



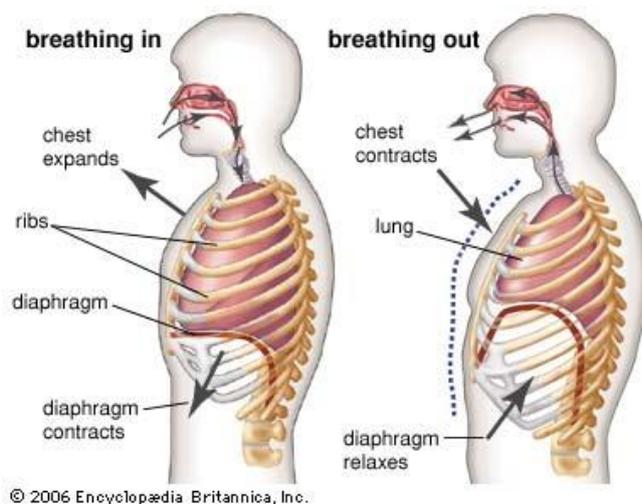
## Week 3 – Mindful Living Yoga

### Breathing

Pranayama literally means extension of the life force. Without breath we cannot live. In fact there is an ancient saying that we are born with a finite number of breathes and when we use them we die. So the secret to a long life is to breathe slow and deep.

There are some practitioners that say pranayama or breathing exercises should only be practiced with a qualified instructor. However when we are born we are not taught to breathe. Watching a new born baby breathe you will note how the abdomen moves in and out with little effort. The child breathes through the nose. It is over time that we forget to use our full lung capacity and start to develop techniques that see us only using about 1/3 of our lungs to breathe.

With practice we can re-train ourselves. Explore the process of breathing for yourself. Inhale - exhale. Understand the mechanical parts of the body involved with breathing. When you inhale, the rib cage expands, the



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Image sourced: respiration, human. [Art]. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/99770/The-diaphragm-contracts-and-relaxes-forcing-air-in-and-out>

diaphragm moves downwards – flattening out, the lungs expand and air is drawn in through the nose (or mouth), moves down the trachea into the bronchi and the exchange of oxygen and Carbon dioxide occurs in the alveoli.

When you exhale, air is moved out of the lungs by the diaphragm moving upwards or relaxes back into the lung space. The rib cage contracts during exhalation.

This entire process is brought entirely on by a play in muscle contraction and relaxation and a natural response to restore equilibrium to the body. Pressure



in the alveoli naturally functions to be in balance with atmospheric pressure – the air in the environment.

Breathing is normally done unconsciously controlled by specialised centres within the brain. Functions within the body often send signals to our brain that unconsciously control the depth and rate of breathe we take. For example when we exercise – changes in carbon dioxide in the cells of the body will send a message to the brain causing us to increase our respiration. Stress and anxiety can also cause physiological changes to our body which impacts on the way we breathe.

Learning to become conscious of our breath and then using breathing exercises we can help ourselves relax with real positive outcomes for our wellbeing.

Conscious breathing techniques used in meditation include abdominal breathing, alternate nostril breathing, Ujjayi breathing, Kriya, Ki Breathing exercise and bellows breathing. While technique can be important and easily learned I think the most important step in breathing for meditation is just being aware of the breathe and training yourself to take slow deep full breathes.



## Physical Activity

Science has proven that regular physical activity promotes good health and promotes many social benefits. Physical activity can reduce disease and improve our mental wellbeing. Government agencies recommend at least 30 minutes of daily moderate physical activity outside of our day-to-day routine. It is a totally individual decision as to whether we participate in exercise or not however prior to meditating I recommend undertaking some form of movement to assist in stimulating blood flow and most importantly to connect with your physical being. Majority of the time our mind and body are disconnected and we physically function without any conscious thought. Physical activity can help to bring mind and body closer together functioning as one being.

Physical activity you might like to explore for yourself include:

- Yoga / Pilates
- Walking
- Exercise of any sort

It is important that you speak to your medical or health care practitioner before undertaking any physical activity. Always listen to your body and be kind and respectful to yourself.

Gentle exercise will allow you focus on your breathing. Use each movement to signal either an inhalation or exhalation. Some gentle stretching or yoga like activity you could do each day include:

- Reaching to the sky and then touching your toes (ensure you keep good postural alignment)
- Surayāsana (basic salute to the sun exercise)
- Side stretches (left and right side)

Repeat about 5 times

You might like to investigate the 5 Tibetan rites as an easy addition to your daily routine.



## Breathing, Yoga and Letting Go

Often in a yoga class you will hear a yoga instructor say during asana, breathe and let go. When we first begin yoga, and if we are practicing while under a great deal of stress our breath and the physical activity (of asana) is very often out of sync. We feel uncoordinated, we hold our breath and our postures feel forced.

The key to the physical practice of yoga is the pranayama, the breath. Therefore as a beginner to yoga it is important that you go slowly and be gentle with yourself. Take the time in a yoga posture to settle into the physical aspect then start to tune into the body through your breathe. Note how you are holding your body. What tension do you carry? Would it be better to come out of the posture, take some deep breathes and then reset using your breathe?

Certain postures may require you to focus on your breathe before eliciting the full posture. I suggest things such as raising the arms, sinking into a lunge inhaling and then exhaling before commencing the movement. Other instructors may have different thoughts. With my background in Aikido, I have tried and tested the concept of “grounding down” using an inhalation and an exhalation. I find that while our arms raise up our attention moves down as we exhale causing a more balanced, stable, strong sensation through our entire body.

Other postures such as Sun Salutation or vinyasa practice require the yogi practitioner to inhale and exhale with specific movements. We will gradually build to this practice over the coming weeks.



Using your breath in yoga practice literally is a practice of tuning in to your body and letting go of all tightness and tension to be able to sink deeper and gain more out of your stretch. Over time you will learn to sync the breath and the body as you move through your yoga practice. You will become more sensitive to your body and what you are achieving with your yoga. You will start to develop self-trust and understanding. Mind and body will become one and your yoga practice will evolve. For now be patient, be kind and listen to your body.