



By Michael de Manincor

In the first of a three-part series in the Australian Yoga Life magazine on the breath, Michael de Manincor overviews breathing in yoga practice, examining how to improve unconscious breathing habits and develop simple breath awareness.

Most yoga practitioners would agree that good breathing is an important aspect of their yoga practice. Different approaches to yoga place varying degrees of importance on breathing, awareness of the breath, and breathing techniques. However, an awareness of the importance of breath in a yoga practice is usually high on the priority list of any yoga teacher.

After nearly 30 years of regular yoga practice, attending classes of different styles throughout the world, I have realised that the development of good breathing is not only fundamental to what yoga is all about, but far more useful and significant than I had ever realised. I also believe that the importance of the breath and practice of breathing techniques in yoga are greatly under-utilised, and often misunderstood.

In many yoga classes, 'yogic' breathing is taught as part of the relaxation to begin or finish the class. Mention is often made of the meaning of prana or vitality. The benefits of yoga postures are often described in terms of the removal of blockages that will allow the prana to flow more freely. When postures or a sequence of postures are taught, coordination of

breath with movement is sometime included. The use of the technique of ujjayi – creation of a soft feeling and sound of the breath in the throat – is not uncommon. Breath awareness is sometimes taught while holding different postures. In some classes, a pranayama technique may also be taught at the end of the class.

Admittedly, many beginners find it difficult enough to work out what, where, and how to do the many different yoga postures. The breath is more subtle, and usually more difficult to focus on, than the physical body. However, as we progress in our practice of yoga postures, and yoga in general, placing greater awareness on our breathing and use of breathing techniques, we experience many benefits of which we may have previously been unaware.

### **The (unconscious) habit of breathing**

Most breathing is unconscious. We don't have to think about each breath we take – it just happens, automatically. Like many vital functions in our system, it is controlled and regulated by the autonomic nervous system. Amidst many things happening in our system, we (more or less) just keep breathing, and our breathing adapts to our needs. While the autonomic nervous system manages this process, it is not usually concerned with improving our health, well-being, or seeking self-awareness. It simply helps keep us alive, keeping things in balance and in basic working order.

This unconscious maintenance of our breathing is affected by many factors, both internal and external. These include our posture, movements, general health and fitness, stress, emotions, and our state of mind. Consequent effects on our breathing are sometimes very obvious. Other times, they are much more subtle, or we simply don't notice anything at all.

More significantly, our breathing becomes a habit - an unconscious habit! Like many aspects of human functioning, we develop habits by repetition. Breathing is no exception. Even if we were to spend up to one hour everyday with conscious breath awareness, it still leaves about 96% of our breathing unconscious. Conscious breathing in yoga helps us change our unconscious breathing habits. If we can consciously regulate our breathing for short periods of time on a regular basis, this will affect our unconscious breathing habits, and establish better breathing in our daily lives. Without some conscious regulation, over 99% of our breathing is based on the unconscious habits we have developed over time.

Have you ever noticed any habits in your own breathing? For example, we may have developed a habit of mouth breathing, chest breathing, shallow or rapid breathing, over-breathing, or a pattern of holding our breath in, or out. Some people can exhale easily, but find it difficult to inhale. For others, it is the other way around. Any of these habits can create imbalances in our health. Poor breathing habits are linked with many health concerns and illnesses, both physical and psychological. In particular, many stress-related illnesses are associated with poor breathing habits.

It is similar to our physical posture - we develop habits. With conscious effort, especially with the practice of yoga asana, these habits of poor posture can be improved. These improvements in our physical posture bring all sorts of health benefits, physically, emotionally, and mentally. It takes effort to change the habits, but the changes can be long-lasting.

If, for example, we have developed a habit of shallow and rapid breathing when stressed, we can consciously work on breathing to make it slower, smoother, and more stable. If we

do this regularly, we can change the unconscious habit of our breathing. By doing so, we can reverse the accumulated effects that stress has on our whole system. Yoga postures and relaxation also help, but regulation of our breathing gives us more direct access to changes in the nervous system and our state of mind, which is where the stress response originates.

