

## Breathing

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Now we are closing in on the essence of exercising qi and its flow. Breathing is sort of a sibling to qi. That is how close they are – almost like twins, but not identical ones. The air that flows through our lungs at each breath has got many similarities to the qi flow, but is still essentially different. That goes for oxygen as well, the substance that breathing transports to the blood, and the blood distributes to all of the body – just like qi. Still, they are different.

Anyway, their similarities are enough for correct and concentrated breathing exercises to be the most effective way of getting your qi flow going. So, now it is time for exercises working on your breathing to make it even more similar to the qi flow. If we devote ourselves wholeheartedly to one of the twins, the other cannot stay away for long.

Good breathing is a blessing in life, surpassed by few things. It gives a sense of delight, and is so stimulating that it must be compared to inspiration. That is indicated by the very word inspire, *inspirare* in Latin, which originally means breathing – more precisely breathing in. That says a lot. Breathing can inspire, especially breathing in. Take a deep breath and feel your soul soar.

When you inhale you receive, and when you exhale you give. That is the rhythm of life. The one is impossible without the other. They are opposites that are forever linked, similar to the pair of *yin* and *yang* in classical Chinese cosmology.



At first, inhalation and exhalation need to be treated as two evident opposites, but by time they should sort of blend, so that the change between them becomes less and less perceivable. Breathing shall become a constant life-giving flow through the body, a concrete mirroring of the hidden ether that is qi.

When exploring breathing and its nature, we start by making a clear distinction between in and out.

## Extend your exhalation

Of course, there must be an absolute balance between inhalation and exhalation. Otherwise breathing just would not work. Still, lots of people are most concerned about the former. We tend to focus on breathing in, to the extent that we completely neglect what happens when we breathe out – as if it were not that important. This discrepancy needs to be corrected, in order to create a flowing breath.

One effect of giving priority to inhalation is that the lungs are almost completely filled with air all the time, as if they did not want to give it away. Therefore, breathing is only done on that marginal lung volume remaining. In that case, you are forced to breathe quickly in order to get enough fresh air. That rushes and stresses the body and mind. It also easily causes you to get almost painfully out of breath, so that you have trouble even with modest hardships.

Only by emptying yourself of air can you fill yourself with it, and that is the only way of assuring that you get plenty of fresh air into your lungs. So, the first exercise is simply to breathe out properly, in order to fill the lungs anew – deeply.

- 1 You can stand, sit, or lie down, just what you like. It does not matter. But try to have the good posture that you have learned from previous exercises, and avoid any clothing that sits tight on your body. Wear loose clothes, and as few as possible.
- 2 Inhale normally, through your nose.
- 3 Exhale through your mouth – as much as you can, without losing your good posture. Continue the exhalation as long as possible – *and then some*.
- 4 Close your mouth and *let the inhalation happen automatically*. Do not let your conscious mind control your inhalation. You will observe that you breathe in as suddenly as if the air was pushed down your lungs, like a vacuum suddenly opening to the outside world. This way, the inhaled air feels particularly fresh and refreshing.



- 5 When this sudden rush of air has entered your lungs, you should not consciously continue with the inhalation. Instead, you open your mouth and breathe out, at least as much as last time.
- 6 Repeat as long as it feels good. Remember to keep your good posture. If you get dizzy by the increased oxygen intake this kind of breathing causes, slow down by prolonging your exhalations. You can also take short pauses between inhalation and exhalation, but do not try to change the speed of the former.

You can do this exercise as much as you like. It is particularly useful when you feel tired or just a bit inert.

This is also the way to catch your breath after an ordeal. When we get out of breath, we are so eager to get fresh air that we forget to exhale the old air. That makes it hard to ever get enough air. So, when you are out jogging or doing something else that makes you out of breath, try to concentrate on the exhalations. You will quickly get more stamina than usual. Strive to push the old air out of your lungs. You do not have to worry about the inhalations, because they take care of themselves.

This kind of inhaling – suddenly and automatically, after a long exhalation – is invigorating. You will find it quite inspiring. When you face some task that demands the most of your abilities, this breathing is excellent preparation. It gives you lust, power, and the kind of spiritual inebriation that is the true mother of invention.

### **Lower your breath**

Extending the breath, like in the above exercise, also makes it deeper – but not to the extent that this exercise is able.

A breath that is to stimulate the qi flow must take place deep in your body, what is usually called belly breathing or diaphragm breathing. Most people breathe exclusively with their chest, maybe as high up as the shoulders. This leads to short breaths and persistent tension around the shoulders. Such breathing also afflicts the mind with unrest and insecurity. That is as far from relaxation as one can get.

The Eastern ideal is instead to breathe with the belly, actually as low as the bottom of the abdomen. Of course it is still the lungs that get the air, but you should feel very clearly that the shoulders relax while your abdomen moves with the breaths you take, as if the air goes all the way down there. Opera singers do the same kind of breathing. It carries their voices better, and gives them power to really sing out.

If you have never tried belly breathing, it can be quite tricky to learn. Breathing is something the body does without the conscious mind being involved in it – around the clock, and year after year. Such habits are difficult to change. We continue with the same old habits, if we do not make the proper efforts to alter them. Your body has to learn a new way of doing what it has done in pretty much the same way all your life. Expect it to take time, maybe years, before you are belly breathing without having to think about it. No doubt, you have to practice it daily.

