

Editorial

Breathing and Yoga: The Awareness of Our Physical, Mental and Spiritual Body

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We breathe unconsciously every day, because the breath comes to us automatically, without our effort and this unconsciousness might bring a quick shallow breathing, reaching only the top part of the chest, which can bring unbalance to our physical and mental health.

Our breath is connected to our present moment, and in order to breathe properly, we need to bring our focus, our attention to our abdomen. And when we bring our consciousness to our physical body, perceiving on inhaling our abdomen expanding and filling our lungs with air and then on the exhaling perceiving our abdomen contracting expelling the air out of our lungs, naturally will arise a silence in our body and mind.

When we have an active mind, filled with thoughts, we are not able to go deeper in our breathing, and when we do not live the present moment, thinking in the past or living in the future, we are not able to deal with our expectations, generating anxiety in our lives.

Emotionally, anxiety comes when we want to control what we do not know, trying to control the unknown. Physically, anxiety comes through unconscious breathing, when we have a quick and shallow breath, decreasing the blood flow in our body, making our brain and body experience a lack of oxygen. This lack of oxygen activates the sympathetic nervous system, this response can trigger the fight/ flight mode, making us tense and anxious, instead of calming us down. That is why it is important to stop, to take a break from our activities, gently take a deep breath in and again gently breath out, working to identify where that anxiety comes from. Calming the body and mind through breathing is the first step to relieving anxiety, to living in the present moment, to meditate. This is an essential step to living a healthier life.

Before we move on let's quickly understand the mechanics of our breathing: "As air enters our nose, particles of dust and dirt are filtered out by the hairs that line our nostrils. As the air continues on through the nasal passages it is warmed and humidified by the mucous membranes of the septum, which divides the nose into two cavities. If too many particles accumulate on the membranes of the nose, we automatically secrete mucus to trap them or sneeze to expel them.

After passing through the nose, the air then flows down past our pharynx, the cavity at the back of our mouth where the nose and mouth are connected, and where swallowing and breathing are

coordinated by the pharyngeal plexus (under the control of the lower brain stem). Here the air passes through the lymphoid tissue of the adenoids and tonsils at the back of the nose and throat, where bacteria and viruses are removed. The air then move past the larynx, which helps the vocal cords use air to produce sound, and then continues downward into the tide of muscle called trachea, which separates into two bronchi serving the lungs. The trachea and bronchi are lined with mucus-secreting cells that trap pollutants and bacteria. As the air flows through the branch, tiny hair like lashes called cilia massage the mucus and remaining debris away from the lungs and upward toward the trachea, over the larynx, and finally into the esophagus. When too many particles, chemicals, or clumps of mucus accumulate in the bronchi, they trigger a coughing spasm- a powerful muscle contraction and bronchial constriction which can generate a wind force stronger than a tornado- to expel this toxic material.

In the lungs, the bronchi divide into smaller branches called bronchioles. The bronchioles which have muscular walls that constrict air flow through contraction end in some 400 million bubble-like sacs called alveoli. It is in the alveoli that the life-giving exchange between oxygen and carbon dioxide occurs- where fresh oxygen enters the circulatory system to be carried throughout the body by hemoglobin molecules in the blood, and where gaseous waste products such as carbon dioxide are returned by the blood for elimination through exhalation" [1].

Understanding this amazing mechanical function of our respiratory system, how air enters our blood system to nourish our cells, muscles, bones, organs and tissues, truly recognizing this process we start honoring our physical body and understanding how we can make a positive impact on our health.

In order to access the benefits of proper breathing, we need to breathe through the diaphragm, defined as natural breathing, the natural way we all used to breathe as babies, where during inhaling the belly inflates and during exhaling the belly contracts.

The diaphragm is a large dome-shaped muscle located by the lumbar spine, at the bottom edge of the lower ribs and the sternum. Above are the lungs and heart and below are the intestines, stomach, liver and kidneys. It is the major muscle responsible for our breathing.

During the inhaling, the diaphragm contracts and moves downward towards the abdomen, reducing the internal pressure in the rib cage and facilitating the entry of air into the lungs. When we exhale the diaphragm relaxes and moves back up, resulting in the expulsion of the air from the lungs.

With this inhaling and exhaling movement, the diaphragm massages our digestive organs, improving the blood circulation of these organs and also improving the functions of digestion and elimination of toxins.

Compared to quick and shallow chest breathing, breathing through the diaphragm allows a larger volume of air to enter our lungs, bringing more oxygen into our blood system and thus improving our immune system, as well as calming our mind and improving overall health.

Studies show that cancer cells can only come alive and grow in a body that is lacking oxygen. The average person today, especially someone with cancer, has a serious case of insufficient oxygen, allowing the cancer cells to multiply, developing the disease [2].

Our posture is another factor that helps with our breathing because when we have a sloppy posture, where our shoulders are bent forward and our spine is not straight, we do not give enough space for our abdomen to expand and bring more oxygen into our body. Even if you try to breathe correctly but you do not have a correct posture, you are not going to have the same benefits as if you would have a proper posture. Yoga is a practice that brings awareness to our posture and our breathing.

The asanas (postures) and the Pranayamas (breathing techniques) taught in yoga help us to have a better relationship with our physical, mental and spiritual body, bringing a new awareness to them through not only the asanas, but also with the breathing, and consequently with the meditation. Yoga is the synchronicity of our breathing and movements, having control of our physical, mental and spiritual body and knowing how to live in harmony with them. It is to understand that they are not separate but rather a perfect union.

Yoga brings us the ability to see beyond the surface, to perceive our functioning, to listen more to our physical and mental body and to go deeply into our essence. That is why yoga has this healing power, because when we understand more about how our physical body works, we start to respect ourselves more, making our physical, mental and spiritual body our own sacred space.

And when we see our bodies as a sacred space, we begin to treat ourselves as divine beings, which deserve attention and compassion.

When we begin to breathe naturally through our diaphragm and become aware of its function in our vital organs, we begin to feel our physical body alive, feeling each cell vibrating, and when we have this awareness of the physical, we can take the benefits of breath to our mind. As breathing properly can calm our minds, we can improve our focus, regroup our ideas or even bring more vividness to our brain. When we calm our mind, we can enter into a meditative state, bringing the balance of our physical, mental and spiritual body. Meditation is not only emptying the mind but also the act of awareness, concentrating on the breath, and being grateful for this gift, soon the stillness arises.

Breathing is the act of inhaling the new, inhaling the health, inhaling the idea, as well as the act of exhaling the old, exhaling the toxins, exhaling the illusion that we have control of the future. It is the act of accepting, trusting, letting go and being grateful. It is looking into yourself and looking at your health.

Breathing is vital. When we are born the first action we do in the world is to inhale, opening our lungs for the first air to enter into our body and when we die, the last action is to exhale, releasing the last air of our body.

References

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