



Breathwork and Relationality

By Elizabeth A Lange PhD

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Background on Breathwork

Breathwork is the first and simplest way to centre back in the body. **Our body is a gift** that brings our being into the world. It can foster the state of **inner listening** in which we can touch the simple grace of living.

There is much research on the science of breathwork, especially for **medical applications** such as heart health and cancer treatment. Such mindfulness training usually starts with the breath to raise **body awareness**, as we live in a society that views the body simply as a machine, subject to the control of the mind. Breathing seems too mundane to matter, yet most of us only breathe from the upper part of our lungs and shoulders—chest breathing—because we are in such a stressed, driven society. By fostering body awareness, mindfulness **reduces stress responses** in the body, especially the nervous system, that compromise wellbeing and even create illness. Physician Jon Kabat-Zinn calls his process the *Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program, used around the globe. Using belly breathing for as little as 5 minutes a day can assist in bringing calm and focus to your day.

Use of the breath has also been the basis of **meditative practices in almost all spiritual traditions**. Bringing awareness to the breath and thus to the body, helps find the centre of your being, from which you can engage in life. Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön explains that the attention to breathing is the basic sitting meditation. The first aspect is to learn to be fully present, by simply concentrating on the breath. In yoga, **breathwork** is the third limb¹ of yoga practice. The next step is **sensory withdrawal**, the fourth limb² of yoga practice, where you can find a stillpoint, in a world normally flooded with sensation.

The second aspect is learning to come back to the breath as the distractions of the mind and the stream of self-talk pull attention away. Such constant centering or **stilling of the mind** can help us identify the ongoing stream of emotions and thinking that keep us occupied. When centring on the breath, one creates a spaciousness and a sense of the slowing of time, especially in the gentle pause between breathing out and then in. Into this spaciousness comes healing, compassion, and joy as we honestly watch ourselves with the **witness self**. We simply observe without judgement or without labelling, the unfolding of our Self. For those who might have trauma stored in their body, be aware that anxiety and irritability may surface initially. This is the first step toward changing unhealthy patterns through self-regulation, and toward evolving humanity.

Simple breathing exercises help us to come back into our bodies and become more fully present in the moment and to the various voices speaking within us. For educators and learners, breathing helps clear the mind and create an **open receptivity for learning**. By restraining the constant chatter and physical distractions, learners can tap their natural curiosity and desire for learning, moving into a **flow state** or full engagement, also called “seeing with the beginner’s mind”. As Csikszentimihalyi says, “flow is a source of psychic energy in that it focuses attention and motivates action”, which is the optimal state for learning.

With a short breathing exercise, attention can drop into a place of **interoception**, which is the 8th sense, the ability to sense all our other 7 senses. In particular, we can notice the body sensations that connect to different emotions. This not only heightens a **feeling for our inner landscape** but also helps create a climate of safety and receptivity toward the **outer landscape**. Once we can

¹ The third limb of yoga practice is called *pranayama*.

² The fourth limb of yoga practice is called *pratyahara*.

recognize the impact of the outer world on us, we do not have to resort to all our unconscious protective defense mechanisms, but we can **choose our response**. This means we can be more open to the world and to people, as we gain confidence in effective responses. Again, in the case of trauma stored in the body, more care and perhaps guidance might be required.

In these ways, breathwork is a **pathway of transformation** from our habitual, reactive responses to fresher, more conscious responses. It is also a pathway into understanding the profound ways we are connected to all other things in the cosmos.

Background on Relationality

Relationality is **not** referring to social relationships. Rather it refers to a **relational understanding of existence**. The current **Western view** is rooted in the Newtonian model that sees **separation** as the basis of reality. Coming out of quantum physics, living systems theory, complexity theory and many other new streams of science and philosophy, relationality means we understand reality as related at all levels, from the smallest quantum level to the largest cosmic level. This understanding of relationality has been present in many non-Western thought systems for centuries.

In Western ways, we “see” planets circling around the sun, separate and unconnected in their own orbits...yet, in reality, quantum physics demonstrates they are all connected by a multidimensional, flowing fabric of energy. In the Western view, human development is considered as becoming autonomous, a critical thinker, and standing on our own as self-sufficient individuals, as the expression of full, mature adulthood. Yet, from the moment we are born, we are in a web of relations that include body relations, social relations, cultural relations, ancestral relations, historical relations, land relations, and ecological relations.

