



## Just Breathe

By Wendy Marks  
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Sometimes it's easy to forget that the simplest things in life are often the most important. Take a breath, for example. Really, right now— just inhale and exhale... There— feels good, right? We breathe day and night, and much like a heartbeat, we only become conscious of our breath when there is something wrong. If we have a cold or flu or asthmatic symptoms, breath moves to the forefront of our consciousness. Breath is the mainstay of life. Without our breath we are not alive. But we are seldom aware of it during the course of a day.

Breathing is about inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. The process of respiration is essential to life— every cell in our body needs oxygen to function. It is the fuel that allows our body to do anything.

When we become stressed or upset we may notice changes in our breathing— it may become shallow or rapid under tension or in a difficult situation. We may feel as if we are almost panting. This is a natural process that our body performs in order to oxygenate and enable us to fight or flee, depending on what is appropriate at the time. When we are relaxed or at peace, our breathing becomes deeper and slower, maximizing each breath and slowing down all of the systems in our body, including our heart rate. Rest is very important. It allows regeneration and health.

There are many health benefits to good breath practices. They include keeping your body oxygenated as mentioned above, giving your body a rest, expanding your diaphragm and massaging your bowels with deep breath. Also, breath work calms your adrenal glands, and chills you out.

### Pranayama

Pranayama, the ancient system of breathwork, has been made into an art form, and is a spiritual practice on its own. No yoga session is complete without including some focus on the breath. No meditation begins without the initial concept of breathing, slowing things down....

Over the course of my spiritual journey I have probably learned 30 techniques for pranayama. Some of them are so complicated that I can't even remember how to do them. I think any practice that



requires a lot of effort to learn is much less likely to be integrated into your life on a daily basis. I encourage you to find a practice that you can do regularly, because working with the breath can really improve the quality of your life.

I never realized it, but over the past several years people have pointed out to me that when I need a break from the conversation or situation, I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. I had no idea that I did this. I have so integrated breath work into my every day practices that when I feel even a little stress, I unconsciously slow things down so that I can get a handle on them. I have controlled a potential bad reaction and given myself a moment to regroup.

There are many kinds of pranayama that help to create a meditative state and improve general health. My personal favorite is singing. I like to sing in a chorus. The feeling of individual voices combining to create something much larger is a lot like being a single cell in a larger organism—the sum becoming greater than the parts. Singing requires breath control and is therefore a very pleasant form of pranayama. In order to sing, you warm up with exercises that open your lungs and relax your muscles. Then, during the course of your singing, you control your breath with your phrasing, and with the requirements of reaching notes and completing your song.

Strenuous exercise can be a form of pranayama. Long-distance runners are amazing practitioners of pranayama. How could they not be? In order to run a long distance, you must carefully muster your strength and control your rate of breath to assure that you have adequate oxygen for the long run—literally.

#### A Simple Breathwork Exercise

I am really a fan of the simple pranayama exercise of circular breathing. I teach it to everyone who is new to breath work. Anyone can do this. All it requires is counting. You inhale through your nose for four breaths, then exhale through your mouth for eight. If this is too much, start with two/four and so on. Eventually you can work yourself up to very large numbers. Some people can do as much as 24 in and 48 out. Start low, and if you take a gasping breath at the end, then you have pushed it too far.

The argument I often hear about not being able to do pranayama is that people become distracted and their minds wander. If you are counting, it is much easier to keep your mind from wandering. Is this real meditation? Of course it is. Meditation requires that you empty your mind. Counting, although it requires thought, is not the same thing as having a “monkey mind” that wanders all around and gets stuck on whether or not you remembered to turn the stove off a few minutes ago—like a mantra, it provides a resting place for the busy mind.

Find your breath work. I try to practice for a few minutes before my meditation twice a day. Once you establish a practice of regulating your breathing, it becomes second nature. It can be very useful in stressful meetings or any situation where you need to regulate your body’s functioning and your emotions. One thing I suggest if you find yourself in such a situation and you feel stressed: go into the bathroom and practice pranayama for a couple of minutes. You will be amazed that your mind will calm down, and your “fight or flight” reaction will lessen as well. This will allow you to make better decisions and move forward with your meeting or your day. It works great with children too—both to calm you, and to teach them.

As breath is the foundation of life, controlling it to benefit your health is well worth a try. If you are already a practitioner, think about renewing your practice and trying to make it stronger, or a little more conscious.

Just breathe.

Namaste,  
Wendy

