

Coherent breathing: you have what you seek

The Prison Phoenix Trust

From time to time, it's good to go back to basics in your yoga practice. Aren't the simple things often the most beautiful and effective? Coherent breathing, described here, couldn't be simpler and yet it's powerfully beneficial for mental and physical well-being. You can make it a part of what you do each day, or use it when you find yourself waiting for something.

This practice uses belly breathing, and you make your in-breath the same length as your out-breath. Here's why it's so useful:

- Breathing with the upper chest only and without the belly means we're using muscles in the neck and upper back, making them stiff. Sometimes people breathe so high up in their chest that their shoulders actually lift! This sends a signal to the brain that you feel threatened, and keeps you on high alert. Breathing down into the belly means you can relax the shoulders, neck and back, and this tells the brain that you are calm.
- Each time you breathe in, you are activating the part of your nervous system responsible for action. Your heart beats slightly faster, and your blood vessels constrict. There's nothing wrong with this - you need it to get moving.
- Each time you breathe out, you activate the part of your nervous system responsible for resting, digesting and healing the body. Your heart rate slows down and your blood vessels widen.
- Breathing in and out at the same rate balances these two parts of the nervous system. When this happens, various other systems of the body begin to work in union on a very deep level. They become coherent, which means they form a unified whole, rather than working at cross purposes.

So this breath will harmonize your body's systems, and bring the body and mind into coherence too. You can do this twice a day, or more if you wish. Here's how to do it:



- Lie with your legs higher than your hips, in an 'L' shape. If you're on the floor, you may need a blanket under you (and perhaps over you too, if it's cold). Your calves rest on the chair or bed.



- You can also do this sitting in a chair or on the edge of your bed, with your spine nice and long, your chin slightly tucked in. Rest your hands in your lap, with relaxed arms. Your feet are flat on the floor. You can close your eyes if you wish.



- Rest one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take a slightly longer, slower breath than normal. Notice how your body moves under your hands as you do this. Your chest will probably rise slightly. You also want your belly to expand too, rather than sucking it in. If your belly expands, this means the big muscle at the bottom of the rib cage attached to the base of the lungs - the diaphragm - is moving down properly and creating a good vacuum, so you draw in lots of air. At the end of your out-breath, the diaphragm is in a bell shape, with the top of the bell pointing up toward the centre of the chest. At the end of your in-breath, the bell shape has been flattened as the centre of the diaphragm is drawn down.
- Take five slow easy belly breaths like this, feeling your breath with your hands. (Let your out-breaths be normal and easy.)

- Once you've got the hang of belly-breathing, make the in-breaths the same length as the out-breaths. Do this by counting six seconds as you breathe in, and six as you breathe out. If after a minute, six seconds in and six out seems too long, shorten the count to four in, and four out. People over six feet tall can consider building up to a count of seven or eight. But if you're tall and find even counting to six too long, don't worry: start at five or four.

- Take time to find the right count for you. Don't worry if you need to make the count shorter for the first few days. You can gradually start to make it longer.

- Keep going with your coherent breath for 15 minutes, enjoying the simplicity.

- When you finish, be still for a few minutes without counting the breath and just experience how you feel: your body, your thoughts, your breath - how are they?

There was a Japanese meditation teacher named Hakuin who lived in the 1700s. No stranger to hard times, he understood suffering, and helped a great number of people find freedom inside themselves, right in the middle of their everyday lives. He and many people before and since, from all spiritual traditions and scientists who study the human body have discovered the same thing: your own breath is a powerful ally in helping you feel better.

One of Hakuin's verses has these lines:

*How sad that people ignore the near
And search for truth afar:
Like those in the midst of water
Crying out in thirst...*

If you feel you're looking for something outside yourself to take away your restlessness or troubles, give coherent breathing a go. Maybe what you're seeking is right here inside.



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15 minutes for a solid 40 winks

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A good night's sleep is something you may not have had in a long time. Being tired during the day means you feel a little grouchy and have less tolerance for things not going your way. Also, you can't think as clearly. Furthermore, not getting enough good quality sleep over a long period can be a factor in a number of physical health problems. Cutting down on caffeine (tea and coffee) is a good idea if you're serious about good sleep. It helps to not have watched any television in the hour or so before you turn in. A well-rounded yoga sequence can also send you for a good sleep. Here's one we think works well. Enjoy it!



Forward Bend

You don't have to touch your hands to the floor. Just hang down at your maximum and let your head and neck completely relax. Stay for 15 long, easy breaths.



Happy Cat/Angry Cat

Flow slowly between these two poses in time with the breath, ten times. Appreciate whatever mobility your spine may have.



Seated Twist

Hold for five slow breaths each side. Keep your attention in the spine and how it feels.



Butterfly

Hold for ten slow breaths. Don't try and force your knees down, just let them relax without trying to get them down to the floor.



Knees to chest

Hold your knees and move gently, in whatever way feels nicest on your back - side to side, in circles or back and forth.



Bridge

Lie on your back, feet as close to your bum as you can get them, hip-width apart. Push up with your legs and hold for three slow breaths. Lower yourself down carefully. Rest for three breaths. Repeat.



Rest

Lie like this on your bed. Stay still, counting your out-breaths up to ten and then starting again. Allow your body to relax as completely as it can. Do this for ten minutes. Remember as you finally lie down to sleep, that as hard as it may seem, you really can let go of everything: all your problems and worries and concerns. Keep gently tuning into each in breath and each out breath, aware of the body gently being breathed by this same breath that's breathing creatures all over this planet.



