

Find Deep Relaxation with Three-Part Yoga Breathing

By Melissa "Mati" Elstein

When people hear the word "yoga," they probably envision yogis stretching their bodies in various physical yoga poses or seated cross-legged in the traditional lotus pose for meditation. However, there is an equally important practice of yoga called "pranayama," the practice of yoga breathing or breath control.

In the classical Hatha yoga tradition outlined in the ancient *Yoga Sutras* text by Patanjali, yoga is described as an eight-limbed path. The third limb is the yoga poses ("asanas" in Sanskrit), followed by the fourth limb, pranayama. (The other limbs include ethics, morality, behaviors and the meditative practices). Reading the *Yoga*

Sutras for the first time during my initial yoga teacher training was illuminating, as I learned that there was so much more to the practice of yoga than just the physical postures.

Many people believe they cannot do yoga because they are not flexible. Yet, when we learn that yoga involves more than doing stretches or standing on our heads, it makes yoga, and its benefits, accessible to everyone. And one of the most accessible and beneficial aspects of yoga is the three-part deep breathing ("deergha swassam" pranayama).

The Three-Part Breath is known for its calming effects on the nervous system. Practicing it can help to counter the fight-or-flight stress response that many of us experience due to daily stressors of modern city living, as well as work or family demands. It is a great tool we can use when we have a few free moments during the day, when we are feeling stressed, or at night before going to sleep. As Integral Yoga founder Swami Satchidananda writes in *The Breath of Life*, Three-Part Breathing can be practiced anytime during the day. This differs from most of the other yogic breathing practices, which should be done only after the yoga postures are performed. Therefore, once we learn it, Three-Part Breath-

ing has many practical applications.

So how do we practice Three-Part Breathing? It can be done either sitting or lying down. If you are seated on the floor, you may sit cross-legged using a cushion or pillow under the buttocks and perhaps pillows under the thighs to support the knees. If you have a meditation bench, you can kneel placing the buttocks on the support. Another option is to sit on a chair with the feet planted on the floor and the legs in line with the hip bones. It is important to not slouch. Instead, try to keep the spine lengthened and the chest widened.

If you are lying on the floor or in bed, it might be comfortable for you to place a pillow

or cushion under the knees to help support the lower back. If your chin tilts up toward the ceiling, place a little pillow under the head to prevent the neck from over-arching.

Whether you are lying down or seated, the next step is to gently place one

hand on the abdominal area and one hand on the middle of the chest—often called "the heart center" in yoga classes. Your eyes may be closed or open with a soft gaze.

