

# BREATHE! The Art of Breathing

Breathing exercises to enhance your well-being

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Compiled by Riley Lee

Dr. Riley Lee, ethnomusicologist and Grand Master of the shakuhachi (traditional bamboo flute), has developed these simple exercises through more than two decades of teaching and performing experience.

The purpose of these exercises is to make you immediately aware of your breath.

Breathing requires whole body, not just our lungs and inhalation/exhalation muscles. Warm up exercises remind us to use more of body than just lungs and associated muscles.



## Assumptions behind the exercises

- There is a healthy (optimal) way to breathe.
- Most of us do not breathe in this way much of the time.
- Simple breathing exercises can benefit almost everyone on both physical and metaphysical levels, by increasing the time we breathe optimally.
- Better breath awareness leads to better control over all aspects of your life.
- Tension hinders optimal breathing.
- Awareness encourages optimal breathing

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## BODY AWARENESS #1

The first thing we need to do in order to begin to breathe better is to become aware of our body and of our breath.

- Sit comfortably and relax.
- Close your eyes.
- Pay attention to your breathing.
- Do not control your breath.
- Only be aware of your breath.
- Choose to pay attention to thoughts that are related to your breath. Let go of other thought as quickly as possible.
- Notice how your breath changes over time.
- We will continue for five minutes.

## BODY AWARENESS #2 (also good for insomnia)

- Sit on edge of chair Elbows on knees. Chin in hands. Nasel, 'sniff' breathing. Notice belly and lower back expand.
- Tense all the muscles in your body as you breathe in through the nose, then releasing them as you exhale through the mouth, which you repeat a few times. Create space between your teeth, with your tongue placed on the hard palate.
- Breathe in through the nose for a count of three,.
- Hold it for a count of four.
- Breathe out through the mouth, relaxing the tongue, while counting to five.
- Repeat this for at least 10 rounds.

## INVOCATION BREATHS

- Hands on lap.
- Inhale while sweeping hands and arms in a wide circle, so that arms are straight above your head, and you are looking up at them. Palms of hands are pressed together.
- Hold for ten seconds.
- Slowly bring hands down (palms still pressed together) and look at your fingers while exhaling. Elbows are up so that forearms are parallel to the ground.
- Hold for five seconds.
- Repeat twice.

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## INVOCATION TWIST

- Palms are pressed together, hands are level with your eyes. Elbows are raised so that forearms are parallel to the ground.
- On the inhalation, move hands to the right, while keeping your elbows up. Do NOT move your body or chest. Only the hands and arms move as far to the right as possible. Eyes follow the fingers.
- On the exhalation, return hands and eyes to the centre. Pause.
- On inhalation, repeat to left. Keep elbows up. Keep chest and torso still.
- On exhalation, return to centre. Pause.
- Repeat twice.

## WARM UP EXERCISE #1 - HEAD TILTING

- Tilt head to left shoulder - hold 5 seconds – relax!
- Tilt head to chest - hold 5 seconds – relax!
- Tilt head to right shoulder - hold 5 seconds – relax!
- Tilt head backwards - hold 5 seconds – relax!
- Exhale slowly throughout all four positions (over approximately 20 seconds).
- Inhale when returning head to upright.
- Repeat sequence twice (three times total).

## WARM UP EXERCISE #2 – SHOULDER ROTATIONS

- Rotate shoulders very slowly in forward circular motion x5
- Rotate shoulders very slowly in backward circular motion x5
- Breathe deeply in on upward motions and breathe out on downward motions.
- Repeat sequence twice (three times total)

## WARM UP EXERCISE #3 – FINGER PRESSING (PALMS NOT TOUCHING)

- Arms parallel to ground, elbows bent, hands in front of chest
- Fingers touching. Palms apart. Eyes closed. Inhale.
- While slowly exhaling, press inwards on fingers until palms are almost touching. Fingers on each hand resist the fingers on the other. Do not touch palms.
- While inhaling, slowly release.
- Repeat for 10 breaths.

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## WARM UP EXERCISE #4 – WRIST SQUEEZING

- Hold hands in front of you
- Clasp right hand around left wrist
- Squeeze gently against inside of wrist with right thumb five times
- Breathe normally.
- Swap hands and repeat.

## WARM UP EXERCISE #5 INHALE-EXHALE WITH ARMS

- Palms together in front of Heart Centre
- Slowly inhale while extending each hand outward, opening arms as wide as possible.
- Pause.
- Slowly exhale, bringing palms back to touch each other in front of Heart Centre.
- Pause.
- Repeat twice (three times total).

