

CHAPTER 1



Breathe, Smile, and Be at Ease

Love is in the air. Breathe deeply.

Life as we know it begins and ends with the breath. The breath is the most important source of energy. Breathing is normally an involuntary process controlled by the autonomic nervous system without conscious control. Every part of the body needs oxygen to survive. Our bodies work to keep us breathing, even when we are sleeping. It would certainly be tedious if we had to keep track of every breath.

We may take inhaling and exhaling for granted, until the day a common cold restricts our breathing and our most desperate need becomes a simple breath. I think back to a vacation with my sister when I spent two consecutive nights sitting up in bed because I couldn't breathe lying down. Since that time, I have not taken one breath for granted.

In this opening chapter, the breath will also be viewed from the perspective of an effective, voluntary tool; it is the prerequisite for the chapters that follow. Voluntary breathing will be explored in terms of healthy breathing practices and as the first step in handling every challenging situation.

Understanding the power of the breath is like knowing that the brakes in your car are fully functioning before you leave the driveway. You have what it takes to slow down or stop when necessary. When you take a deep breath,

you immediately bring about a physiological change, and in stressful interactions, this allows you to shift from an emotional to a logical perspective.

Taking a deep, voluntary breath creates the space for conscious action to avoid impulsive reaction.

This story shows how preoccupation with a situation can disrupt proper breathing. Lia, a client, remarked that during a heated argument, you are not breathing to calm down. You are simply reloading. She revisited an incident of taking rapid breaths on her way to an encounter with her domineering sister. Lia was unaware that shallow breathing meant she was taking in less oxygen and releasing less carbon dioxide, adversely affecting her immune system, mood, and mental clarity. This was raising her physical and emotional stress and could result in dizziness, fainting, nausea, and chest or abdominal pain.

At a stoplight, a police officer looked over at Lia's car. He observed her distressed breathing and asked if she was okay or needed medical assistance. She chuckled nervously, assured him that she was fine, and thanked him for his kind offer. She inhaled, smiled, and returned to the gentle, deep breathing that would release the calming chemicals she needed to restore her composure. Each traffic stop sign gave her the opportunity to stop, breathe, and be alert before proceeding.

Lia had also learned to replace the harmful habit of holding her breath in stressful situations with the healthy alternative of conscious breathing. She understood that when you use proper breathing to stabilize, no one can rob you of your peace.

The breath combined with a smile can be an effective practice. A progressive organization provided an in-service training program on the procedure and benefits of breathing and smiling when taking calls from customers. Then mirrors were installed at the desks of their customer service agents.

Can You See What Eye See?

This allowed the agents to see how they were coming across to the customers. Within a few months, customer satisfaction improved significantly, and the employees reported feeling more in control and less stressed at the end of their shifts. You could try this experiment yourself the next time you have to make a challenging call.

Ongoing research reveals that breathing correctly keeps the mind and body functioning as it promotes feelings of relaxation, helps you destress, and lowers blood pressure. Slowing your breathing will provide nourishment for body and spirit. For example, scuba divers learn the crucial nature of proper breathing, as do snorkelers when they come up for air. Interestingly, scuba divers are taught to follow the bubbles when needing to know what direction is up in dark water. The breath helps you follow your thoughts when you are in the dark about what to do next.

Studies indicate that deep breaths trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to calm you. With the awareness that breathing is the essence of life, commit to bringing your full attention to the breath, visualizing how you are energizing and connecting mind, body, and spirit. Witness how the breath can dramatically impact aspects of life, such as anxiety, distressing thoughts, restlessness, and insomnia, and can bring a sense of control over emotions, behaviors, and well-being. Use the breath to get in touch with your inner wisdom and grace. To feel better, breathe better.

The single most effective relaxation technique
I know is conscious regulation of breath.
—Dr. Andrew Weil

This is a simple deep-breathing exercise called belly breathing (a.k.a. diaphragmatic breathing). Lie on your back

on a flat surface, bend your knees, and place a cushion under your knees and (or) head for comfort. Rest your hand on your belly to help you concentrate on the air going in and out. Inhale deeply through your nose and feel your stomach rise. Let your belly relax. Breathe out slowly through your pursed lips, like blowing bubbles. Repeat for a few minutes. Increase the time as you become more comfortable with the exercise.

Breathing deeply into your belly will expand your rib cage over time and oxygenate your body more efficiently, which in turn allows your metabolism to become more efficient. When you develop a breathing practice, starting with just five minutes a day at a designated time and sacred space, you train your mind to gently bring you back from overthinking. The breath gives you something concrete to rely on.

Establish and maintain a breathing practice to enhance your mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. The breath becomes your path to health and wellness. Thich Nhat Hanh offers this brief meditation, which is a beneficial daily practice and a great resource in times of stress: “Breathing in I am a mountain. Breathing out I feel solid.”

There is a Zen story about a man riding a horse that is galloping frantically. A man standing on the road yells to him, “Where are you going in such a hurry?” The man on the horse yells back, “I don’t know. Ask the horse.”

Whenever your mind feels like that galloping horse overcome with fear, anxiety, and distractions, the conscious breath can restore your peace of mind. Pay attention to how the breath connects your mind and body. You will regain control, see things more clearly, and proceed effectively.

Life will provide many opportunities for you to behave one way or another. With the awareness that you do not have to react immediately, you use the breath to provide the space to mindfully choose your response. Ted, the father of a precious five-year-old, wanted to prepare her for the potential

stress of moving to a new home. He asked her not to worry if Mommy and Daddy got upset at times. His little daughter touched his hand and said, “Daddy, you just need to breathe!” He smiled and hoped she had learned this from him.

Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Key Points

- Visualize breathing life into every cell of your body.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly through lips.
- Be aware of expanding your rib cage, followed by a gentle release.
- Recognize all the benefits of mindful breathing.
- Practice daily so that this becomes your default mode.
- Access the breath as your first step in handling any situation.
- Be ever grateful for the breath.

The importance of the breath cannot be overstated. Develop your breathing exercises by starting with short time-outs and extend your practice as you become more comfortable. Use the breath as your first and most valuable tool for self-control and inner peace. Take a deep breath and then move on to the other chapters.