No person is self-contained but is embedded relationally from their very first breath. This is our **matrix of life**. This matrix shapes who we are, while also giving us the ability to develop a separate sense of self from within these relations. When these relations change, we change. We matter within our relations. Every thought, response, action and even intention creates energy that resonates around us. Thoughtful engagement helps create the world we wish to live in.

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First Breath Exercise: Our Matrix of Life

Belly Breathing

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Sometimes it helps to just stomp your feet a few seconds. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Begin by taking a long deep breath in. You should be breathing into your diaphragm, not just the usual shallow chest breathing. Relax your belly muscles.

For the next deep breath, put your hand on your abdomen so you can feel it expand with your breath. Then, exhale all the way out, drawing it out, letting your abdomen deflate. You should feel your belly relax. Breathe again, letting your belly rise like a balloon filling with air and then deflating naturally.

Now do 8-10 more long deep belly breaths, relaxing the muscles of your face and letting your whole body relax. The lungs and your rib cage should remain quiet. Then open your eyes.

Relationality Reflection: As we rarely breath this deeply in modern society, we may feel some discomfort at the beginning, given that we are fully engaging the diaphragm, which is the air pump for our body. Just notice the physical feelings as they arise.

By the end, you will likely notice both your body and your mind has calmed. Our breathing is the first step, moving from a sense of separation, even from our own bodies...toward relationality with all that is. We help to re-enchant the universe, becoming re-acquainted with the vital spark that pulses through all life. Our breath links our bodies to all that has existed...and that currently exists.

Our need for oxygen is absolute. Oxygen is our matrix of life. Therefore, each breath is an essential ritual.

It was the creation of oxygen that enabled the whole explosion of life on planet Earth. We breath in molecules from the stars, as part of the cosmos. We breath in parts of all that has gone before us, from the dinosaurs...to volcanoes...to all humans. We are indebted to the forests that create the oxygen upon which we depend. We are connected to all things...from our very first cry...to our last sigh at death. So, breath in deeply. In breathing, we contribute to the possibility of life after us.

Second Breath Exercise: The Rhythm of Life

Rhythmic Breathing

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Stomp your feet to assist. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Bring your attention to the rhythm of breathing. Our breathing occurs naturally all of our life, without any attention from us. We are rarely aware of it. Just notice the natural movement of your breath, the experience of being alive.

Natural breathing is chest breathing. Feel your breath enter your nose, noticing all the physical sensations...how it moves down into your base of your lungs on the inhale, how it travels up to the head then out the nose...how it feels as it exits the nose.

On each cycle, feel the breath moving throughout your body, like a breeze of energy moving through you, down all the way, and up all the way. Notice the buoyancy of the inhale and the pull of gravity upon the exhale. Notice the movement of your chest, up and down. Continue breathing easily but consciously for several minutes.

Slowly open your eyes.

Relationality Reflection: Rhythms are basic to all of life. The ocean ebbs and flows, part of its rhythmic motion, or breathing. The breath moves like the sea. Waves of breath nourish the earth body we inhabit. The ebb and flow of life itself exists within the inhale and desists within the exhale.

The land also breathes. During the day, cool sea breezes flow onto land as an inhale, warm and rise, then flow back out over the sea as an exhale. During the night, the cycle reverses and the cool land breezes flow out into the sea as an exhale, warm and rise, then flow back onto land where they cool and sink, as an inhale.

In NASA footage over 20 years, it is clear the Earth breathes as well, by the seasons. In the Northern Hemisphere winter and Southern summer, the snow grows in the north and recedes in the south, then in Northern summer and the Southern Hemisphere winter, the snow reverses and grows in the south and recedes in the north, like inhaling and exhaling.

During summertime and active photosynthesis, there is growing, and during winter as plants lay dormant, there is a shrinking. Plants, especially trees, respire taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, part of their daily breathing. Soil respire similarly. All animals breathe in some way.

Everyday, the moon and sun both rise and set each day, their daily rhythms. We live in a cyclic world...a rhythmic world...a breathing world.

In this way, your breath can teach you about life rhythms, the inbreath and outbreath. This pulse of life within us is echoed throughout the natural world. Holding our breath, holding emotions, holding still, while all necessary at times, are detrimental over long periods. Breathing consciously can bring our attention to one of the regular rhythms we experience through the day, encouraging a natural ebb and flow. We are within the flowing Universe and the flowing Universe is within us.

Third Breath Exercise: *Being Life*

In this breathing exercise, you can enter interoception, the eighth sense, or the awareness of all your other senses. Interoception is the *felt sense* of being. Our body is a gift that enables us to touch the world in many ways. We spend the majority of our waking hours experiencing our environment from the outside in, sifting and sorting what we are conscious and not conscious of.

