

THE BREATH IS THE LIFE

By WTS Staff

The first thing we do when we are born is inhale. The last thing we do as we die is exhale. Breath not only bookends our life, breathing is our life. It's odd that something we do automatically, without thought, would warrant focus. Yet this article adds to a long list of articles on the importance of breath in our practice. It isn't the first; and, it won't be the last. Sometimes it pays to give attention to that which we think needs no attention.

When we are not mindful of the breath, we can actually forget to breathe. It's for just that reason that McElroy Laoshi can often be heard on the mat or in the room repeatedly reminding people to breathe. "I've even seen people turn red," he tells us. "They are so focused on their movement that they forget to breathe." As he gives people repeated prompts to take a breath, Laoshi points out the seeming absurdity of it. He notes that we can live for many days without food, a few days less without water, and only moments without air. Yet, when we struggle with learning something new, we stop doing that thing we need to survive. As the breath relaxes both the body and the mind, staying with the breath can actually help eliminate the struggle and ease the learning process.

Staying with the breath can also help us to release strong emotions. Anger, frustration, sadness can all be lessened by mindfully settling into a deep breath. It has been suggested that it is actually impossible to hold onto such emotions if one is breathing deeply. The trigger for the emotion tends to lead one to begin to tense the body which tends to shallow the breath with tends to create even more tension in the body which tends to shallow the breath even more, ad infinitum. "When I worked in the corporate environment," Laoshi tells us, "I was known for stepping into someone's office when they were having a tough day and reminding them to breathe." He says that he could watch the tension and stress melt off of them with that first, deep breath. However, if he stood in the office long enough, he would witness the breath start to shallow again and the tension and stress start to return. He defines the lesson, "When you don't stay mindful in the breath, it's only a very short-term solution."

If you ever share a ride with Laoshi, you might notice a small sticker on the steering wheel of the Pilot. It's a small heart. "It's to remind me to breathe," he admits. "I continue to find the traffic on Long Island to be a challenge to my calm and I'll take all the help I can get." The idea was given to Laoshi by a business associate. He was taking a sales class through Legend Development Services in Hauppauge and the facilitator, Rich Isaac, told the class of the suggestion made to him by a life coach. Mr. Isaac was having issues with relaxation and the coach suggested he put stickers in places he would see on a regular basis — his closet mirror, his PDA, his car's review mirror, etc. — as a reminder to pause, take a breath, and relax. "I thought it could serve me on the road," says Laoshi. He believes it has and tells us that it has been a part of his driving life for long enough now that it's more knowing the sticker is there than actually having to look at it that works for him.

Taking the breath isn't enough, though — we must also breathe deeply. Although the chest can be part of the breath, it shouldn't be the center of the breath. Using the diaphragm, we should center the breath deeper in the body cavity in a method that is commonly called abdominal breathing. In other words, the abdomen should be contracting and expanding with every breath. Opinions vary as to whether the abdomen should expand on the inhale and contract on the exhale or vice versa. Regardless, we should only breathe to about 75% of our capacity. Anything less is probably not deep enough and anything more starts to push the breath to a point of tension — just as we don't want to extend our joints to the point of locking off, we don't want to breathe to 100% of our capacity.



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Breathing deep is only one of six aspects of the breath according to Ken Cohen in his book *The Way of Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1997, 111 — 129). Mr. Cohen also defines slow, long, fine, even, and tranquil as important qualities to bring to the breath. The breath should maintain a slow rate and an unhurried mood. There should be a long, steady stream of air. It should be smooth and quiet instead of coarse and loud. There should be an internal balance between left with right, back with front, and equal ease between inhale and exhale. As the breath should be unhurried, so should it be unharried.

Regardless of Mr. Cohen's six aspects, regardless of everything else mentioned in these few words on breath, the simple thing to remember is *breathe*. Such is the advice that Laoshi gives whenever someone asks about breath and form, breath and movement, etc. There might be recommendations for when to inhale and when to exhale, but more important is that we remember to breathe and, when we do, to make the breath deep. All else is gravy.

