



Yogic Breathing

Description

Introduction & Overview

Questions about how to breathe are really questions about which muscles to use in order to expand the lungs and draw air into them. â?? Rolf Sovik

Confusion Likely without Foundations

- Avoid teaching the techniques discussed here until students have had the benefit of becoming well-established in the foundations.
- Please scroll down to see a progressive series of lessons beginning with Respiratory Anatomy and the Nervous System and moving through cautions and best practices for teaching about the breath; the causes and effects of breathing issues; becoming proficient in promoting conditions for natural breathing; and how to guide students in conscious breathing.
- Without those foundations, students will likely be confused or overwhelmed by the technicalities of yogic breathing presented here.

Clavicular Breathing

- Clavicular breathing is the isolated use of the neck and upper torso for breathing.
- Clavicular breathing is an inefficient process.
- Itâ??s most commonly seen in people who have conditions that limit their ability to draw in a deep breath, such as emphysema. (Rolf Sovik)

Thoracic Breathing

- Breathing primarily with the chest muscles is called thoracic breathing.
- While typically used to recover after exertion, itâ??s not efficient for everyday breathing.



Although there is a certain logic to breathing with the chest muscles â?? that is where the lungs are, after all â?? it is not helpful to use these muscles as the primary tool for everyday breathing. The effect is to arouse the sympathetic nervous system and to maintain levels of tension that sap energy and dramatically increase your susceptibility to emotional disturbances. Overusing the chest muscles for breathing is a subtle but major cause of physical and emotional distress. â?? Rolf Sovik

Diaphragmatic Breathing

- While elements of clavicular and thoracic breathing are present in everyday breathing, [the diaphragm](#) is the key muscle for normal breathing.

Yogic Breathing

- The term â??yogic breathingâ?• appears to have subtle differences in meaning among different sources but generally refers to diaphragmatic breathing.
- It may also include a variety of particular conscious actions such as progressive contraction of abdominal muscles for a conscious exhalation and breathing into the back body.

See Also

- [Respiratory Anatomy](#)

Watch Out For

- Signs of improper breathing include tension in the neck and upper body.
- There may also be tension in the jaw or face, or a headache.

SYMPTOMS OF IMPROPER BREATHING

How do you know when you are breathing improperly? In general, youâ??ll feel a great deal of tension in your upper body. Youâ??ll tend to accumulate tension in your neck and shoulders and between your shoulder blades in your upper back. You may feel tension in your jaw, facial muscles, and around your eyes, possibly in the form of a headache. These are but a few of the symptoms of poor breathing, which can be as extreme as the sensation of having a heart attack. No passive massage or physical therapy will remedy this chronic tension for it will be recapitulated the moment you continue breathing poorly. â?? Donna Farhi

See Also

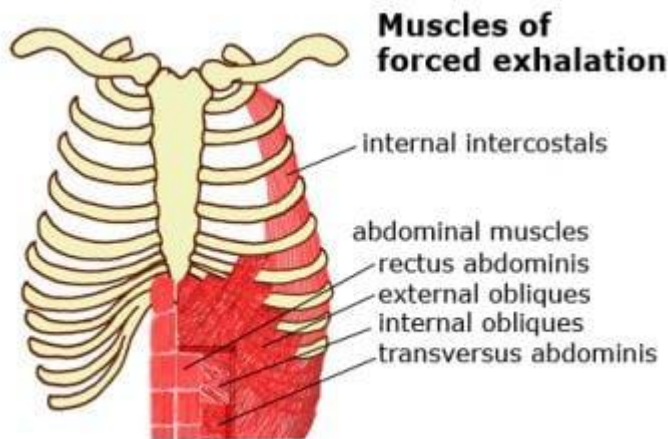
- [Constricted Breathing Patterns](#)

Techniques & Teachings



Yoga, as Max Strom says, is a breathing practice accompanied by movement. â?? Gloria Latham

- Conscious exhalation strengthens the muscles of breathing and causes more air to move in and out.
- Conscious exhalation is practiced by changing the normally passive exhalation into a progressive contraction of the abdominal muscles. See expert instructions below.
- In addition, expert Mukunda Stiles explains that helping students to deepen their breath into the back body â??encouragesâ?• the diaphragm to â??extend downwardâ?• which can, in turn, â??facilitate the opening of the lower lobes of the lung.â?•



Important: From the Experts

CONTRACT ABDOMINALS PROGRESSIVELY

Where inhalation is a function of muscular contraction, the normal unconscious exhalation is the result of the relaxation of the muscles responsible for inhalation. Conscious use of exhalation in asana practice does not follow this natural process. Instead, we intentionally contract the abdominal muscles progressively from the pubic bone to the navel. This contraction is initiated at the rectus abdominis, and then engages both the obliques and transverse abdominis. In certain circumstances, we may also intentionally contract the superficial and deep musculature of the perineal floor. This action stabilizes the pelvic-lumbar relationship, creates more structural stability, helps in flattening of lumbar lordosis, and, when there is contraction of all the muscles [of the perineal floor], it also supports the organs of the pelvis and lower abdomen. — Gary Kraftsow