By taking a few minutes each day to listen to the inner landscape of our body, we cultivate a relationship with ourselves in which the “feeling” or “sensing” mind can be more awake, more aware. The result of practicing in this way leads us to a greater sense of accepting and understanding our bodily nature, the aliveness of being. It can also lead us to deeper gratitude for the gift of our bodies and the experience of being embodied.

Body Awareness Breathing

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Stomp your feet first if helpful. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Notice the taste in your mouth...what did you eat and drink last and what is lingering on your taste buds? Slurp in some air through your mouth. What does the air taste like?

Smell what is on the air...what is wafting by...are there smells that passed by earlier...

Listen to the sounds around you...identify the natural sounds...identify the human sounds...can you hear all the layers of sound at once?

Explore your sense of touch. Feel the surface of your skin... the temperature of your skin. Feel the tactile sense of clothing...the feel of your hair...feel your ears. Now, feel the weight of your body, the pull of gravity on you, and the support of your chair or the floor beneath you.

Open your eyes...see the colors...see the shapes...see any movement...close your eyes again.

Relationality Reflection: Your breath can teach you about all the senses of the body. In our Western and urbanized world, we lead with our eyes more than other senses. When we close our eyes, we allow other senses to surface with more clarity. The nose and smelling, the tongue and tasting, the ears and listening, the skin and touching.

By inviting our focus through the felt experience of the senses we are “slowing down” and paying attention to our physical wisdom. Our Western world has denigrated the body, considering it the site of all desires and appetites, regarded negatively. But our bodies are our connection to the world. Our bodies have basic needs which must be met. Our bodies store knowledge in each cell, including how to heal as well as to communicate and synchronize with the larger whole. There is memory in our bodies, some carried in our DNA. Some of these memories will be difficult and an obstacle, others will be positive and healing. There is innate wisdom in our bodies, that can be called up when needed.

By taking the time to sit and feel the layers of “beingness” we can cultivate a *body knowing* which can yield a sense of aliveness, contentment, and well-being.

Fourth Breath Exercise: Spaciousness

The rate and pattern of breathing can alter our heart rate. Many meditative traditions have identified a sweet spot of breathing where the breathing is regulated, synchronizing with the heart rate and the electrical rhythms of the brain, called the resonant rate. We can voluntarily alter our breathing and therefore find a place of spaciousness. This rate of breathing can assist those experiencing high anxiety, obsessive worry, insomnia, depression, and overwhelmed feelings.

This rhythmic pattern corresponds to one mind state, present in meditation as part of many spiritual traditions. This pattern leads one to conscious alertness. It is achieved by lowering the normal beta waves and increasing the alpha and theta brain waves. In this state, previously unconscious feelings and memories can surface and can be witnessed and released, as we are in a nonreactive state. This state of consciousness is now being used in high-altitude sports performance, as it increases strength, balance, and flexibility of response.

In this optimal mind state, the healing parts of the nervous system are being recharged, and the overactive part of the nervous system is being calmed. Ideally, to achieve this state, one must slow the breathing down to approximately 5 breaths per minute, although this can vary from 3.5 to 6 breaths. Individuals can learn to do this incrementally until they feel they have reached this state following the instructions below. Using a musical note or chime tone to guide learners in the rate of breath is helpful in this exercise.

Slow Breathing

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Stomp your feet if helpful. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Breathe slowly and deeply, feeling the air move into your chest and belly. Notice the rise and fall of your chest and belly. Focus on the breath moving naturally. We will now lengthen the breaths.

Breathe in through your nose and count "two" on the inbreath and on the outbreath. Do this for two breaths.

Now, breathe in and count "two" and "three" on the inbreath and then on the outbreath. Do this for three breaths.

Now, breathe in and count "two, three, four" on the inbreath and then on the outbreath. Do this for four breaths.

Now, breathe in and count "two, three, four, five" on the inbreath and then on the outbreath. Do this for five breaths.

Relationality Reflection: We spend so much of life running out of breath, catching our breath, or needing to take breathers. As we slow the breath, our mind slows, instead of running off in all directions. The body slows too and rejuvenates itself with more blood flow and oxygen. It creates a pause which is a waiting, a moment of mindfulness, helping us be more present.

Slow breathing can be used as an anchor to move back into the balanced rhythms of heart, mind, and body. In this slowness, a spaciousness emerges where we can witness ourselves, both the hyperactivity of mind and body. A spaciousness emerges where we are not constantly pulled by our desires or even our worthy aspirations. A spaciousness emerges where our bodies can tap the resources to heal and bring us back into balance. The tensions of the day fade and even old tensions stored in our body can move more and more fluidly, becoming unblocked, as you breathe into them, as a wind through the trees.

