

Tune in to your breath to find inner peace

Meditating on your breathing can help you feel calm, grounded, and connected. By Richard Miller, PhD

YOUR BREATH IS ONE of your most powerful healing resources. For instance, deep, slow, and rhythmic whole-body breathing can reduce anxiety, fear, pain, and depression; activate your immune system; increase your ability to concentrate; and release healing and “feel-good” hormones, such as serotonin and oxytocin. Deep breathing does this by activating your parasympathetic nervous system and a rest-renew-heal response, ultimately helping you feel relaxed, in control of your experience, and connected with yourself and the world.

The practice of “breathsensing,” a meditation technique that teaches you to observe, experience, and regulate your breathing patterns, offers a way to access the benefits of deep, rhythmic breathing any time you’d like. By mindfully following and observing your breath, you develop a relationship with it and start to think of it as a moment-to-moment flow of sensation, energy, and feedback. Focusing on the breath in this way helps to deactivate your brain’s default network,

which allows you to locate yourself in space and time. (For more, see my *Meditation* column in the June issue, online at yogajournal.com/meditationpractice.) Turning off this network enables you to release obsessive thinking; it also activates your parasympathetic nervous system, encouraging your mind and body to relax.

Once you become aware of your breathing patterns, you can start to make changes that help you stay balanced. For example, practicing exhalations that are longer than your inhalations supports your nervous system in maintaining a healthy equilibrium between your sympathetic response—a fight-flight-freeze pattern in the face of stress—and the calming parasympathetic response. This, in turn, helps you feel balanced and at ease as you move through your day; it also enhances your ability to sense and respond to the critical information your body is constantly sending you. Attuning to your breath can help you recognize subtle sensations of irritation, fatigue, and more that may be early-warning signs that you need to set a boundary with something or someone, or that you need to take time to rest, change your diet, or take actions to reduce your stress.

ILLUSTRATION: ABIGAIL BIECERT

live well
MEDITATION

Experience breathsensing

Introduce breathsensing during the first several minutes of your daily meditation practice. Start with Practice 1, below; as you feel calmer and more comfortable, move on to the more advanced second and third practices. Then, interweave breathsensing into your daily life by remembering to tune in to your breathing patterns throughout the day. If you wish, set your watch or phone to beep at regular intervals, such as every hour, as a reminder to stop whatever you're doing and check that your exhalation is smooth, steady, and slightly longer than your inhalation.

PRACTICE 1: OBSERVE YOUR INHALATIONS AND EXHALATIONS

During the following practice, note the natural flow of your inhalations and exhalations, and the feelings of well-being that naturally arise. Rather than thinking about your breath, be fully engaged with the sensation of each breath.

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. With your eyes open or closed, scan your body and note any unnecessary tension. Bring attention to the sensation of your breath. Without thinking, simply note and feel the sensation of each inhalation and exhalation. During inhalation, note your belly gently expanding; during exhalation, sense it gently releasing. Feel yourself settling, relaxing, and letting go with each breath. When your mind wanders, gently and nonjudgmentally bring it back to noting and feeling the breath-driven expansion and release of your belly.

Welcome and nourish the feelings of well-being, ease, peace, and groundedness that naturally arise with each breath. Remain here as long as you feel comfortable, being at ease with each breath.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to open and close several times as you return to a wide-awake state of mind and body.

PRACTICE 2: OBSERVE FLOWS OF SENSATION AND ENERGY

Stress can disconnect you from feeling the natural flow of the life force within your body that supports health, har-

mony, and well-being. However, the meditative practices of breathsensing can help you stay connected to it. Set aside 10 minutes at the beginning of your daily meditation for the following practice, which will help you experience your breath as a flow of sensation and energy.

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. With your eyes open or closed, scan your body and note any unnecessary tension. Bring your attention to your breath. During inhalation and exhalation, note your belly gently expanding and releasing. Feel yourself settling, relaxing, and letting go with each breath.

With each breath, note a circulating current of sensation and energy flowing throughout your body: With each inhalation, sensation and energy flow down the front of your body, from head to feet. With each exhalation, sensation and energy flow up the back of your body, from feet to head.

As the sensation and energy continue to circulate, allow every cell in your body to welcome feelings of ease and well-being.