## WARM UP EXERCISE #6 – ARM EXTENSIONS

- Right arm to right as far back as possible, twist torso – inhale
- Back to centre – exhale
- Left arm to left as far as possible, twist torso - inhale
- Back to centre – exhale
- Repeat 3 times each side.

## WARM UP EXERCISE #7 – HIP SWINGING

- Swing hips around. Allow torso and legs to follow movement.
- Allow arms and hands to slap on small of back and opposite shoulder.
- Let heels lift, but do not let feet leave ground completely.
- Head moves in direction of swing.
- Movement is generated entirely from core and hips.
- Inhale and exhale as deeply as possible while spinning.
- Continue for five minutes.

## WARM UP EXERCISE #8 – TWENTY-ONE SPINS

- Arms outstretched horizontal to floor, palms facing downward
- Keep arms in line with shoulders.
- Slowly spin clockwise until you become slightly dizzy.
- Gradually increase to 21 spins.
- Inhale and exhale as deeply as possible while spinning.

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## CIRCLE OF JOY

- This is a four-part breath, which stretches various parts of the upper body.
- Clasp hands in front of you, inhale while raising hands above head
- Release hands and exhale while bringing hands and straight arms down to the side of your body
- Clasp hands behind you, elbows straight, inhale while stretching straight arms as high as possible towards the ceiling
- Clasp hands in front of you, invert clasped hands, exhale while curving back and stretching arms directly away and in front of you, as if pushing something.
- Repeat three times

## ELBOW STRETCH

- Clasp hands behind head, elbows stretched out.
- Inhale deeply while opening chest by stretching elbows backwards as far as possible.
- Exhale while bringing elbows to touch in front of you and trying to touch your chin to your chest.
- Repeat six times

## RAISE ARMS - HOLD BREATH

- Raise arms, clench fists
- Hold breath
- Pound right side of upper chest while holding breath
- Stop and exhale on signal or after at least 10 seconds
- Exhale (with whoosh and arms back, head to floor if possible)
- Repeat sequence on left side of upper chest
- Repeat on lower lung lobes (be gentle)
- Repeat while punch air upwards and downwards
- Repeat while punching air forwards
- Repeat entire sequence of activities twice (three times total)

## TWIST and STRETCH

- Arms forward
- Deep breath – hold
- R arm to right rear, eyes follow
- Exhale while beating chest with other hand – twist further
- Inhale – back to centre
- Same on left side
- Slowly twice on each side
- Faster six times on each side

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## SINUS MASSAGE (only once)

- Massage head with knuckles
- Massage temples, forehead and jaw with finger tips
- Massage both sides of nose with middle fingers while exhaling

## FEEL THE TENSION

- Hug and Breath (tension) --> Relax and Breath (no tension)
- Repeat each activity twice (three times total)

## SIMPLE HOLD

- Hold breaths for ten seconds on three 'settings'
- On full, 2/3 full, half full, 1/3 full, 'empty'
- Repeat each activity twice (three times total)

## BLOW OUT THE UNWANTED

- Inhale. Hold.
- Gather everything you want to get rid of – emotional baggage, aches, habits, etc.
- At the signal, suddenly blow out all of this negativity with a big “Phooh” through slightly pursed lips.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## BLOW OUT EVERYTHING

- Inhale as deeply as possible. Hold briefly. Gather up your energy/effort/determination
- Exhale while counting 1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 over and over again as quickly as possible
- Do this for as long as you can, counting one to ten as many times as possible. Try to go beyond your limits
- Inhale deeply when you can go no further
- Repeat at least three times

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## SEATED PUMP & MOVE

- Isometrics while pumping three times on inhalation, and three times on exhalation
- Push hands together - apart
- Push legs together - apart
- Push legs down - up
- Grab left wrist and raise
- Grab right wrist and raise
- Push left fist down
- Push right fist down
- Repeat entire sequence twice (three times total)

## SQUAT AND RECOVER

- Five (or more) fast squats until 'breathless'
- Stop, sit, hand on lungs
- Follow breath until it slows to normal
- Inhale through nose
- Exhale through mouth
- Repeat entire sequence twice (three times total)

## SITTING COBRA

- Inhale and arch back
- Exhale and make back concave
- Do two sequences slowly
- Do six sequences faster, without pausing

