

Breathe “Normally”

Yoga teachers guide students to inhale or exhale in order to coordinate breathing with the movements of the posture being practiced. In cat pose, for example, one exhales to round the spine into “angry cat” and inhales when the “cat looks up”. If you are staying in a pose for a while you simply breath “normally”.

“Normally”, on the yoga mat, means normal yogic breathing. Breaths should be calm and steady, long and slow. It is this long, calm, yogic breath that makes the practice so powerful and gives us such a profound feeling of relaxation and peace. By keeping that long, calm breath even in the most challenging postures we are training the body and mind to remain calm even when the going gets tough.

By holding the breath or taking short shallow breaths we are depriving the muscles and brain of the oxygen that they need to function well. This creates tension and stress in the body, the breathing becomes even more restricted, and we are dragged into a negative feedback loop.

The benefits of good breathing go beyond the physical, and even modern western medicine recognizes that how and when we breathe matters. Breathing controls pain; pregnant women spend several weeks in birthing classes learning how to breath for labour. When you go to have blood drawn or to receive a shot you are asked to take a deep breath. Breathing focuses energy; it is a vital element in martial arts and weight lifting. Breathing expresses emotion; people in all cultures sigh when relaxed and singers and even piano players learn when to breath in their pieces in order to convey the right emotion.

The breath does more than just help us perform, however, it is also used as a barometer of both physical and mental health. A change in breath can help diagnose a heart or lung condition. Someone under mental strain can also experience a change in breathing. Just observe your own breath the next time you are angry, nervous, or excited.

As a yogi, you should pay close attention to your breath in class. Try to take long, calm breaths even when the pose is difficult. See if you can make your exhales slightly longer than your inhales. If you know the Ujjaii breath try to use it throughout your practice. If you don't know Ujjaii yet ask your teacher to show you how it's done. If you notice in a particular pose that your breath has become laboured, or short and sharp, take a moment to reflect; are you in pain? Should you come out of the pose or try an easier variation? If this is not the case then check with your emotions; does this pose frustrate you? Scare you?

If you are not in pain and you simply feel the pose is “hard” or you are facing either emotion or ego then work to lengthen the breath. Slow it down and get in touch with the chatter in your head. Try to breathe into the pose instead of fighting it. Be present with your frustration, ego, or fear. Acknowledge your emotions without feeling the need to “fix” or change them. Learn to be present and calm in your practice and remember that the real practice occurs off the mat in your everyday life. We will all find ourselves in many “hard” or frustrating situations that we cannot change from time to time. Working with your breath can help you sort through confusion and work towards peacefulness.

Enjoy your practice.