First you must find that deep breathing, in the lower abdomen. This is the most effective method I know, to accomplish that. Still, count on quite some time before you get it right.

- 1 You can stand or sit in this exercise, but the best is probably if you lie down on your back, like in some of the previous exercises. When you have learned to find a deep belly breathing, it is not necessary anymore to do it lying down. By then you should be able to do it sitting, standing, or even walking. Loose clothing is helpful, and in the beginning probably quite necessary. Loosen what might be tight, especially around your belly. The less clothes the better. Even very loose garments have a tendency to slightly inhibit your breathing.
- 2 Relax and take a few normal breaths, so that you calm down.
- 3 Put the palm of one of your hands on your belly, between the navel and the crotch. There should be good contact, but do not press the hand on your belly. Observe that it is the palm of your hand that is important, and not the fingers. They should be passive. Otherwise they can confuse and disturb your breathing.
- 4 Breathe in and then start a slow exhalation. Do not breathe out through your mouth, which tends to bring the breathing up toward your chest, but through your nose.





- 5 Now, make a sudden and forceful exhalation, by which you try to push the hand on your belly. Make it bump, *only by your sudden exhalation*. Do not push with your body. The hips should not move at all. The push should come from within your stomach. In the beginning it is probably a kind of wave from your chest and downward, but by time you should be able to do the push with your stomach, and nothing else. It is tricky at first. Try again and again, until you succeed.
- 6 Take a new breath and repeat the pushing of your hand with your exhalation. Remember to *start the exhalation slowly, before you make the push*. Otherwise the body tends to resist and get tense. You should repeat the exercise until you feel that you manage to push the palm of your hand from inside your stomach, without the rest of the body helping noticeably.

This exercise is intended to lower the breathing of a person who is not used to breathe with the belly. When you have learned this, it is no longer necessary to repeat the exercise. Later on, you may benefit from testing it now and then, although you know how to belly breathe, just to check that you really breathe as far down in your abdomen as you wish.

Do not underestimate the depth of proper belly breathing. If you succeed when you hold your hand in the middle between the navel and your crotch, continue by moving it further down, closer to your crotch, and try again. If you can

breathe down at the very bottom of your abdomen, then you have opened your breathing completely.

It is advantageous, not to say necessary, to let this exercise be followed by the next one – especially if you are in the process of learning belly breathing, and trying to make it a habit.

### **Belly breathing**

The above exercise is an effective way of bringing down your breathing to the belly. Then you have to learn to breathe that way normally, making belly breathing something that comes naturally to you. That is what this exercise is for, so try to do it right after the previous one.

When you feel that you have no problem getting the breathing down to your lower abdomen, you can skip the above exercise and go directly to this one. Actually, they do not differ that much.

- 1 You can walk, stand, or sit down, but in the beginning the easiest is to lie on your back. Your clothes should be loose, especially on the belly, and the less clothes you have on, the better.
- 2 Put the palm of one of your hands on your belly, about midway between your navel and your crotch – or closer to the crotch if you can get your breathing that low. Remember to keep a good contact between your palm and belly, without pushing.



- 3 Start a slow and deep inhalation through your nose, and try to do it in such a way that your belly pushes on the hand. This means that the belly expands when you breathe in.
- 4 Continue with a long exhalation through your mouth – and this time, too, there should be a pressure from your belly onto your hand. That may seem odd, but *both when you inhale and when you exhale the belly should expand*, pressing on your hand. Thereby, the belly seems to be constantly growing, which is fine. Do not worry about your figure, since this is just how it feels.
- 5 Go on with this breathing, your belly pressing on your hand. When you feel that you do it right without any particular effort, you can take away the hand – but continue with the same breathing for a while.
- 6 If your breathing tends to move up toward your chest, and you notice that the chest starts moving at each breath, then put your hand back on the belly, and try again.
- 7 Continue to breathe this way as long as you want. Take your time – it is supposed to become a new habit of yours. If you notice that you get very tense when trying to belly breathe, you should not do it for more than a few minutes. Instead, repeat the exercise at another time.

Of course, the hand is on your belly to help you learn deep breathing, and to make you feel clearly when you do it right. But the hand is not only a passive tool for measuring the effects of your exercise. It is active, and sort of calls on your breathing. A kind of dialogue appears between the hand and your belly, an exchange that helps you along. It would not work nearly as well if you tried putting a dead object on your belly. A live one other than your hand, though, would work at least as well. You can try with the friendly hand of a loved one, or a cat curled up on your belly, peacefully purring. Cats know everything about qi.



A good way of testing your breathing is to put one hand on your belly, and the other on your chest. Then you will notice to what extent you breathe with your chest or your belly – under what hand there is the most activity. The best is if just about nothing happens under the hand on your chest, and lots under the hand on your belly. That might take a while.

Do not start with this two-hands test when you try to learn belly breathing. Both hands might call on your breathing, so you will end up with breaths that are evenly divided between the belly and the chest. You want all the breathing in your belly, so wait with this test until you are well on your way.

Count on needing to do this belly breathing exercise quite a lot, in order to establish this new breathing habit. I doubt that it can be done in a shorter time than a year, no matter how much you do it daily. You will learn to belly breathe quite quickly, but it will take time before that breathing becomes an automatic habit. It may even take significantly longer than a year, but you should notice that each time you do the exercise it comes easier and more freely. It gets increasingly natural to you. And your body will be delighted, because this is how it wants to breathe.