## DEEP PANTING BREATH

- Take a full breath through your mouth.
- Blow out immediately and quickly take another deep breath.
- Breath deeply in-out in-out etc. as vigorously as possible as if panting for breath after having run a fast kilometre.
- If there is any tightness, breathe more gently.
- Only ten inhales and ten exhales at a time.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

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## SHALLOW PANTING

- Think of panting shallowly, just like a dog!
- Take an average breath through the nose.
- Sticking out your tongue, breathe in and out through your mouth as fast as possible.
- Concentrate on the air flowing rapidly and evenly over the tongue.
- Continue for at least ten seconds.
- Resume normal breathing.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## GENTLE BREATH

- Take a full breath through your nose.
- Immediately blow out through your mouth as gently and smoothly as possible.
- Exhale for at least 30 seconds.
- Resume normal breathing.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## HELD BREATH

- Take a full breath through your nose.
- Do not release, but hold.
- While holding breath, relax, especially diaphragm and shoulders.
- Hold for at least 30 seconds.
- Blow out air forcefully, emptying lungs.
- Resume normal breathing.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## VIGOROUS EXHALATION

- Take a full breath through your nose.
- Immediately blow out air through your mouth as forcefully as possible, like blowing out birthday candles.
- Empty lungs completely.
- Repeat twice (three times total)



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## **STRONG EXHALATION (Vigorous Exhalation with pumping)**

- Take a full breath through your nose.
- Immediately blow out air through your mouth as forcefully as possible, like blowing out birthday candles.
- Empty lungs completely.
- Begin pumping out more air without inhaling.
- Continue pumping for as long as possible.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## **SIZZLE BREATH**

- Take a full breath through your nose.
- Gently release air through teeth, making a “sizzling” or whistling sound.
- Make entire exhalation smooth, paying attention to rough places in the sound.
- Exhale for at least 30 seconds. Resume normal breathing.
- Repeat process at least three times.

## **HELD BREATH ON EXHALATION (STRONG)**

- Gently inhale through your nose.
- Gently exhale through your mouth only to the point where another inhalation would feel natural.
- Hold on “empty” for at least 20 to 30 seconds – the longer the better!
- Relax the body.
- Become used to the discomfort.
- Resume normal breathing only after the discomfort becomes intolerable.
- Repeat at least three times.

## **HELD BREATH ON EXHALATION (SUSTAINED)**

- Gently inhale through your nose.
- Gently exhale through your mouth only to the point where another inhalation would feel natural.
- Hold on “empty” for 20 to 30 seconds.
- Relax the body.
- Become used to the discomfort.
- Once the feeling becomes intolerable, slowly ‘sneak’ in very shallow inhalations and exhalations, until sensation is no longer intolerable, but still uncomfortable.
- Continue for three minutes.
- Return to normal breathing for 30-60 seconds.
- Repeat twice (three times total)

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## AWARE SNIFFING

- Sniff room/pause on inhalation – THINK about smells
- Exhale through nose with slow pulses – try to smell exhaled air
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## SILENT INHALATION

- Gently exhale through your mouth. Pause.
- Inhale through your mouth as quickly and fully as possible, without making any sound at all.
- Pause on the full breath.
- Gently exhale.
- Repeat at least three times.

## TOP UP INHALATIONS

- Inhale fully
- Top up through nose with ‘bursts’ of inhaling (try to smell the room)
- Slow exhalation through nose
- Repeat twice (three times total)

## EYE OF TIGER

- Relax. Stand erect. Empty lungs.
- Inhale slowly, deeply, while gradually rising on toes.
- Turn head to left and look behind you.
- Let eyes take head further. Do NOT turn shoulders or twist hips.
- Inhalation is completed on fully raised toes, looking as far behind as possible.
- Hold for count of three while holding breath on inhalation.
- Exhale back to original position. Pause for count of three at bottom of exhalation.
- Repeat on right side.
- Both sides repeated twice (three times total)

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## LIFT THE ROCK

- Relax. Empty lungs
- Palms upward, fingers intertwined (to carry rock)
- Inhale slowly and deeply while raising rock in joined hands to chin
- Continue to raise hands, reversing palms, twisting them towards face, downwards and finally upwards.
- Follow movement with eyes, to utmost stretch.
- Strain to go further, for a count of three while holding breath.
- Relax.
- Slowly exhale, reversing movement, back to original position.
- Press downwards for count of three while holding breath on exhalation.

