause of heart disease. Proper breathing also can relieve anxiety and stress which is the common denominator in mortality rates in America. Breathing deeply helps to keep the nervous system in harmony.

The autonomic nervous system consists of two systems: sympathetic and parasympathetic. The two subsystems work together to regulate the body, including heart rate. The sympathetic system accelerates heart rate and the parasympathetic nervous system slows the heart rate down. Finding the quality of breath and learning to control the breath brings the parasympathetic nervous system into balance with the sympathetic nervous system. Balance is the key.

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, heart rate increases and blood flow is restricted to the organs and

is sent to the limbs instead in case of a fight or flight response. Upper chest breathing and the result of stress triggers the sympathetic nervous system into overdrive. Many times the energy in physical activity to discharge its accumulated energy if not met will lead to anxiety. When this happens, anxiety is perpetuated by continuous arousal which usually results in states of irritability or even hyperventilation, not to mention lack of blood flow to the vital organs. Studying the interrelationship between emotions, breath, and the autonomic nervous system could bring valuable insights to the prevention and treatment to a number of stress related dis-eases.

Learning and practicing pranayama, diaphragmatic breathing to expand the chest while contracting the abdominal muscles, will achieve the best results intended by the autonomic nervous system in the body. It's not about just breathing, it is about the quality of breathing that matters.

I often teach my students to breathe by imagining a coil of energy at the base of the spine that needs to be lifted to the heart. Try this by inhaling into the contracting lower abdominals, then out east and west into the side ribs and continuing out into the expanding heart. Then hold the breath for several seconds and finish by exhaling slowly. Try inhaling for 10 counts, holding the breath for five counts, and exhaling for 10 counts. Eventually work up to the 20/10/20 ratio of breath counts or more.

Live. Breathe. Love. Laugh. Do Yoga.

Jennifer has been practicing yoga since 1994, having studied Flow, Vinyasa Yoga with Jonny Kest at The Houstonian, Anusara Yoga with John Friend, The Yoga Institute of Houston, Houston area Bikram's Yoga College of India, Boustany's Hatha Yoga Studios with Robert Boustany, Shiva Rea from Venice Beach, Ashtanga with David Williams, and Forrest Yoga extensively with Ana Forrest. She has taught yoga at the Southeast Texas Tae Kwon Do Academy, Tomball Fitness Center, Tomball College and is currently providing yoga instruction at The Jewish Community Center off of S. Braeswood, the prestigious The Houstonian in the Houston's Galleria/Tanglewood area, The Houstonian Lite downtown, Your Body Center in Houston's Montrose, and at Eastern Harmony Clinic specializing in Fertility Yoga. Jennifer opened TEX YOGA inside Sonia's World of Dance located at 5539 Richmond Ave near Chimney Rock behind the Houston's Galleria in August 2006 and has recently released her newest DVD, Red Hot Yoga available in Houston. Call 713-TEX-YOGA or go to www.texyoga.com for more information.