In this moment, a new kind of consciousness emerges in which we foster an inner listening. Through this, we can tap our inner wisdom. There is space for important insights to emerge. In this deeply relaxed state of calm alertness, we can open to the gifts of the universe.

Fifth Breath Exercise: Stress Awareness

4-7-8 breath

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Stomp your feet if that is helpful. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Place two fingers on your wrist or neck pulse, leaving them there. Breathe slowly and deeply.

Bring your attention to the rhythm of breathing, using chest breathing, noticing the natural ebb and flow.

Now, think about something stressful such as stepping into a crosswalk, then seeing a moving car right there. What happens to your breath? What happens to your pulse?

Now we will do 4-7-8 breathing. Inhale for 4 seconds through the mouth (like you are slurping water from your hands). Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds. Then slowly allow the breath to release for 8 seconds while pursing your lips like you are blowing through a straw. Do this for 12 breaths or until you can feel your relaxed state return.

Now, think about someone yelling at you. What happens to your breath? What happens to your pulse?

Again, do 4-7-8 breathing. Inhale for 4 seconds through the mouth (like you are slurping water from your hands). Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds. Then slowly allow the breath to release for 8 seconds while pursing your lips like you are blowing through a straw. Do this for 12 breaths or until you can feel your relaxed state return.

Relationality Reflection: Rhythms of our heart and breath can quicken or slow, dependent on our activities and emotions as well as the situations we are in. Our breath is a direct link to our awareness, particularly states of expansion and contraction.

When we are in a contracted state of awareness (in emotional anxiety or physical stress) our breath shortens and becomes less available, creating tension in the muscles. While this is needed in some circumstances, living in a contracted state over time, including holding one's breath repeatedly, is not a natural rhythm and is harmful to us. It can create dis-ease/disease over time.

When we become aware that our breath is shortening, and we observe the result on our body, we can choose to "short circuit" our nervous system's "flight or fight" response, by harnessing the breath. By creating length and depth to the breath, it soothes the contracted state of the nervous system, helping it move back into an expansion state. This moves the dominance of the sympathetic nervous system into the parasympathetic nervous system.

The 4-7-8 breath control mechanism helps us have a "one-pointed" focus. This practice is an easy way to interrupt a stress response and voluntarily return to a more relaxed state. Especially if we are called on to speak or act in some way, we can then do so from a more expansive state.

Sixth Breath Exercise – Stilling the Mind

Resistance breathing is any breathing that creates resistance to the flow of air. Just like a cat purring, a partial obstruction of the airway is created, leading to a vibrational sound, which is deeply relaxing. This can be achieved not only through breathing exercises but also in singing and chanting, again present in many spiritual traditions.

For us, this exercise can interrupt the “monkey mind” or “hive mind” and sooth the nervous system. Thoughts are continually running through our mind – telling stories, being critical, judging, inspiring or highly emotional - the full spectrum. Calming this process is important for feeling balanced and is helpful with mild insomnia or agitation when one cannot shut the mind off.

Ocean Breathing

Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, as if you are planted on the Earth. Stomp your feet if helpful. Place your hands in your lap if possible, resting easily. Gently close your eyes.

Purse your lips, with the upper lip pulled over the lower lip slightly, with a narrow opening, then breath out. Breath in through your nose, then breath out through pursed lips. Continue this for 12 breaths, it should sound like the ebb and flow of the ocean.

Now, breath in with your mouth open and then breath out with a whispery ahhh, from the back of your throat. Repeat this for 12 breaths...again it should sound like the ebb and flow of the ocean.

Gently open your eyes.

Relationality Reflection: Your breath can teach you about the busyness of the mind, as the mind takes you away from the simpleness and calmness of your breath. The breath, although we do not notice it for the most part, is an integral part of our inner balance and wellbeing. How do you feel when you breathe through your mouth versus breathing through your nose? What do you observe now about the quality of your mind?

When we interrupt the “vrittis” or fluctuations of the mind by controlling our breath, we can slow down and be more present. Our thinking mind tries to protect us from what is coming in, offering up all its chatter, but we can better protect ourselves by seeing the mind as a sea that is constantly ebbing and flowing. We can sit at the shore and see it come and go, rather than flowing along with every element. Then you are living in dynamic balance, not static, but fostering a stillness while observing the flow.