



# The Harmfulness of Breathing Techniques

*“To work on oneself one must know every screw, every nail of one’s machine – then you will know what to do. But if you know a little and try, you may lose a great deal. The risk is great, for the machine is very complicated. It has very small screws which can be easily damaged, and if you push harder you may break them (...) If anyone here is experimenting with breathing, it is better to stop while there is still time.”*

*from Gurdjieff’s “Views from the Real World”, Chicago, 1924*

Correct breathing has always been associated with the practice of meditation. But what is correct breathing? There are many systems of Chi Gong, yoga or New Age mumbo jumbo that teach various breathing methods in order to generate more energy or promote relaxation. However, manipulating the breath can be very dangerous, as it can disturb the subtle balance of our body and energy. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff writes of being rebuked by a Persian dervish for doing special yogic breathing; he was told that it is foolish to breathe in this way and will harm his body. But why would breathing in an unusual and controlled way be dangerous?

Why do we breathe? Is it just to intake oxygen and release carbon dioxide? One of the most important purposes of breathing is to accumulate carbon dioxide in the blood. It is actually carbon dioxide which allows the oxygen to be absorbed in the cells, so that it can be used for mitochondrial respiration. Carbon dioxide has many other protective functions in the body and promotes longevity. In mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, carbon dioxide saves the other person’s life, not oxygen. When we hyperventilate, by forcing ourselves to breathe very fast, we lose carbon dioxide and cannot really absorb the excess of oxygen. Lack of carbon dioxide in the blood is the cause of many ailments and of the gradual deterioration of the body. This is why living at high altitude is considered healthier. As a general practice, breathing for five minutes into a paper bag once or twice a week can be beneficial, as it helps to increase our intake of carbon dioxide into the blood.

With this knowledge, we can understand the hidden purpose behind correct breathing: to assure our physiological survival and well-being through adequate absorption of carbon dioxide. The physiological importance of breathing is in direct relationship to our spiritual well-being as well, but should be grounded in the natural, intuitive processes of the body.

Correct breathing should be slow to allow the accumulation of carbon dioxide, but one cannot force the body to breathe slowly, as this will create stress and damage. Trying to breathe 'deeply' is also a bad idea, because it is unnatural and causes hyperventilation. One cannot learn to breathe correctly through breathing techniques, such as pranayama, as these will have negative impacts on the body. Manipulating our breathing is playing with fire, because the body has its own delicate barometers for adjusting its fine internal balances, including those which tell it how much oxygen it needs. Breathing techniques have been created out of ignorance and should be avoided altogether.

So, if we cannot force ourselves to breathe in a certain way, what can we do to help our body breathe naturally and yet slowly? The foundation of correct breathing is to be conscious and relaxed. We breathe slowly only when we are relaxed. Of course, breathing slowly is not always the right thing to do. Breathing is adaptive: it changes constantly depending on our life situation, our level of physical exertion and our general psychological condition. Our intention should be to breathe in a way that is harmonious with our body's needs.

We should breathe from the belly; this is called abdominal breathing. The problem is that, if one forces oneself to breathe through the belly, one may again begin to breathe artificially, either too deeply or too shallowly. This could well lead to hyperventilation or stress. If one breathes too slowly, thus causing the body to be starved of oxygen, one will begin to feel suffocated, which is obviously also not healthy. We should breathe through the belly, but from a very calm and comfortable place, without pushing it. Belly breathing is called 'deep breathing' because, by expanding the diaphragm, air can enter the lower lungs. However, within this deep breathing, one can breathe either very gently (almost imperceptibly) or more deeply. In both deep and gentle belly breathing exhalation is complete. What differentiates them is the quality of inhalation: in deep belly breathing, inhalation involves a more substantial expansion of the diaphragm, as if our belly inflates like a balloon. Which one is correct? Breathing naturally is correct. It is our body that decides whether we should breathe more deeply or more lightly.



We should be in touch with our breath gently and intimately, but we should not be too conscious of it, as this is the point where the mind begins to interfere with the natural functions of the body. Essentially, breathing should be subconsciously regulated, uncontrolled by the conscious mind.

For our breath to open up fully, we must be connected to the energy of being. Unless we rest in being, we cannot experience the true relaxation which should form the base of our breathing. One of the main causes of incorrect breathing is incomplete exhalation. When air remains in the lungs, we cannot inhale properly, because there is not enough room. This causes our breathing to be fast and too shallow. So, complete exhalation is one of the most important expressions of correct breathing; among other benefits, it assures the optimal absorption of carbon dioxide.

In order to exhale fully, we must rest in being; complete exhalation is not achieved through forcing all the air out, but through letting go with exhalation into the ground of being. Even though breathing involves both inhalation and exhalation, it is actually in our deeper relationship with exhalation that we discover the secret of correct breathing, the essence of which is letting go, or surrender, into being with exhalation. Exhalation is naturally linked to the energy of rest, the inner repose. When we rest in exhalation during meditation, there is always a slight gap before we inhale. In natural breathing, exhalation is longer than inhalation. But once again, if one artificially tries to make exhalation longer, one is manipulating and interfering with the rhythms of the body. The body should be left alone.

We actualize correct breathing by embodying our pure nature and reaching absorption in the condition of existential repose. Here our breathing is not static, it is adaptively dynamic. For instance, we might be breathing so gently that no movement is detectable, but then our body may suddenly take a deeper inhalation of its own accord before falling back again into imperceptible breathing. We are not breathing; our body is breathing. By reaching the natural state inside, we become one with the body's natural wisdom. The body is released from the constrictions of the mind – finally it can *breathe*.

Blessings

Anadi

*For a full glossary of terminology you may visit our website:  
[www.anaditeaching.com/glossary](http://www.anaditeaching.com/glossary)*