## SCOOP THE STREAM

- Stand legs shoulder-width. Focus eyes on an object.
- Empty lungs. Palms downwards
- Raise arms while inhaling slowly - palms upward above head
- Imagine weight on palms. Stretch!
- Count three while holding breath (on inhalation).
- Lower hands with hands 90° angle from arms, fingers straight, exhaling slowly
- At bottom, interlace fingers, palms up. Imagine weight in palms. Arms stretch downwards. Engage core muscles.
- Count three while holding breath (on exhalation).
- 'Scoop water' with hands together in cupping position. Thumbs rolled outward.
- Raise hands to 'drink water', palms parallel to ground, thumbs rolled out, shoulders relaxed, slowly inhaling.
- Count three while holding breath (on inhalation).
- Reverse palms (turn 'scoop' over). Press downwards, as if pressing down on strong spring, while slowly exhaling. Stretch at bottom.
- Count three while holding breath (on exhalation).
- Entire sequence ten times

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## SILK THREAD BREATH

- Gently inhale through your nose.
- While inhaling, imagine the air travelling vertically downward to your feet.
- Pause after a full inhalation.
- Imagine a sunrise.
- Relax muscles!
- Gently blow out air, imagining that the air is a fine silk thread travelling smoothly through empty space.
- As you blow out, gradually, but imperceptibly, lean forward.
- Empty the lungs completely.
- Pause after full exhalation.
- Imagine a sunset.
- Relax muscles!
- Repeat process immediately.
- Continue for 5 to 30 seconds.
- Inhalation is much shorter than exhalation.

## COMPLETE BREATH (three types – all x3)

- 1-2-4-1
- 1-4-4-2
- 1-4-8-2
- Gently inhale through your nose while counting four “beats” (or about 4 seconds).
- Hold breath.
- Relax the entire body—particularly the shoulders!
- Count eight beats.
- Gently exhale through your nose while counting sixteen beats. Control exhalation so that lungs are empty (but not forced) on the sixteenth beat.
- Hold on empty. Relax the body!
- Count four beats.
- Immediately repeat the process without resuming normal breathing.
- When breathing in, imagine inhaling goodness, light and energy.
- When breathing out, imagine exhaling tensions, illness, anger and fear.
- Continue for 5 to 30 minutes.

## COMPLETE BREATH w/sound through nose

- As above, but on all exhalations, make noise through nose, as if trying to warm up nasal passages.

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## VISUALISED EXHALATIONS

- Visualise each breath. Give a colour to the exhalation.
- Exhale slowly and silently.
- Three times each.
- Exhale on a mirror
- Blow out “haaaa”
- Blow out “thuuu”
- Blow out “heeee”
- Blow out “puuu”

## LONG VOCALISATIONS

- Inhale fully.
- Vocalise slow exhalation using the four following sounds.
- AH....
- EEE...
- OHMM...
- HUMMM...
- Repeat entire sequence twice (three times total)

## SHORT VOCALISATIONS (repeat all sounds three times)

- Vocalisations do not have to be loud.
- Power breath: Ha!
- Short single shouts. Release all air at once.
- Short repetitions. Exhale with as many shouts as possible
- Short repetitions, speeding up, until shouting as fast as possible
- As above using Ho!. Then using Ya!

*[The final exercise is in a number of ways the most difficult!]*

## WATCHING ONE'S BREATH - ZAZEN

- Do not control breath.
- Count inhalations from one to ten.
- Do not fall into rhythmical breathing.
- Pause on exhalations if you feel like it.
- Sigh if you feel like it.
- Bigger breaths, smaller breaths, slower breaths, faster breaths
- Just count inhalations.

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## NOTES:

- Don't expect miracles, either from these exercises or from yourself.
- Try doing a few different exercises every day. Rotate which you do each session.
- Doing a few of these exercises regularly is better than trying to do all of them at once, and never repeating them.
- Also, many of the exercises in this list are best done with a guide or teacher.
- When doing them on your own, listen to your body.
- Don't overdo it, and consult your doctor if necessary, as with all new and possibly challenging physical activity,
- Finally, over the coming months, I will be creating short videos illustrating all of these breathing exercises, and will notify you when these videos are available.
- If for some reason, you haven't joined my mailing list, see link below.

[CLICK HERE TO BE ON RILEY'S MAILING LIST](#)



**HAPPY BREATHING!!**