

# The Ancient Art of Mindful Breathing

By Shoshanna Katzman, L.Ac., M.S.



The capacity for breathing is a precious life possession, one not easily taken away. Respiration is governed by the autonomic nervous system, a physiological process happening all on its own. In Western culture, people become concerned with their breath when a medical problem such as asthma, pneumonia or chronic pulmonary disease becomes evident. Only then does a true appreciation for this bodily process arise, one commonly taken for granted.

Simply look at any baby and breathing into their belly is obvious. Though natural for babies, school-age children have already abandoned belly breathing for a tight abdomen and big chest. As adulthood approaches, respiration becomes increasingly shallower due to exorbitant levels of emotional, social, work and family pressures. This stressful state becomes so extreme that one literally forgets to breathe – a tendency that can be reversed through the artful practice of mindful breathing.

Interestingly, one such technique that ameliorates stress through triggering the sympathetic nervous system is known in Chinese medicine circles as “baby breathing” or “natural breathing”. The simplest of which is performed via slow, rhythmical expansion of the belly upon inhalation and gentle belly contraction during exhalation, working toward 3-5 breaths per minute. Through targeted mental focus to adjust the rate, duration, intensity, depth and quality of each breath – big changes happen.

For example, a longer exhale cycle not only decreases carbon dioxide and other toxic gas levels, but also lowers blood pressure. This promotes better cell metabolism, improved digestion and elimination to ensure whole body nutrition and desired weight.

This ancient paradigm for health offers holistic protocols to treat respiratory problems, but most importantly to prevent them from ever happening. Application of these techniques throughout life provides a multitude of benefits including peak lung capacity, complete relaxation, mobilized energy, clear mind and well-oxygenated blood. Energetically, belly breathing promotes health by drawing Qi (vital energy) downward to relax the mind, strengthen Jing (vital essence) to enhance physical healing, and activate Yang (outward energy) to boost strength and energy. Furthermore, whole body breathing boosts sexual energy, fertility and gynecological health, especially when the mind directs the breath downward to ignite “Hui Yin Point” – the meeting place of yin energy, located at the center of the pelvic floor. Additionally, spiritual awareness becomes enhanced through directing mind intention upward to “Hundred Meeting Point”, an energetic center located at the top of the head where yang energy of the body merges.

Breathing fully and mindfully into every aspect of the body both physically and energetically leads to mind/body integration characterized by a more centered feeling, greater confi-

dence, enhanced intuition, and increased likelihood for remaining in the “here and now”. Moreover, this whole body approach maximizes awareness and appreciation for one’s breath to become an essential healing tool, one always there ready to be accessed. These methods initially require mental concentration and consistent practice. But after a while a new way of whole body breathing just happens on its own, without any thought.

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