

RELAXATION YOGA BREATHING EXERCISE

The single most effective relaxation technique I know is conscious regulation of breath. This is a yogic breathing exercise. It is utterly simple, takes almost no time and can be done anywhere. You can do the exercise in any position, but to learn it I suggest you sit up with your back straight.

(Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.)

First exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.

Next close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four. Next hold your breath for a count of seven.

Then exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight. This is one breath.

Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. I would like you to do this twice a day to start with. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned, it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you.

Use it whenever something upsetting happens, before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension.

Use it to help you fall asleep. I highly recommend this exercise, everyone can benefit from it.

(-In case you wonder, many people ask me the reason for keeping the tongue in that position. Yoga philosophy describes two 'nerve currents' in the human body, one positive, electric, and solar, the other negative, magnetic, and lunar. These begin and end at the tip of the tongue and the ridge behind the upper front teeth. Putting those structures in contact is supposed to complete a circuit, keeping the energy of the breath within instead of letting it dissipate. I don't know if there is any correlation between these ideas and Western concepts of physiology, but since Yogis have been doing this exercise for thousands of years, it seems worth following their instructions exactly.)