

# breath awareness

As well as energizing the body, our breathing has a profound influence on the nervous system. Fast or shallow breathing makes us feel anxious and stressed, whereas

slow, deep breathing immediately relaxes us. If you are to practise active relaxation, you need to be aware of your breathing patterns, so that you can use your breath to

consciously reduce stress and promote well-being. Note that the awareness of exhalation comes first in yoga, avoiding any forceful inhalation.

## 3 Deepening the breath

Sit upright on a sturdy chair, with your feet apart and planted firmly on the floor. Feel your breathing muscles working by placing your hands on your ribs, then lower chest, then abdomen. The lower you can take the breathing movement the more energized and relaxed you will feel, and the more efficiently your abdominal organs (digestive and reproductive) can function. In yoga you should always breathe in and out through the nose unless instructed otherwise.



△ 1 Bring your elbows back to open your chest, and place your hands on the sides of your ribs with fingers pointing forward. Breathe in deeply, expanding your ribcage against your hands. Breathe out, keeping the lift and openness in the chest. Be careful not to collapse, even though your ribcage contracts a little. Repeat several times.



△ 2 Still with elbows wide and chest open, bring your hands forward with fingers pointing towards each other and little fingers against your lowest ribs. As you breathe in feel your lower ribs expanding outwards and your diaphragm contracting downwards against your abdominal organs. As you breathe out feel the ribs relaxing inwards and the diaphragm relaxing upwards. Repeat several times. If you blow the air out forcibly through your mouth you will also feel the corset muscles around your waist contracting sharply.



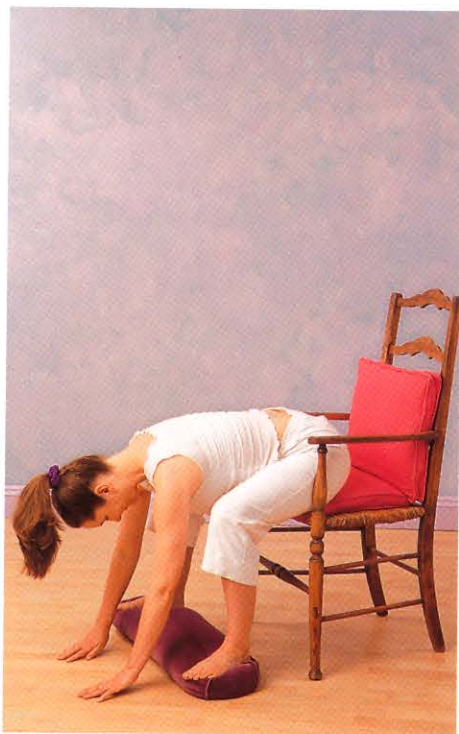
△ 3 Now move your hands below the navel to feel the effect of deep breathing on the abdominal organs. As you breathe in, contracting the diaphragm, the downward pressure massages and flushes away stale blood from these organs. As you breathe out this pressure is released and fresh new blood rushes in, bringing a new supply of oxygen and nutrients. Feel the movements of your breathing reaching right down through the abdomen and pelvis to the muscular pelvic floor. Repeat a few times, keeping neck and shoulders relaxed, and then rest.

#### 4 Stretch, bend and relax

This exercise sets the pattern for all your yoga practice – alternating active movements with a pause to relax. If you can arrange your daily life to the same natural rhythm you will find that you can undo stress before it has a chance to build up. Either sitting or standing you can rid the lungs of stale air, open the chest and massage the abdominal organs.



△ 1 Make sure that you are seated comfortably and use a firm bolster or similar as a foot support. As you breathe in raise both straight arms above your head.



△ 2 As you breathe out fold forward like a rag doll, dropping your head between your knees and hands loosely to the floor.



△ 3 Breathing naturally, relax your neck and shoulders to ease out any tension. Repeat this exercise several times.

#### 5 Lengthening the outbreath

The breath out relaxes the nervous system, whereas the breath in is energizing. First, sigh or yawn to release tension. Always remember to make the breath out last a little longer than the breath in. An enjoyable way to lengthen the breath out is by using the voice. A lower pitch usually resonates better than a higher one and is more relaxing.

▷ With spine erect and chest open, breathe in deeply and let the air out slowly as you chant "A...E...I...O...U...".



#### 6 Alternate nostril breathing

This breathing exercise is a classical yoga practice. It is remarkable for soothing the nervous system and balancing our extrovert and introvert tendencies – calming us when we are anxious or overexcited and lifting our spirits when we are tired or depressed. Ideally, it should be practised for a few minutes each day.

▷ Sit with spine erect and chest open. Place the right hand in front of the face, with the index and middle finger resting lightly on the centre of the forehead, the thumb in position to close the right nostril, and the ring finger in position to close the left nostril. Now concentrate and follow these steps:

- Close the right nostril with the thumb and breathe in through the left nostril.
- Close the left nostril and open the right.
- Breathe out through the right nostril.
- Breathe in through the right nostril.
- Close the right nostril and open the left. Breathe out through the left nostril.

This is one round. Repeat, gradually building up the number of rounds over a few weeks.