Breathing

1. Sit upright on a chair or the edge of your bed, feet flat on the floor, spine long, body relaxed.
2. Breathe in for a slow count of five through the left nostril, closing the right side with your right thumb.
3. Breathe out for a slow count of five through the right nostril, keeping the left nostril closed with your ring and little fingers.
4. Breathe in for five through the right nostril, keeping the left nostril closed.
5. Breathe out for five through the left nostril, keeping the right nostril closed with your thumb.

Keep doing this for five minutes, switching hands if your arm tires.



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Yoga for Strength

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A lot of people think that yoga is just about relaxing and being more flexible. But it can also build strength and stamina, without any need for gym equipment. These poses all strengthen the body when practised regularly, particularly in the arms, legs and core. As you do them, keep breathing, slowly and deeply - this strengthens the mind, too. Even if it's a challenge, don't hold your breath! We suggest you hold each pose for five breaths, but you might want to start with three, and with practice you could build up to ten or more. Listen to your body and work with it, not against it.

Child Pose

This is a strong routine, so rest like this after every couple of postures, or whenever your body needs a break.



1 Down Dog

5 breaths.



2 Plank

5 breaths.



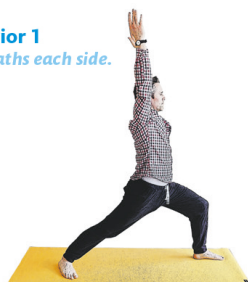
3 3 Legged Dog

5 breaths each side.



4 Warrior 1

5 breaths each side.



5 Warrior 2

5 breaths each side.



6 Boat

5 breaths. For an extra challenge, hold your arms out straight beside the legs.



7 Bridge

Start with your feet close to your bum, arms by your sides. As you breathe in, lift your hips and arms above your head, and hold there for 5 breaths before coming gently back down.



8 Sitting

Just as the muscles of the body are strengthened with practice, so is the mind's ability to see deeply into how we humans create unnecessary problems in our lives, and to discover the wisdom of doing things differently. That seeing and discovering takes focus though, so sit with your back straight and let the air flow in and out through your nose. Count your breaths silently: in 1, out 2, in 3, out 4 and so on, up to 10, and then start from 1 again. If you lose count, it doesn't matter. Just start again at 1. Sit for 10 minutes, gently returning to your breath counting whenever the mind wanders.

Neck and Shoulder Relaxer

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Most of us carry around a lot of tension in our shoulders and neck, leading to tightness and pain. This physical tension can come from stress or from work, whether that's sitting at a desk or manual labour. It can also come from weight training. Try these movements and postures to help you loosen up your shoulders and neck. You may find they make you feel more relaxed all over.



Forward bend with hand clasp

Clasp your hands behind your back, let your head hang loose and pull your hands as far away from your bum as you can. Stay for five slow breaths.



Shoulder rolls

Slowly roll your shoulders up and forwards while breathing in, then down and back while breathing out. Do this ten times, then repeat going the other way.



Thread the needle

From hands and knees, slide one arm under yourself until your weight rests on your shoulder. Stay for five slow breaths.



Head tilts

Tilt your head up, down, left, right and side to side. Stay in each position for three slow, deep breaths, mindful of how your neck feels.

Puppy pose

Stretch like this for five long breaths.



Forward bend - ragdoll

Relax your neck completely and hold the opposite elbow in each hand. Stay for five slow breaths.



Sitting

Sit up straight on a chair, the edge of your bed, or in a cross-legged position or kneeling, and focus on your breath. Count your breaths silently to yourself: in 1, out 2, in 3, out 4 and so on, up to 10, and then start from 1 again. If you lose count, it doesn't matter. Just come back to 1 and begin again. Even if you lose count several times, it doesn't matter. Be gentle with yourself and know that there is nothing to "get wrong". Do this for five minutes, setting an alarm on your watch or clock if you have one. Sitting in meditation regularly might help you relieve some of the stress that causes your neck and shoulders to be tight. If you choose to sit like this each day, you may wish to gradually lengthen the time you sit to 10, 15 or even 25 minutes.

Cowface

Five breaths each side. If your hands can reach each other, that's great. If not, use a sock to connect your hands.



Eagle

Press your elbows together in front of you and work on lifting them to shoulder height. Do this for five slow breaths.



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Sun Salutations

a simple guide to meditation

The Prison Phoenix Trust

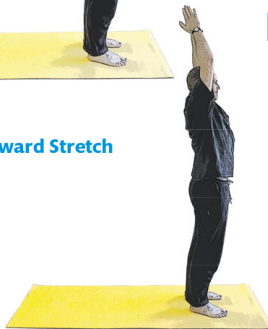
As the days get shorter and winter starts to take hold, it's good to have something to do in your cell to warm you up. This strong routine, called Sun Salutations, will heat you up fast and make you feel energised and focussed. Do the movements in time with your breathing, taking a breath in or out for every new pose, and concentrating on the way the breath moves through you and the way your muscles feel as they warm up. Start with five rounds of this routine on each side, and add one every day until you can easily do ten at a time.

Sun Salutations are a core part of many yoga classes and some people practice them daily on their own as well. It's a complete practice - it gives you a chance to stretch out as well as giving cardio and strength training elements. Another benefit of doing it frequently over a long period of time is that it's a good way to get to know yourself - some days it will be easy to find the motivation to do the routine, other days it will be harder. At times you will have the energy to do 20 rounds, or more, while another day you may only manage a couple before you're tired. By checking in with yourself every day and noticing these changes in your body, you can start to tune into your body and feel more connected to yourself.

1 Mountain



2 Upward Stretch



3 Forward Fold



4 Left Leg Lunge



5 Down Dog



6 Plank



7 Up Dog



8 Down Dog
(See exercise 5)

9 Right Leg Lunge



10 Forward Fold
(See exercise 3)

11 Upward Stretch
(See exercise 2)

12 Mountain
(See exercise 1)



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