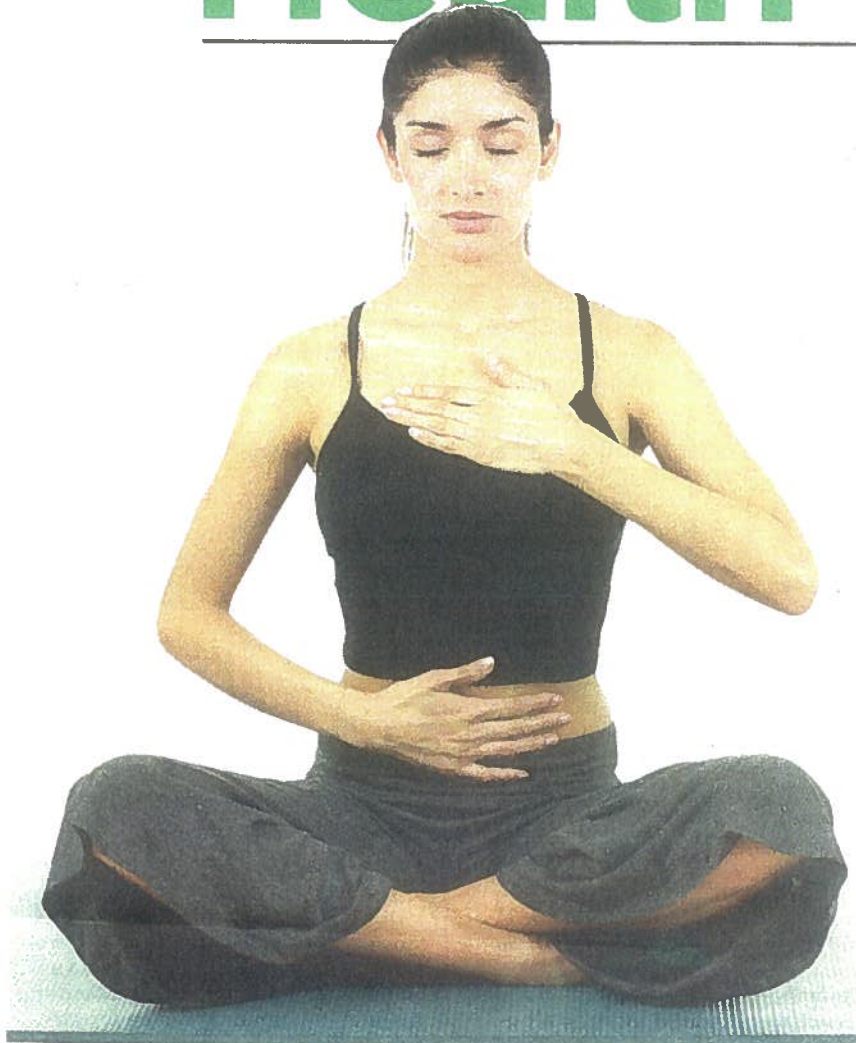
Begin by simply observing the movement of the breath in your body. Breathe in and out of the nose. Observe where you are feeling an expansion in the body as you inhale, and where you notice a softening or a releasing as you exhale. Continue this breath observation for a few minutes. You may notice that simply by bringing your mental awareness to your breathing that the breath may naturally start slowing down and deepening. This alone can be very relaxing; as we focus the mind on the rhythm of the breath, our thoughts are likely to slow down. And as Dr. Herbert Benson discusses in his now-classic book *The Relaxation Response*, beneficial physiological changes (such as lowered heart rate and blood pressure) occur when we meditate on the breath.

To begin the Three-Part Breathing, on your next inhalation, bring awareness to the hand on the abdomen and feel the belly rising. Next, shift your awareness to the ribcage area and observe the expansion in the side body. Third, bring awareness to the hand on the heart center and notice the chest lifting.

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Alternative

Health



Exhale, and reverse the movement of the breath in the body. Soften the chest, then relax the ribs, and finally bring the navel slightly in toward the spine to complete the three-part exhalation. As you continue to focus on the breath in this manner, and without any straining, see if you can deepen and lengthen the breath and slow down its natural rhythm.

Allow the inhalations and the exhalations to flow one right into the next—like a beautiful ocean wave receding into the ocean and then reaching the shoreline, and then returning back into the ocean. If you like using visualizations, you can envision yourself doing this breathwork in a beautiful place in nature, breathing in fresh, clean air.

After a few minutes, let the hands fall to the side and return breathing to normal. Observe the effects of the Three-Part Breathing. As you practice this breathwork, you can lengthen the practice time but always stay within moderation.

Some precautions: As with any of the yogic practices, if you feel discomfort, strain or dizziness, immediately stop the pranaya-

ma and return breath to normal. Do not practice pranayama right after eating, and for more advanced yoga breathing practices it is recommended to work directly with a teacher.

When you get more accustomed to the Three-Part Breath, try exploring sound by softly humming as you exhale. This is the Brahmari ("humming bee") pranayama. As with all the yogic practices, have an open, non-judgmental mind both during the breathwork as well as afterward when observing its effects on your body, mind and spirit. And most of all, enjoy the process!

Melissa "Mati" Elstein, founder of Good Energy Yoga & Reiki, teaches open yoga classes at Integral Yoga Institute and Upper West Side Yoga and Wellness Center, Tai Chi Easy and Qigong classes at Kinespirit and the Dorot Center, and her stress reduction seminar "Less Stress, More Peace" for corporations and organizations. For more information, see www.goodenergyyoga.com