### **The Breath in Yoga**

Working with the breath has been part of yoga practice for thousands of years. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, pranayama, one of the essential eight limbs of yoga, is defined as "conscious regulation of the breath" (II:49). Patanjali gives more attention to working with the breath than he does to asana. Working with the breath is often recognised as being more important than the practice of yoga postures by themselves.

These are consistent yoga teachings throughout history. A further example is in the teachings of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, where it is clearly stated that pranayama is the most important aspect of all Hatha Yoga techniques. Many who practice what is called 'Hatha Yoga' today, may not be aware that the founders of yoga considered pranayama to be more important than asana.

Working with the breath can also be an efficient way of improving health for time-poor people. Benefits can be achieved with just a few minutes, and regular practice can have significant and lasting effects. A few minutes of asana can also be helpful, but often we are just warming up. Ten minutes of conscious regulation of our breathing, a few times a day, can result in far greater benefit for our general health and state of mind than the same ten minutes doing a few yoga postures.

This is not to diminish the value of asana in any way. It remains an essential limb of any yoga practice, helping us establish and maintain good health and stability. However, by taking a broader perspective of what yoga includes, we may come to realise the relative importance of each of the limbs in our practice, the benefits that each can bring, and how our practice might evolve over time, especially at different stages of our lives.

If we are not convinced, I recommend trying it for ourselves – 10 minutes of conscious breath awareness, twice a day!

### **Cautions**

Throughout history, there are cautions about some pranayama techniques. It is usually suggested that one must not practice pranayama without the guidance of a teacher, and that pranayama should only be taught to more advanced and experienced practitioners of yoga. Others suggest that we must not practice pranayama at all, until we have perfected the yoga postures.

Without disregarding these cautions, it is helpful to consider that there are many different pranayama techniques. Those that include breath retention can sometimes produce obvious and dramatic effects. Sometimes, the effects are more subtle, and may still require caution.

Just as with yoga postures, there are some breathing techniques that are suitable to teach beginners, and other techniques that are more suitable for those with more experience. We can all begin to work with greater breath awareness in our yoga practice. This may lead us

to further conscious regulation of the breath. Experienced teachers will be able to guide individual students in what is appropriate for them at different stages of their lives and practice.

### **Basic Steps**

Before we explore the different techniques of pranayama, it is important to establish an awareness and practice of good basic breathing. This will hopefully become the foundation of our habitual breathing in all of our yoga practice, as well as in our lives.

The first step for all of us is simple breath awareness. As we develop the ability to simply observe our breathing, we will already begin to notice benefits. This is often done during yoga relaxation, and can be practiced at other times – anytime that we remember. Simple breath awareness does not necessarily include any attempt to consciously regulate our breathing. Just observe. Amazing what we might notice! Many of us notice that as soon as we begin to observe our breathing, it will usually slow down. The simple technique of ujjayi mentioned previously, can also be of great benefit when used with simple breath awareness, as well as helping us to further regulate our breathing.

Simple postures usually make it easier develop our ability to observe our breathing. While more challenging and complex postures have many benefits, they usually require more effort and attention to the requirements of the posture, and we are less able to maintain the same level of awareness on our breathing. I often see people developing the ability to 'do' the form of different postures, but without any effect on their breathing. Sometimes, focusing solely on posture work may even adversely affect the quality of breathing. To work on improving our breathing patterns, we may need to re-consider the priorities in our yoga practice for a while. We may also discover new possibilities of what yoga has to offer us.

### **Yogic Breathing – reviewing the concept**

One of the most confusing aspects of 'conscious' breathing taught in many yoga classes is related to what is often called 'yogic' breathing, or sometimes 'three-part' yogic breathing (not to be confused with the four components that make up one cycle of each breath). It is often taught by inhaling into the expanding abdomen, then the area of the diaphragm, and finally the expansion of the chest - like 'filling a bucket'. Exhaling, the chest relaxes first, then the area of the diaphragm, and finally, the lower abdomen is drawn in for the completion of the exhalation - emptying the bucket out. This is sometimes called abdominal-diaphragmatic breathing, and many readers will recognise it. With this approach, we are trying to make breathing a little deeper than just breathing in the chest. Having been taught this myself, and then teaching it for several years, I never noticed any difficulties. It is also very effective for relaxation.

