The Joy of Breathing!

By Kate Kellman, MMQ

Most of my life, I took breathing for granted, as most people do. Not until I watched my mother struggling with COPD and heart failure, fighting for every breath, did I come to appreciate the miracle of breathing. When I began my Medical Qigong training, it was the first thing we learned – a technique called Six-Directional Breath. Yet, like most people, I was resistant to changing ingrained habits. Control the breath? Huh?? For someone who’d experienced more than her share of control by others, my inner rebel screamed at the mere thought!

My intelligent mind could fully grasp the many benefits of consistent breath work. 6D Breath massages the internal organs, calms down the Central Nervous System and vagus nerve, inhibits “fight or flight” mode, reducing stress and keeping us centered instead of freaking out all the time. I fully understood *why* it was so important to breathe properly. Unfortunately, the subliminal messages from my mind totally squashed any true attempts I made to mend my ways. Those voices kept whispering in my ear: “*Just another thing you should do, Kate, like eating healthy or getting more exercise or washing the car more than twice a year.”*

A funny thing happened, though. The more the idea was hammered into me, the more failed attempts I mustered, the more I realized a disturbing concept – I actually *did* feel better when I worked on my breath! It was the same masochistic way I’d learned to eat right. Growing up, my diet was horrible, as was the case with most kids in the 60s and 70s. Back then, no one knew any better. Sugar, starch, junk food with every preservative invented by man – it was what we lived on, aside from the meat, potatoes and vegetable dinner we were forced to consume once a day. When healthy eating became the fad, I gave it a go and discovered how much better my whole body felt when I stoked my engine with the proper fuel. Years later, I finally gave up all the crap because I could no longer deny the results. I was tired of punishing my body with unhealthy nutrition. In a similar way, that’s how I started to appreciate my breath – I could *feel* the difference.

When I finally found my own rhythm, using both 6D breath (see Dr. Ted Cibik’s YouTube video for detailed instructions) and a method I learned called the Alexander Technique and the Whispered Ah (see [www.constructiverest.com](http://www.constructiverest.com) for more details), I was amazed at how much I actually enjoyed breathing! More importantly, I discovered how much it soothed my soul, calmed my mind, and relaxed my body. At first, I only remembered to do it when I was stressed, getting that familiar knot in my belly. “*Breathe!”* I scolded myself. “*Just breathe!!”* After a while, my masochistic tendencies abated, and I found myself doing it more and more often – just for fun! I truly enjoyed working with my breath. Finally.

Why was I so resistant? Like most of us, I believe it relates to an inability to embrace our freedom. Society puts so many demands on us to be a certain way, to fit in, to follow a prescribed program of how we ought to be that we forget our inherent birthright. I remember a friend telling me she needed physical therapy because she never raises her arms over her head. I was shocked. Personally, I love to stretch like a kitty cat in bed when I first wake up. Yet, how often do we repress our natural instincts? It’s not usually considered cool to run around laughing like a hyena during a rainstorm. Or to sob openly when we’re sad. Our repressed emotions carry into our body movements. So, not taking the time or effort to breathe properly in our harried, hectic, busy world is not so surprising.

Once I gave myself permission to fully relax through my breath, I began to play with all the various ways of breathing. I remembered a quote from the Hua Hu Ching: “Drinking in serenity, breathing out contentment.” I gave it a whirl, feeling serene on the inhale and content on the exhale. Wow. That felt delicious! I played with the Whispered Ah. Following the advice of a friend who is well versed in this method, I inhaled through my nose about 70% (much less strenuous, so you stay relaxed). I paused, just waiting, enjoying the stillness. Then, when I felt ready, I opened my mouth to form a circle and whispered “Ahhhhh,” relaxing my jaw fully. Then, I waited again. It felt so good to be in that “space between” where the Taoist Masters say we experience the Tao or Heaven. I waited until another breath wanted to come, of its own free will. Then, I did it again. Wow. Where had this been all my life?? Why had I fought it for so long??? *This really felt good!!!*

I found myself wanting to play with my breath more and more. Instead of seeing it as a chore, a burden, another “should do” in the many requirements of life, I started to appreciate my breath. I wondered what it would be like to be in my Mom’s shoes, huffing and breathless on a muggy day. Or, to be an asthmatic during an attack, feeling like my mouth and one nostril is covered with duct tape as I run up 20 flights of stairs. How wonderful that I *can* breathe, I told myself humbly. The Taoists believe staying calm and centered, through our breath, controls the Po or our negative, earthly side and that deep breathing increases longevity. Doctors say it reduces blood pressure and relieves stress. Me? I say I am finally enjoying life through the miracle of simply breathing!

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*\*To be published in the Healing Springs Journal, (Issue #92 / June, 2017 – July, 2017), Saratoga Springs, NY. www.healingspringsjournal.com*