



The Breath

by Margaret Hargas

WE ALL know that breathing is vital to maintaining life in our body, for quite apart from the vital chemical composition of air that the body needs, the act of breathing air brings into our body a very special and precious form of energy, the so-called "*life essence*" which we use, quite unconsciously, to sustain ourselves and grow within our physical and psychic environments.

Breathing provides the cells with oxygen and permits the cells' waste products, primarily carbon dioxide, to be eliminated. In fact, the lungs actually expel 25% of all bodily waste, which is a very high percentage when you consider that we don't usually think of the lungs as an excretory organ. Breathing also affects our immune function, mental clarity, vitality and the general tone and energy level of our body.





Pranayama is a system of breathing techniques used in many yoga disciplines.



The deep, prolonged inhalation of a yawn is the automatic response of the body to the build-up of carbon dioxide waste in the bloodstream, caused by shallow breathing.

Defining Breathing

For obvious reasons, the breath has long been associated in the human mind as the life-essence which is drawn into us with our first breath and departing from us when we die. Indeed, the classics of Eastern medicine describe the vital life force as being taken into the body with the breath, followed by the lungs' extracting this vital substance from the air, thereby making it available for use by the body.

The ancient Chinese were not the only civilisation to associate the breath with the vital life force. In ancient Greece we have the word *pneuma*, meaning both *spirit* and *breath*. In English we borrow this word intact and define it as the vital life force. From Latin comes the word *spiritus*. This one word was used to express breathing, the breath of life, soul, mind, spirit and (the association here is quite interesting) courage. From *spiritus* we have the words inspire, aspire and expire; words not only relating to physical processes but also to the human heart and soul.

“The classics of Eastern medicine describe the vital life force as being taken into the body with the breath...”

The early dynasties of ancient Egyptian, predating both the Greek and Roman civilisations, referred to the breath as *sahu*. This word was variously used to denote the breath, the soul or the higher self. *Sa* was the term for the “divine fluid”, the substance which gives life to humankind. The Vedic tradition of ancient India,

flourishing at roughly the same time as the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms of Egypt, refers to *atma*, meaning both the breath and the soul. This ancient word, related to the ancient Greek word *atmos* (breath), survives virtually intact in the modern German language as the verb *atmen*, meaning “to breathe.”

Also, from the Sanskrit comes the word *prana*, meaning both the breath and the life force which is common to all living things. Pranayama is a system of breathing techniques used in many yoga disciplines. The practice of pranayama is also used to awaken kundalini, the divine fire and feminine aspect of the divine principle. Kundalini is usually represented as a coiled snake, residing at the base of the human spine.

Rhythm of Breathing

Of course, breathing techniques are used in many disciplines for healing work and even for projection of the psychic body. It is therefore interesting to note that there is a mechanism in the skeletal system of the body called the “cranial-sacral pump.”

Cranial, of course, refers to the bones that make up the skull, and *sacral* refers to the sacrum, the triangular bone at the base of the spinal column. The word sacrum, incidentally, comes from the Latin *sacer*, meaning *sacred*, which is an intriguing cross reference to the seat of the kundalini energy. This pump mechanism creates the circulation of the cerebral spinal fluid which bathes the nervous system structures with nourishment, carries away waste and provides a cushion for these precious organs.

It is none other than the steady rhythm of inhalation and exhalation that causes the pumping of the cerebral spinal fluid to occur. The subtle motion of the breath rocks the sacrum and the temples of the skull gently





and minutely, causing the flow to occur. The temples are actually two sides of the same bone which passes through the entire width of the skull.

The Huna tradition, which is preserved in Polynesian culture and is familiar to us as the doctrine of the Kahuna, the legendary masters of the elements, uses the breath to accomplish miracles and to move creation. The drawing in of the breath and thereby the vital life force, is known to them as *mana*, a word which means *to sacrifice, to empower, revere, love or greatly desire*. It also refers to *authority, skill and capability*. And it is the root for words such as *truth, worship, ideas, meditation, confidence and time*. It is *mana* which opens communication between, and then integrates, the emotions, the intellect and the higher self. And it is then, through the act of breathing, that the expression of life is begun, sustained and refined.

Our emotional state has an impact on our breathing rate and volume.

Breathing More Efficiently

Approaching breathing from a more practical and physical point of view, we find that our breathing habits are generally far from the ideal of perfect efficiency. Usually, the physical act of breathing is taken completely for granted. It is assumed that by virtue of the action of the inhalation and exhalation of air, breathing is being done correctly. Unfortunately, with time, tension, poor postural habits and restrictive clothing, we lose the

natural breathing patterns that are spontaneous during early childhood.

The breath should be taken in and let out efficiently, and to do this, we must use each lung entirely. The lungs are fairly large and fill the chest all the way from the collarbone down to the bottom of the rib cage. If you place your hands over your chest and breathe normally, you should feel the rise and fall of the chest. Usually however, only the upper chest and shoulders move your breathing. You should in fact feel this expansion and contraction over your entire chest, along the sides, and over a portion of the back. The fuller the expansion of the lungs, the correspondingly greater the amount of vital oxygen is taken in, and the greater the amount of debris is removed from the lungs with the exhalation. The deep, prolonged inhalation of a yawn is the automatic response of the body to the build-up of carbon dioxide waste in the bloodstream, caused by shallow breathing.

Breathing also affects our visual acuity, as anyone holding the breath until he or she sees spots can testify! It is also related to our emotional well-being. Our emotional state has an impact on our breathing rate and volume. Imagine for a moment the quick, ragged breathing of anger, and it is clear that emotion affects breathing. Conversely, if you mimic this or any other emotion's breathing pattern, you can begin to create the physical and psychological changes that occur with that emotion.

Breathing in a natural unrestricted manner is an important and easy means to improve many facets of the physical, psychological and spiritual makeup of the human being. It is our choice to use this understanding to our fullest capacity to improve our health, increase our mental clarity, and structure our physical and emotional well-being. First comes breathing, then comes life. Without breathing, we have no life. Therefore, take care with your breathing, and do all you can to do this correctly.