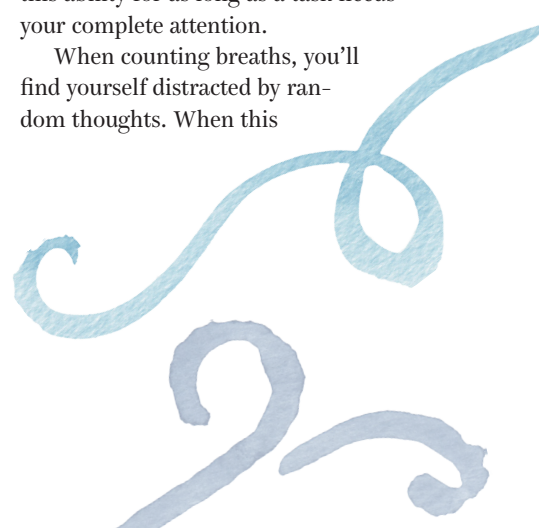
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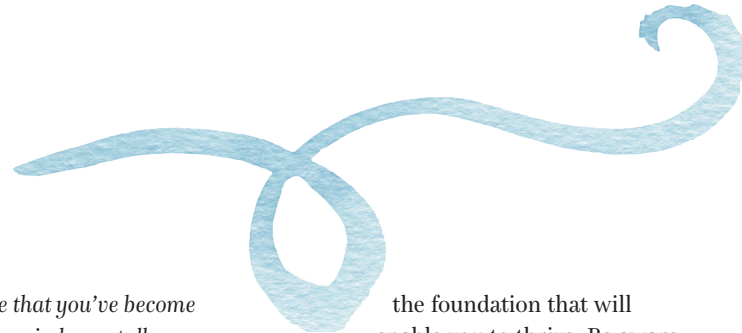
PRACTICE 3: COUNT YOUR BREATHS

You can also practice breathsensing by counting your breaths—a practice that's useful in developing focused attention and concentration. To succeed at anything, be it meditation, a work-related task, getting a good night's sleep, or developing a sense of well-being, you need to maintain single-pointed focus for the duration necessary to accomplish your goal. Breath counting helps strengthen this ability for as long as a task needs your complete attention.

When counting breaths, you'll find yourself distracted by random thoughts. When this

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occurs, gently and nonjudgmentally refocus and begin counting again. Each time you refocus, you're strengthening your ability to remain undistracted during breath counting, as well as in your daily life. At first, breath counting can feel challenging, like simultaneously trying to rub your stomach and pat your head. I encourage you to patiently continue practicing; in time, you'll discover the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits that come as a result of doing this simple yet powerful practice.

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. With your eyes open or closed, scan your body and note any unnecessary tension. Bring your attention to your breath while noting the natural flow of sensation. Let your belly expand as air flows in, and release as air flows out. As you breathe, count each breath from 1 to 11 like so: Inhaling, belly expanding 1; exhaling, belly releasing 1. Inhaling, belly expanding 2; exhaling, belly releasing 2. And so on.

When you recognize that you've become distracted, gently and nonjudgmentally bring your attention back to your breath, starting your counting again at 1. Continue counting while noting tension throughout your body.

When you're ready, allow your eyes to open and close several times, returning to a wide-awake state of mind and body.

Move forward

How do your body and mind feel at the end of breathsensing? I think you'll be amazed how only a few minutes of breathsensing can leave you feeling grounded and refreshed—and able to respond to each moment, no matter what your situation. Can you imagine how you might use these practices on the fly, during your daily life? Make it your intention to practice breathsensing whenever you feel the need to relax, rest, and renew. As you engage these meditative practices, you're laying

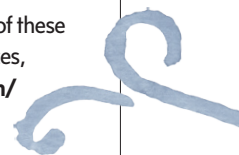
the foundation that will enable you to thrive. Be aware that as you practice breathsensing, it's natural to encounter the emotions that are present in your body. Tune in to the November issue, in which I'll focus on how to respond to these emotions with actions that empower you to feel in harmony, both with yourself and the world around you. 🎧

Richard Miller, PhD, is the founding president of the Integrative Restoration Institute (irest.us) and co-founder of the International Association of Yoga Therapists. This is his fifth in a series of 10 columns designed to help you create a lasting and impactful meditation practice.



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