

Do it right

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 Sunday, 24 February 2008
 Last Updated Tuesday, 08 April 2008

The mother of the child that threatens to "hold my breath till I turn blue if I don't give in;" knows better than to give in; the young ransom-seeker will soon gasp for air before he could issue another threat. From the time we squeal to announce our arrival, we instinctively know we will not last without air. More importantly we instinctively knew then how to breathe right. Over time, we forget how to do it right.

Pollution is now a part of the package we call Life. All the more are the reasons to do it right because our body instinctively inhales less air in order to protect itself from pollution. Like those living in high altitudes adapting itself to thinner air, our body is telling us to make do with a smaller intake of air. Perhaps it is worse for those living in Beijing, Shanghai or Mexico City. We need to clean up our act! But in the meantime, do we do what the little ransom-seeker above does? Sixty years ago, an experiment conducted in Germany confirmed that lack of oxygen can cause cancer. In that experiment, it was found that when oxygen was withdrawn normal healthy cells turned into cancer cells within a short time. Breathing is life. It facilitates the pumping of the heart, the emission of hormones from the organs, the movement of cerebral spinal fluid in the spinal cords and more. Deep and correct breathing allows the body not only to attain health, but also, on the spiritual level, to achieve the super conscious state. Two strands of Eastern philosophies support the notion that breathing right prolongs life: Taoist breathing and Pranayama. Both share many conceptual similarities. **QI IS KEY** The key concept in Taoist breathing is qi, the life force that is the most fundamental to all that exists, pervading all things, animating life, and forming the core of the human body. Qi literally translates into "air" or "breath", and its quality, quantity and balance are crucial to health as well as longevity. Therefore, learning how to control one's breath is pivotal to regulating the levels of Qi in one's body. While hsing-Qi is the controlled and meditative breathing under this practice, it is really the TaiQi exercise that is related to attaining longevity. One major lesson is learning how to be more conscious of the relationship of breathing with the body and mind, from which peace and wholeness can be cultivated in one's life.

Taoist breathing is a gentle and cumulative way that gently leads the practitioner to get in touch with who they are. By focusing on internal awareness, one knows the 'inner person' better and harmony in the mind is achieved. Other than maximizing the use of oxygen that one takes in, this internal awareness also improves one's breathing. This is done by re-patterning one's shallow breathing - a bad habit 'learned' through the years. Following years of habitual shallow breathing, many adults suffer atrophied lungs. Proper breathing techniques will eventually be able to restore the lungs' optimum function once more. All in all, this translates into good health, that can also help the body work towards self-healing and, ultimately, longevity. **CONTROL** Pranayama is the science of breath control. Prana is the life force, the vital essence that pervades the entire universe. Subtler than air, prana nonetheless is often translated as "air" or "breath" besides also being referred to as "spirit", "life", "energy", "the upwards-moving energy currents within the body"; it is also the direct expression of consciousness. This practice that derives its name by combining prana with ayama is one of the eight limbs of Raja Yoga. It means "lengthen or extend by restraint". The techniques allow increased amount of oxygen to be brought into the accomplished practitioner's body by intentionally and rhythmically controlling the respiratory organs. The purpose is to effect chemical changes that help free the flow of prana throughout the body, besides giving the practitioner greater poise and willpower in regulating emotions, thoughts and actions. A yogic tenet claims that a person's lifespan depends on the number of breaths he is allotted, implying that for a longer life, slow down your breath. **IS the secret of life embedded in our breath, and that to longevity in our mastery of breathing techniques? Regardless of the possible answers, it is clear that breath is life; we begin our lives with our first breath and end it with our last.**