

Breathing 102

Diaphragmatic Breathing in the Lower Body - How Low Can You Go?

After some practice the downward movement of the diaphragm can be experienced as a comfortable, long, slow movement. The diaphragm presses down to inhale and relaxes to exhale. Using the full movement a breath cycle of 30 seconds becomes possible - with almost no effort (15 sec to inhale, 15 sec to exhale).

As the diaphragm continues to press down, the 'wave' of the in-breath moves into and then through every part of the lower body: front, back, sides and pelvic floor. More space is created in the belly and the groin (called the *kwa* in Chinese martial arts). The breath may even start to challenge the tight holding that many people habitually hold in the pelvic floor (hence the expression 'tight-arsed' - a habitual residual tension in these deep muscles) and which affects all the organs in this area by cramping energy and vitality.

Diaphragmatic Breathing in the Upper Body - Without Invoking Anxiety

In the sympathetic (threatened/anxious/panic) energy state the body uses mainly the relatively weak secondary respiratory muscles, which attempt to lift and open the rib cage from above. The upward pull comes from many small muscles around the neck, jaw, collar bone, shoulders and shoulder blades. This style of breathing is the most common cause of pain and tightness in these areas - the muscles become overworked and exhausted. So how could there be a healthy breathing movement in the *upper* body?

The key point is that the rib cage can be lifted either *from the top* using secondary respiratory muscles - or *from the bottom* using the primary respiratory muscle. The upward and forward movement of the front of the chest might appear to be the same in each case, but there are big differences elsewhere.

If lifting the rib cage from the TOP, the neck, throat and collarbone muscles do the work. On each in-breath the movement is up at the front of the chest, but the shoulder blades are pressed together in the middle of the back, and the energy gateway in this area is jammed. The shoulders seem to move backwards.

If lifting from the BOTTOM of the rib cage, the diaphragm does all the work - and because it is possibly the strongest muscle in the body, the amount of effort feels much less. In this mode, the middle of the back WIDENS under the shoulder blades during each in-breath, and the rib cage feels like it expands evenly front and back. The shoulders tend to float forward slightly, the mid-back rounds, and a pleasant, spacious sensation arises between the shoulder blades.

Creating Length in the Spine

But wait - there's more! Imagine how - with each in-breath - the diaphragm presses DOWN on the pelvis (which is like a bowl) and UP on the rib cage (which is like an upside-down bowl). The only thing that keeps these two bowls from separating is the spine, which joins them together up the back. So the spine gets a nice stretch with each in-breath. This allows each inter-vertebral disc to relax, soften and absorb fluid, because it is unloaded for a moment at the peak of the in-breath. Those pesky tummy rolls also diminish!

You may feel yourself grow taller after a period of full abdominal breathing, as your breath momentarily supports all of your upper body weight before gently lowering it back onto your spine. The spine has a chance to relax as the diaphragm tightens and presses down, then they swap roles and the diaphragm relaxes while the spine carries the weight of the body. Feel the exchange between spine and diaphragm.

References:

The Breathing Book, Donna Farhi. Simon & Schuster, 2001

Opening the Energy Gates of Your Body - Chi Gung for Lifelong Health, Bruce Frantzis. Energy Arts Inc, 2006