
The Three-Part and Full Yoga Breath

Practising the Three-Part Breath and Full Yoga Breath encourages us to adopt healthy breathing patterns, realising the full potential of the breath and bringing the body and breath into complete harmony. We gradually learn how to release any restricted breathing patterns, creating strong foundations and giving us the ability to progress towards the more complex practices of pranayama.

We'll be discovering a variety of pranayama practices throughout this course, and it's important to establish firm foundations with the breath before moving on to these techniques.

Healthy and Restricted Breathing

On Day 1, we explored the anatomy of the breath and how important it is that our diaphragm is able to move freely and unhindered (refer to Handout 'Breathing – The Fundamentals').

“Breathing affects your respiratory, cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal, muscular, and psychic systems and also has a general effect on your sleep, your memory, your energy level, and your concentration. Everything you do, the pace you keep, the feelings you have, and the choices you make are influenced by the rhythmic metronome of your breath.”

Donna Farhi

There may be many reasons that our natural breathing pattern becomes restricted, including:

- Prolonged sitting
- A hunched posture
- A habit of sucking in and firming the belly
- Tight clothing / waistbands
- Chronic stress or excessive hurry or busyness
- Chronic tension in the body
- Injury or illness
- Chronic nasal obstruction
- Trauma

Over time, these behaviours or physical patterns may become habitual and lead to shallow, rapid or inefficient breathing. We might become less reliant on the diaphragm as the primary muscle of breathing, and instead become over-reliant on the secondary muscles of respiration, which are intended to simply support our breath.

Poor breathing can lead to:

- Neck and shoulder pain
- Back pain (remember that the diaphragm attaches to the lumbar spine)
- Difficulty in concentration and focus
- Low energy
- Low mood / depression
- Anxiety
- Exacerbation of chronic pain
- Poor sleep and sleep disorders

Types of restricted breathing patterns

Some of the ways that the breath can be restricted include...

Reverse (Paradoxical) Breathing:

The muscles are used in the opposite way to the natural process of breathing. So instead of the belly expanding on the inhale and softly drawing in on the exhale, the opposite occurs – the belly moves in on the inhale and expands on the exhale.

Chest Breathing:

In this pattern, there is little natural movement of the belly (which is often contracted or drawn in) and the breath is forced higher up into the chest. (*see note 1)

Breath Holding / Frozen Breath:

The breath is held for no apparent reason, being restricted at the throat or so shallow that there is very little natural movement throughout the body.

Over-breathing / Rapid Breaths:

The breathing rate is too high. This is most obvious in its extreme form of hyperventilation (e.g. a panic attack), but may also be a chronic and more subtle pattern.

(*see note 2)

How can the three-part and full yoga breath help?

By practising the three-part and full yoga breath, you encourage the most efficient and natural way of breathing and can begin to undo any chronic restrictions within the breath. Your diaphragm is allowed to move freely, and you use all parts of your respiratory system fully.

When you tap into the full potential of the natural breath, you might notice the following characteristics:

- The breath flows freely and effortlessly.
- There is a subtle full-body movement.
- The breath feels calm and smooth.
- The breath is regular.

And...

“The breath expands in all directions, radiating out, just as a full dandelion flower radiates from its core”. Donna Farhi

We are all unique...

It's worth bearing in mind that how we breathe is also affected by our natural body shape, and you may be naturally more inclined to breathe with greater movement at the belly or chest.

Bernie Clark reminds us that no two rib cages are the same and that these unique differences may affect the way that you breathe. As well as differences in the size of our rib cage, the way that the ribs are angled towards the front of the body affects how much space is created on the chest as we breathe. The greater the downward angle (obliquity) of the ribs, the greater the space created in the lungs when we breathe.

In women, the ribs generally point down significantly more than men's – creating greater lung volume in the chest (possibly a natural adaptation of the body to allow space for a baby in pregnancy). Bernie Clark suggests therefore that women may breathe more naturally into the chest, whereas men may breathe more naturally into the belly. The angle of the ribs may also change as we age – being more horizontal in older people, due to a stiffening of the cartilage of the ribs.

So, you may have a natural predisposition to one way of breathing over the other (chest/belly). What's most important then is that you experience the full potential of your breath. Does my breath feel expansive, calm and regular – do I feel a subtle movement throughout my whole body?

Notes:

* 1: Interestingly, 'chest breathers' tend to brace their upper body. Researchers discovered that most people brace the upper body the moment their fingers rest on a computer keyboard! This causes them to chest breathe and increase their breathing rate while typing. (Donna Farhi: The Breathing Book). So, if your work is largely based on a computer, at regular intervals be sure to relax your upper body and drop your awareness to your belly to encourage the natural movement of your diaphragm.

* 2: Some restricted breathing patterns may be involved with certain health conditions. If in doubt, seek advice from your doctor.

References & Sources of Inspiration:

Your Spine Your Yoga, Bernie Clark
Yoga Myths, Judith Hanson Lasater
The Breathing Book, Donna Farhi
All of my wonderful teachers past and present