

Breathing and Movement¹

The Importance of Breath

The importance of breath has long been recognized by many cultures and it is incorporated into many systems of exercise from Tai Chi to Yoga. It is also used in meditation to help still the mind. In modern, western language, we can explain its importance as follows.

The body's nervous system divides into two main circuits. These are (i) the *somatic nervous system*, which is under conscious control and which, for example, allows us to move our limbs; and (ii) the *autonomic nervous system*, which is unconscious and which controls such things as digestion and heart rate. Physical and emotional reactions, stress and anxiety, all have an injurious effect on the autonomic systems in the body. Hormones are released into the blood stream and heart rate and blood pressure can be affected. This is usually the result of the autonomic nervous system being agitated. If we want to undo the effects of stress we need some way to calm this part of the nervous system. However, as we have said, the autonomic nervous system is not under conscious control. This is why breathing is important.

If you do not think about it, your breathing just carries on, steadily supplying you with the oxygen you need. If you get agitated, your breathing often speeds up or becomes shallow and irregular. Thus, we can see that breath is affected by the autonomic nervous system. However, we can also consciously control our breathing. If we need to hold our breath, we can stop it for a short period. If we need more oxygen, we can consciously start taking deeper breaths. Thus, we can see that breath is also under the influence of the somatic nervous system. In fact, breathing seems to happen at the boundary between the somatic and the autonomic nervous systems. It can be affected by conscious action, but left to its own devices, it will continue as it needs to. Because of this unique position, breath can be used as an effective tool in helping to manage stress and aid relaxation. When it is combined with simple movements, the effect can be greatly enhanced.

The following exercise is a form of Chi Gung, a Chinese breathing meditation technique. This form of exercise has a long history in China and is highly regarded amongst martial artists as a way of strengthening the body and helping to ensure good health. It is simple, but very effective at calming and relaxing the body. Practiced regularly, it can help to reduce the symptoms of stress and may, over time, actually start to reverse the effects of chronic stress. The exercise can be done with your eyes open or closed, whichever feels most natural to you. The exercise should be performed consistently, ideally every day. If you can set aside 15 minutes at a regular time each day, this will help to give your practice consistency.

A Simple Exercise

Begin with a long out breath to expel the stale air from your lungs and prepare yourself for the work you are about to perform.

Stand with the feet shoulder width apart and parallel. The knees should be slightly bent. Scrunch your toes up as tight as you can, as if you were trying to grip the floor with your feet. Then relax them. As your feet relax, imagine that they are melting into the floor. Imagine you are putting roots down into the ground. Let your body sway slightly from side to side. Feel the movement in your ankles and knees. Gradually let your swaying get smaller and smaller, keeping your attention

¹ Thanks to my Chinese Doctor for this exercise.

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on the movement in your ankles and knees. Keep reducing the movement, until you are not moving at all. In that stillness, feel your ankle and knee joints as open and relaxed.

Imagine that you have a tail. Tuck your tail between your legs. This rotates the pelvis in slightly and opens out the lower back. Now bring your attention to the top of your head. Imagine a thread coming out of the crown of your skull, helping to support and balance your head. Use this to help you imagine your spine lengthening and extending. Feel your back, from the base of your spine, up to your neck, lengthening and extending. Let your shoulders relax. Let the weight of your arms pull your shoulders down. Let your arms move slightly and feel your shoulders and elbows open and mobile. Flex your wrists and wriggle your fingers, feel those joints open and mobile. Gradually reduce the amount of movement, keeping your attention in the joints. Reduce the movement until you are not moving at all. In that stillness, feel your shoulders, elbows, wrists and finger joints as open and relaxed. Turn your palms slightly so they face backwards. This will open out your shoulders.

Tuck your chin in slightly and press you tongue lightly into the roof of your mouth just behind your front teeth. Breath through your nose. As you breath in, feel your abdomen expanding. As you breath out, let it contract. Feel your breath as long and steady. Do not force it, do not try and breath slowly or deeply. Just let your breath find its own natural rhythm. As you stand, focussing on your breath, keep your awareness in your posture. If you are practicing with your eyes open, do not focus on any one thing in front of you. Instead, take in the whole of you field of vision. After a while, bring your hands together, one on top of the other, palms facing upwards, just below your navel. As you breath in, draw your hands up the front of your body. Then, as you breath out, turn the hands over and let them drop down the front of the body. Repeat this movement in time with your breath. Do not make your breathing fit the movement, let your movement following your breath. You should move your arms at the same rate as you are breathing. Do not let your shoulders hunch as you raise your arms. Keep everything relaxed, and remain aware of your posture.

After a while, when you are ready, move onto the third part of the exercise. The movements are slightly more complex, but you should remain relaxed and attentive to your posture. As you breath in, draw your hands up the front of your body as before. Then, as you breath out, separate the hands and press them forward, out in front of you. When you get to the end of your out breath, turn the hands over and draw them in as you breath in. Then, as you breath out again, let the hands drop down the front of the body, as before. As you breath in, draw the hands up the body again. Then, as you breath out, separate the hands, but this time, push them out to the sides. When you get to the end of your out breath, turn the hands over and, as you breath in, draw the hands in again. Finally, as you breath out, let the hands drop down the front of the body again. If you are practicing with your eyes open, then you should be able to see your hands in your peripheral vision as you push them out to the sides. Use this to keep your visual awareness from becoming fixated. Repeat this cycle, in time with your breathing: draw the hands up as you breath in, push the hands forward as you breath out, draw the hands in as you breath in, let the hands drop as you breath out, draw the hands up as you breath in, push the hands out to the side as you breath out, draw the hands in as you breath in, let the hands drop as you breath out.

When you are ready to finish the exercise, let the hands return to your sides at the completion of a cycle of movement. Spend a moment just standing, checking through your posture, ensuring that the alignment of your joints is open and correct. Be aware of your surroundings. To conclude the exercise, hold you hands gently over your belly and feel it rising and falling with your breath. Be aware of the steady cycle of your breathing.