

Breathing Basics - Meditation Lesson #1

Developing your meditation skills will require the ability to control your breath. In Yoga, it is the prana, or life force, that you are controlling by mastering your breathing techniques. Therefore, as you control your breath, you control your life force.

So, let's start with a basic breathing technique. The purpose of this first exercise is to help you relax. When you are tense or feeling stress, this exercise will help you release that tension so you can accomplish whatever you are attempting - meditation, control of anger, finding a calmness in the midst of pressure. Whatever the reason, controlling the breathing will help you find your center and clarify your thinking.

In order for the breathing exercise to be successful, you first need to feel relaxed. You might want to use the basic relaxation technique that involves lying comfortably on the floor or in bed or sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the ground. With your eyes closed, you progressively tense and relax each area of the body beginning with the feet until you have reached the top of your head. When you feel that you are fully relaxed, then you put your attention to your breath.

Let your mind begin to focus on your breath as you draw your air in and out slowly. As you become more aware of the steadiness of your breath, you begin to create a rhythm by breathing through the nose to a count of 1 - 2 - 3 - 4, pausing for a count of 1 - 2 - 3 - 4, and then slowly releasing the breath to a count of 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8.

At first this may not feel natural and it will feel forced. If the count of 4-4-8 bothers you, then change to a count of 3-3-6. The process will feel foreign at first because most people never think of controlling their breath. Breathing is breathing and we tend to take it for granted. But when you focus on the breath, you will find your rhythm if you just relax and try not to force the control.

With your attention, follow the in breath, pause slightly and lightly, and then release the breath. All of your breath control should be coming from the abdomen, not the chest. Let your abdominals pull the breath in deeply (as well as quietly and without strain) and then use the abdominal muscles to push the air gently back out.

As you focus on the breath, avoid bringing tension into your abdomen, arms or hands. If you notice that your body is getting tense, shrug it off and just continue to pay attention to your breathing. If you find yourself struggling, stop counting and just listen to the breath as it comes in and goes out naturally. Once you are relaxed again, go back to your 4-4-8 or 3-3-6 count.

Remember, you don't want to struggle with this breathing exercise because that will create tension. If necessary, drop back to a 3-3-6 pattern or even 2-2-4 until you can easily breathe with comfortable control. Then move to longer counts. If you get tense, then you defeat the purpose of breath control.

Do this breathing technique for up to 5 minutes. Then just float with the relaxation, listen to the sounds, think of anything you want. Your goal is simply to relax, control the breath and absorb the feelings.

If you are lying in bed before going to sleep, you can just drop off to sleep after your exercise. If you are lying on the floor or sitting in a chair, when you feel you are ready, gently put your attention back to your normal breathing pattern and as your awareness of your body returns, you can bring your focus back to the room and go about your day completely refreshed.

Remember, as you control the prana, or life force, you control your life.

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