

Energy and the Breath

Have you ever noticed how drained you feel when your breathing is agitated? Or how athletes prepare for explosive power by taking forceful quick breaths ... or how relaxation techniques for restorative energy use slow deep breaths? That's because our intrinsic energy is tied very closely to our breath and breathing cadence. Energy is continually being consumed in one part of the body and produced or stored in another. It is always being shifted. In India they call the shifting energy the *pranic body*. In the U.S. we call it energy flow. If you map out an overall pattern of flux within your body where energy is flowing, you'd find areas of blockages, storage, and consumption at different times of day, during different activities, and at different stages of digestion. Movement of airflow in the body (the airflow is delivered by the blood but oxygenation of that blood is determined by the type and cadence of the breath) affects the way in which energy is supplied to the body and brain, and in this way it influences emotions, the mind and the physical body.

With each breath, energy flows through our bodies in waves, constantly shaping and restructuring the pattern of energy that comprises our energy flow. If the energy pattern changes sufficiently, our physical body changes also and we are able to see changes in our bodily functions and appearance. Emotional and psychological, as well as internal and external physical changes can occur that we can see, feel, hear or know are occurring.

We may lose or gain weight, or our facial expression may change. We may develop changes in our skin, our complexion may change, or we may stand, sit, or walk differently. These are all energy flow changes that we might be able to see in ourselves and others. Likewise, changes may occur that most of us can't see. Changes in liver, digestive, or kidney function could occur from changes in energy flow. Those systemic changes could create other changes in ulcers, tumors, etc. that also wouldn't be visible but would definitely affect the health of our physical bodies. Our emotional body will note increases in peacefulness, acceptance, and joy.

Many variables have an impact on the pattern of energy flow but the one function that has the most impact is respiration.

Just as we train our bodies to work from a strong trunk rather than allowing arms and legs to flail or “wag” the body, our breath can either be allowed to run haphazardly and create havoc in our bodies and mind, or it can become a part of our constant awareness and be harmoniously coordinated. If we allow our breathing pattern to change on it’s own from watching a television program, fixing a meal or a conversation we give up control of our state of mind and energy flow. If we choose to use our breath to improve our energy flow we must bring back into our awareness a whole area of ourselves that we’ve cut off, and gradually reintegrate it into our consciousness. Once our breath is integrated into our awareness, we’ll wonder how we ever got along before.

Psychologists have shown that there is a correspondence between personality types and breathing patterns. What is going on inside a person could be judged from his breathing. (The behavior of the breath can even warn of illness.) If a certain state of mind results in a certain mode of breathing, then conversely, by consciously adopting that mode of breathing we can evoke the corresponding state of mind.

The learning and awareness of breath control (just like learning to drive a car) come gradually. We will find that emotions are closely related to the breath, and by altering our respiratory rhythm we should be able to shift emotional gears. Finally, breath control will open our inner awareness to the very energy that gives us life and shapes our being.

Breathing Application

How do we begin to work on our energy flow? With diaphragmatic breathing.

We normally expand our rib cage to breathe deeply. With diaphragmatic breathing we let the abdominal and trunk muscles relax. It feels like the belly fills with air as it is allowed to expand. Actually the muscles relax to allow the diaphragm to descend. This allows the lower lung area to expand and fill with air.

Often when we inhale we pull our stomach in. Diaphragmatic breathing requires the opposite. It will take time to change that. Here’s a way to experience it:

Breathe easily into the belly, not the chest. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it. Let your stomach and waistline expand as you inhale, and consciously contract the transverse abdominals during exhalation. This means your stomach will relax during the inhalation and be “pulled in” during the exhalation. It feels different and uncomfortable when first beginning. It will eventually become natural and automatic.

Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth (this is considered a cleansing breath) or whatever works for your current respiratory needs.

Try Diaphragmatic Breathing in Different Positions

Practice “belly” or diaphragmatic breathing sitting in a chair. Try that for 30 seconds to a minute. Keep in mind how this feels. Then lie on the floor on your back.

In this position, gravity works against diaphragmatic breathing inhalations. Practice breathing lying on your back and feel the increased effort during the inhalation, and the decreased effort during exhalation. Keep in mind how this feels.

After a minute of lying on your back, switch to lying on your stomach. Practice diaphragmatic breathing for a minute in this position. Gravity and your body weight will combine to make inhalation more difficult and exhalation easier. Keep in mind how this feels.

Next, lie on your side and spend a minute experimenting with diaphragmatic breathing in that position. Inhalation will be easier again, and exhaling will probably be a bit more difficult when compared to lying prone. Depending on your weight and your body type (where you carry your weight), exhaling using diaphragmatic breathing may be much more difficult.

Now sit up on the chair again and continue to breathe from the diaphragm. Experimenting with all positions of breathing will help you know if you’re doing it “right” and will teach your respiration muscles what it is you want them to do. This memory of how it felt in each position can be used for affirmation of working correctly.

Yogic Breathing

Yogic breathing is the next step in bringing balance to our energy flow. Three types of inhalation can be coordinated into one smooth exercise called yogic breathing. The “yogic complete breath” has a diaphragmatic, thoracic, and clavicular phase. Inhalation begins by filling the diaphragm (belly) area, then the rib cage expands outward providing space for more air, and finally, the upper area of the chest cavity fills (lifts) with air. Exhalation is reversed. Air leaves the upper thoracic area first as the rib cage lowers, then the middle (chest) moves inward, and finally the lower (diaphragmatic) area pulls in and out. Use the abdominal muscles to exhale completely.

Incorporation of diaphragmatic or yogic breathing into our daily activities is difficult. It requires much attention in the beginning and as soon as we stop thinking about it we revert to chest (also called thoracic) breathing. That’s okay. Frustration, guilt, and anger will impede energy flow and our goal is to improve energy flow. Practice breathing non-judgmentally.

Reminders

1. No extra time in your day...
2. Cues

Summary

When breathing feels natural, smooth and easy, there is a feeling of lightness, of “being in the right place.” The feeling is free of restraints, “empty,” weightless, and yet somehow supported. This is our energy flow becoming balanced.

This article and the following quote are excerpts from Ai Chi – Balance, Harmony and Healing by Ruth Sova.

Reviewer Response:

I think it is important to remember that sometimes it’s the simplest things, like proper breathing, that can assist clients during and after therapy. Proper breathing can be incorporated into everything we do, and enhance the quality of our clients’ lives immensely, ultimately empowering the clients to help themselves.

Donna Adler, BA, ATRIC

Reviewer Response:

“Energy and the Breath” provides practical instruction on learning to breathe diaphragmatically. The emphasis on learning diaphragmatic breathing stems from the author’s argument that the level and flow of energy we feel is most influenced by the way we breathe. This is an important concept because it indicates the importance of becoming consciously aware of our bodily processes in order to gain full health and wellness. Helping clients learn to be in conscious control of their bodies and to take charge of their health should be an integral part of a good aquatic therapy program.

I particularly liked that the author noted that learning to breath “correctly” would take practice and should be done non-judgmentally. It has been my experience that clients often want to get better but have trouble changing bad habits. Thus, it is important for them to focus on making progress rather than being perfect and for the therapist to be adaptable and help them to find ways of improving their health that they will realistically adopt. This article does a good job of explaining how one can learn diaphragmatic breathing, which is a simple way that clients can learn to improve their health. I think it would be a valuable read for any aquatic therapist.

Dr. Marilee S. Niehoff, Ph.D.