

yoga

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Breathing for Relaxation

How simple breath work can lead you to a deep state of relaxation.

By Claudia Cummins

Beginning students often ask for instructions on the "right" way to breathe. Alas, there's no single answer to that question, since the optimal breathing pattern at any given moment depends on the type of practice. Restorative yoga focuses solely on relaxation, though, and emphasizes breathing that creates calm and serene states of being. When you settle into restorative poses, try the following techniques for cultivating breathing patterns that are hallmarks of relaxation and well-being.



MOVE THE BELLY WITH THE BREATH. When we are at ease, the diaphragm is the primary engine of the breath. As we inhale, this dome-like muscle descends toward the abdomen, displacing the abdominal muscles and gently swelling the belly. As we exhale, the diaphragm releases back toward the heart, enabling the belly to release toward the spine.

KEEP THE UPPER BODY QUIET. During high-stress times, it's common to heave the upper chest and grip the muscles in the shoulders and throat. When we're at rest, the muscles of the upper chest remain soft and relaxed as we breathe, and the real work occurs in the lower rib cage. To promote this type of breathing pattern, consciously relax the jaw, throat, neck, and shoulders, and envision the breath sweeping into the deepest parts of the lungs as you breathe in and out.

BREATHE EASY. Although some breaths may be deeper or faster than others, when we're relaxed, the alternating rhythm of the inhalations and exhalations feels like a lullaby—smooth, soft, and uninterrupted by jerks and jags. Consciously relaxing into this wavelike, oceanic quality of the breath deepens our sense of peace and ease.

LENGTHEN THE EXHALATIONS. When we feel stressed, our exhalations tend to grow short and choppy. When we're relaxed, though, the exhalations extend so completely that they are often longer than the inhalations. Some teachers even instruct that if we're deeply relaxed, each exhalation will be twice as long as the inhalation. To facilitate this, try gently extending each exhalation by one or two seconds.

PAUSE AFTER EACH EXHALATION. In our most relaxed state, the end of each exhalation is punctuated by a short pause. Lingering in this sweet spot can be deeply satisfying and can evoke feelings of profound quiet and stillness.

LET THE WHOLE BODY BREATHE. When we are at ease, the whole body participates in the breathing process. Imagine a sleeping baby: When he breathes in and out, the belly swells and releases, the hips rock to and fro, the shoulders bob, and the spine gently undulates. This offers a mini-massage for the muscles and organs of the whole body, and turns each breath into a soothing melody that further calms and quiets every cell within.

Claudia Cummins teaches yoga in central Ohio. Visit www.claudiacummins.com to read a selection of her essays.

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