

Breath Awareness

by Jean Bryne

The mother gives her breath and lets the other go; she gives the other life and autonomy. From the beginning, she passes on physical and metaphysical existence to the other.

(Luce Irigaray *Between East & West*)

Our breath is central to our being. As long as we are breathing, we are living. We can choose to become conscious and fully present in our lives, through becoming mindful of our breathing. The breath is the most fundamental tool for meditation and relaxation. Not matter what we are doing, our breath is always with us.

The forgetting of our breathing leads to a forgetting of the beauty, joy and richness of life. When we forget to breathe consciously we are caught up in the waves and fluctuations of thoughts in the mind. We can longer appreciate what it is to be present, to feel our breath, to take the time to appreciate the stillness at the core of our being.

The importance and power of becoming conscious of our breathing, of cultivating an intimate awareness of our breath, is not to be underestimated during pregnancy. ***Pregnancy is the only time when we may breathe for another.*** How we breathe effects our baby, when we breathe deeply and slowly with awareness our babies feel and hear the movement in our lungs, it becomes rhythmic and hypnotic for them.

Cultivating mindfulness of breathing also enables us to surrender to ***what is*** without needing to change what is occurring. We can learn to be present in each and every moment, and free our selves from fear and our habitual thought patterns. The cultivation of mindfulness of breath was taught by the Buddha, and it is one of the foundations of mindfulness training. It is a powerful tool for pregnant women to connect with the miracle of pregnancy, and can help women to birth with awareness.

During labour the most important breath is a steady breath. Previously women were encouraged to learn specific breathing techniques which they were then coached through during labour. Now it is more commonly accepted that a woman should breathe in a steady way that is comfortable to her.

A steady breath enables the nervous system to relax and also calms the baby during his or her passage out into the world. It is not important for women to practice special breathing techniques for labour which they then rehearse during pregnancy. However I have found it useful to count women through simple pranayama practices in order to allow the in and out breath to become even and to practice exhaling long and slow. Often during a contraction there is a quick inhalation, and rather than exhaling quickly

and aggravating their nervous system, I teach women to exhale for twice as long as the inhalation in order to practice coping and surrendering to contractions.

Exercises:

(there should never be any sense of dizziness while doing this, if there is stop)

(A) INHALE one two three, EXHALE one two three

This breathing technique is also known as samma vritti pranayam and is a steadying and calming breath for the mind and nervous system

(B) INHALE one, two EXHALE one, two three, four.

This breathing technique enables women to prepare for using their breath during contractions. Inhaling and exhaling at a ratio of 1:2. The sharp inhalation reflects the strong and sometimes sharp nature of the contraction, whereas the twice as long exhalation enables her to surrender, relax and let go on the downside of the contraction.

Jean Byrne

Jean is an Authorised Ashtanga Yoga teacher (AYRI, Mysore, India) and runs The Yoga Space in Perth Australia. As a Senior Member of the Yoga Teachers Association of Australia, she specialises in yoga for pregnancy, birth and beyond and trains pre & post-natal yoga instructors. Jean is completing a PhD exploring the intersection of women's spirituality, non-duality and yoga and is co-editor of *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge 2008).