CONSCIOUS EXHALATION STRENGTHENS MUSCLES, MOVES MORE AIR IN & OUT

With yoga training, the contraction [of abdominal muscles during exhalation] will be felt like a reverse wave from the bottom of the abdomen toward the chest. This action is made possible by toning the centrally located rectus abdominis muscles. It is assisted in breathing by the tone of [other abdominal muscles]. These set of muscles—the diaphragm, rectus abdominis, and the two sets of intercostals—are strengthened and trained to move more air in and out. This increases the quantity of circulating air within the body (called the tidal volume) and diminishes the number of breaths per minute. It requires both practice and heightened awareness to train your respiratory motions to reach your back. With persistence, the breath can stimulate circulation to the kidneys, spleen, and the adrenal glands located in the middle back. By deepening your breath to your back, the diaphragm is encouraged to extend downward, which, in turn, can facilitate the opening of the lower lobes of the lung. — Mukunda Stiles

Breathing Into the Back Body

For further information on the teaching that Mukunda Stiles shares above about expanding breath movement into the back of the body, you may wish to view this [6-minute video](#) where Leslie Kaminoff



gives visual and sensory guidance regarding the anatomy in the back of the body, guiding students toward feeling the backs of ribs and lungs.

More Teachings from Experts

ERICH SCHIFFMAN ON BREATHING

The inhalation starts with the gentle swelling forward of the abdomen and then moves upward to expand the rib cage fully. The breastbone rises and swells forward as the shoulder blades slide down your back. These actions increase the distance between the top of the thighs and the bottom of the ribs—the area of your waist—and it is this increased space that gives the diaphragm freedom to move. As you exhale, allow the ribs to relax and come back to center without losing the spinal length you achieved with the inhalation, and then gently pull the abdomen inward. Breathe like this in all the poses throughout the practice. —Erich Schiffman

B.K.S. IYENGAR: TOTAL OR PRANAYAMIC BREATHING

The sadhaka must first direct his awareness specifically at the lower anterior abdominal wall just above the pelvis. To accomplish this, move the lower abdominal wall towards the spine and against the diaphragm as if massaging from the skin to the muscles and muscles to the inner organs. This sense of active conscious contraction is associated with visible movements of the abdominal wall from the surface skin to its deepest layers and can be directed at will. After that, direct your attention to expand the lateral and posterior regions of the chest. Elevate the lower chest wall, simultaneously expanding the top chest wall with its skin and muscles. The diaphragm gradually and smoothly resumes its domed shape as it starts to relax towards the end of inspiration. During exhalation the dome moves up again. It is active at the start of expiration to encourage a smooth slow start to the elastic recoil of the lungs. —B.K.S. Iyengar

More Refined / Advanced Teaching

- Beginning teachings focus on how the diaphragm causes the belly to swell for the effective —belly breath.— This is an effective method with beginners and helps to release ineffective breathing patterns.
- In more advanced teachings, the diaphragm may be used to lift the rib cage for another effective form of yogic breathing.
- Expert Leslie Kaminoff explains: —Just as you can think of the psoas as either a —leg mover— or a —trunk mover,— you can think of the diaphragm as either a —belly bulger— or a —rib cage lifter.— —
- Due to the expansion in the chest, this technique — which expert Roger Cole calls diaphragmatic rib cage breathing — might be confused with ineffective modes of breathing seen commonly in beginners.

DIAPHRAGMATIC CONTRACTION BULGES BELLY BUT CAN ALSO EXPAND RIB CAGE



Just as you can think of the psoas as either a “leg mover” or a “trunk mover,” you can think of the diaphragm as either a “belly bulger” or a “rib cage lifter.” The muscular action of the diaphragm is most often associated with a bulging movement in the upper abdomen, which is commonly referred to as a “belly breath,” but this is only the case if the diaphragm’s origin (the base of the rib cage) is stable and its insertion (the central tendon) is mobile. If the central tendon is stabilized and the ribs are free to move, a diaphragmatic contraction will cause an expansion of the rib cage. This is a “chest breath,” which many people believe must be caused by the action of muscles other than the diaphragm. — Leslie Kaminoff

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING: BEGINNER VS ADVANCED

Many of us come to yoga as “chest breathers,” meaning we’re accustomed to an unhealthy pattern of initiating the breath from the chest, which can be agitating. When you fall into a pattern of isolated upper-chest breathing, you grossly overuse muscles in the neck and upper body (known as the accessory muscles of inspiration) and under-use the diaphragm. One type of breathing, however, strongly activates the upper torso yet creates a full, deep pattern of breath. We’ll call it diaphragmatic rib cage breathing, because it uses the diaphragm to lift and spread the ribs on inhalation and ease them back down on exhalation, while keeping the belly relatively still. Belly breathing, which massages the abdominal organs more than rib cage breathing, often feels more natural and soothing and is easier to learn. It’s an excellent introduction to breath awareness for beginners and a good way to teach people to calm themselves quickly, especially during an anxiety attack, because it strongly discourages use of the accessory muscles of inspiration.

Diaphragmatic rib cage breathing is harder to learn, and it can stray into inefficient, anxiety-promoting upper-chest breathing if done incorrectly. But if performed properly, it is calming and much more powerful for strengthening the diaphragm, deepening the inhalation, stretching the lungs, and more effectively aerating all parts of the lungs. It can even improve your backbends. — Roger Cole

Related Practices

Some yoga lineages and styles teach particular breathing practices, *kriyas* or combination breathing / meditation practices such as:

- Sudarshan Kriya, from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar lineage
- [The Kriya Yoga Path of Meditation](#), from Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship
- [Kriya Yoga](#) from Kriya Yoga International

See Also

- [Pranayama Techniques Introduction](#)
- [Pranayama & Breath Hub](#)

Author

michaeljoelhall