About 10 years ago, a senior teacher from the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram taught me a different approach. He recommended the following for full breath awareness: as we inhale, first notice the chest and lungs expand, then the area of the diaphragm, and as we continue to inhale, the abdominal area expands - in that order. Exhaling, we begin from the lower abdominal area gently drawing in, the diaphragm relaxes upward, and as the air in the lungs continues to empty out, the chest relaxes down - in that order. This is also known as abdominal-diaphragmatic breathing, but done in the opposite of what was described previously. Either way, both are likely to help with relaxation.

My first impressions of the way the teachers from the Krishnamacharya yoga were explaining breath awareness was that they were good teachers with a lot of knowledge, but they did not seem to understand correct breathing in yoga! In fact, every cell in my body and every thought in my mind told me that they were wrong. It just felt wrong! However, I was willing to explore and continued to practice against my resistance and (mild) discomfort. It did not take long before a few pennies started to drop. It really did make sense, and I realised that the odd feeling of breathing this way was the result of going against previously well-established habit. Changing habits is often uncomfortable. If you are not already familiar with the mechanics of breathing like this, try it for yourself!

What began to make even more sense was that breathing this way was appropriate for asana practice as well as for relaxation. It also supports the core stability of the body. Previously, I was conscious of breathing with abdominal-diaphragm awareness one way for relaxation, but this did not work for correct breathing in yoga postures. Try breathing into the abdominal area first when doing a forward bending movement or posture!

We could say (as I did) that we use different mechanics for our breathing in different situations – and there are occasions where this does help. However, if an important part of yoga is to establish good habits of breathing (99% of which is an unconscious habit), then good habits are best established and maintained with consistency. Breathing with an awareness of these mechanics is consistent with correct breathing in asana, pranayama, relaxation, and, as we will see in a later article, with the application of the bandhas.

It is important to note that we may benefit from focusing our attention on one aspect or area of our breathing for different techniques at different times. However, that is a matter of a particular focus, not a change of the mechanics.

For relaxation, I ask people to focus on the area of the diaphragm and abdomen only. Allow the chest to look after itself. It will move naturally as it fills and empties. The basic mechanics of breathing remain the same - Just a change of focus.

It is also important to note that we are generally not trying to increase our breathing. While resistances in our breathing might be reduced and our breathing capacity might improve, we are seeking to improve the quality of our breathing, training a habit of slower breathing, making each cycle of our breath longer and smoother.

Changing any habit is about conscious awareness and consistent repetition or practice. The same applies for our posture, our breathing, our behaviour, and our thinking patterns. To me, this is what yoga is all about – changing our conditioned responses, our samskaras.

I have also realised that what I previously referred to as 'yogic' breathing, had an inherent suggestion that it was somehow different to the mechanics of 'normal' breathing. For me, this is no longer the case. 'Yogic' breathing is not a special yoga breathing technique. It is simply conscious awareness that develops good breathing habits. Further yogic breathing techniques (pranayama) are based on a foundation of good breathing mechanics.

There is no doubt that the regular practice of yoga postures will give us many benefits. However, without good breathing technique, the benefits of the postures will be limited.

Conscious regulation of our breathing is important in relaxation, asana, and pranayama, as well as at any other time throughout the day. If the time we have set aside for our yoga practice does not improve the quality of our unconscious breathing habits (central to our physical and psychological well-being), then we may be missing out on one of the most valuable benefits that yoga has to offer. Several students – and teachers – have described this to me as a significant 'opportunity cost' in the precious time we have for our regular yoga practice. Some students have literally wept with me as they came to realise the significance of breathing, after several decades of dedication to regular practice of yoga postures.

Changing any habit is about conscious awareness and consistent repetition or practice. The same applies for our posture, our breathing, our behaviour, and our thinking patterns. To me, this is what yoga is all about – changing our conditioned responses, our samskaras.

Breathing with an awareness of the mechanics described in this article is consistent with correct breathing in asana, pranayama, relaxation, and the application of the bandhas. We will explore these in more detail in following articles.

## **References**

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