

The Breath of Life

The Whole Body • Fall 2000

By Darren Main

We do it about 900 times per hour, about 21,600 times per day and about 7,844,000 times per year. It is the most fundamental part of who we are, but we rarely give it a second thought.

Breathing can be a powerful tool. If we learn how to use it, it can literally change our physiology in very dramatic ways. Breathing is one of the few body functions that is under both our conscious and unconscious control. In other words, we can willfully deepen or hold our breath, or we can forget about breathing altogether and it will continue on, using the nervous system's equivalent of automatic pilot. This is called the autonomic nervous system (ANS).

The ANS has two main branches that govern the unconscious functions of our bodies. The "rest and digest" (parasympathetic) branch is responsible for healing, digesting, eliminating waste, the immune system and basic day-to-day functioning. The "fight or flight" (sympathetic) branch of the ANS is what kicks in when we perceive danger. If a vicious dog comes at you, the fight or flight response kicks in. Your body prepares to protect itself; adrenaline surges through your body. This energy can be spent getting you out of immediate danger.

Many of us are stuck in the fight or flight mode, and consequently live our lives as if we are being chased by that dog. Our health and peace of mind are seriously

compromised as a result. Luckily, breathing allows us to manually shift our ANS back into rest and digest mode.

Close your eyes for a moment and notice your breathing. Don't try to change it right away. Just become aware of what it is like. Is it shallow and short or is it full and deep? Now allow the breath to deepen. Start by pulling the breath deep into your belly, filling the lower part of the lungs. Gradually allow the breath to fill the belly and the middle of the chest. Finally, allow the breath to fill all the way up into the top of the lungs. Don't rush; allow the air to fill your lungs slowly. When you exhale, move just as slowly and allow the lungs to empty completely. Allow yourself to take 10 full breaths and then open your eyes.

By taking time to breathe in this way each day, we can set the tone of our lives and keep our minds and bodies healthy and strong. We can also use this technique when we feel the stress of life bearing down and threatening to crush us. Breathing may not fix external problems, but it will certainly induce a state that is much more effective in dealing with most of what life throws our way.

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