

Diaphragmatic Breathing

The Practice

By Rolf Sovik, Psy.D

Breathing in Crocodile Pose



The best posture for sensing the flow of the breath is the crocodile pose. When you are lying prone on your stomach, with arms folded at about a 45 degree angle above your shoulders, your body will naturally begin to breathe diaphragmatically. Use the crocodile pose to counteract the normal abdominal tension that arises whenever you are nervous. It will automatically get you started toward a more natural breathing style. Even advanced students find tension in the abdomen by the end of the day. The crocodile pose offers a chance to unblock the breath and release pent-up tension.

There are several versions of the crocodile pose, each helpful and each designed to accommodate different body types and different levels of flexibility. You may turn your feet in, with legs resting relatively close together, or turn them out, separating the legs until the inner thighs rest comfortably on the floor. Rest your forehead on your folded forearms, elevating the upper chest slightly off of the floor. If your shoulders or arms are uncomfortable, you may prop your upper body with a cushion or a blanket (drape your chin over the cushion). You may also widen the elbows and partially open the forearms allowing the hands to separate. In all cases, the abdomen rests on the floor.

As you rest in the pose, relax your breathing and begin to observe the movements of your body. There are three main observation points: the abdomen, sides of the rib cage, and the lower back. Practice the following exercise to bring each of them to awareness.

First, feel the ceaseless movement of your breath as it flows out and in. The breath will find it's own pace, and even if you believe the speed to be too fast or too slow, you don't need to control it, simply let your body breathe.

Now bring your awareness to your abdomen and feel how it presses against the floor as you inhale and recedes (although remaining in contact with the floor) as you exhale. Relax the muscles in your belly, and let these movements of the abdomen become deep and soothing.

Now shift your attention to the sides of the rib cage. You'll find that the low ribs expand laterally with the inhalation and contract with the exhalation. The ribcage expands as the diaphragm contracts, and the ribs return inward as the diaphragm relaxes.

Finally, shift your attention to your lower back. Notice that as you inhale, the back rises, and as you exhale, the back falls. Soften your back muscles and allow the breath to flow without resistance. This is a particularly relaxing sensation, and you may find that it helps relieve lower back tension that is otherwise difficult to release.

To deepen the breath even further, try the following experiment. At the end of the exhalation, breathe out a little more than usual by continuing to press the abdomen toward the spine. Then, as you slowly inhale, soften the muscles of the lower back and abdomen, and let the back rise and expand. You may feel as if the lower back is being stretched by the

deep inhalation. Repeat the extra exhalation and the expanded inhalation for three to five breaths, until you become accustomed to the feeling of the deep inhalation. Then return to your normal exhalation and continue to let the lower back expand as you inhale. Your breath will feel slower and deeper.

Feel the breath around the entire periphery of your midsection: front, sides, and back. Your breathing will become extremely relaxed. When you are refreshed, come out of the posture slowly, creating a smooth transition back to normal breathing.

Breathing in Relaxation Pose



A simple version of diaphragmatic breathing is accomplished in shavasana (relaxation pose). In this posture, the navel region rises with each inhalation and falls with each exhalation. To experience this, try the following exercise:

Lie on your back on a flat carpeted surface. Support your head and neck with a thin cushion.

Bring your awareness to your breath and feel the continuous flow of exhalations and inhalations.

Soften the rib cage and it will become almost completely motionless (of course, if you breathe more deeply, you can make the ribcage move, but this takes more effort and misses the point of the exercise).

Next, explore the respiratory movements further by raising your arms to the carpet over your head. This will accentuate the rise and fall of the abdomen.

Finally, return your arms to your sides and observe your breathing for a number of minutes, allowing your body to relax.

Sitting Up to Breathe



When you sit erect, the movements of breathing will no longer feel the same as when you were lying on your back. Breathing is still diaphragmatic, but the vertical axis of the body changes the effect of the diaphragm's action on the lower torso. You can easily feel this.

Sit erect in any seated pose (sitting on a flat seated chair will do fine).

Rest your hands in your lap. Close your eyes and turn your attention to the flow of exhalations and inhalations.

Soften the abdomen and sides of the rib cage. Let the muscles of the back support your posture with only modest muscle tone.

Now notice how, if you let it, your breathing results in a quiet expansion of the sides of the rib cage. The front wall of the abdomen also expands, but the movement is much less than it was in shavasana.

Continue observing the breath until it's pace and depth feel absolutely comfortable and relaxed (your breathing will be a little faster and will feel higher in the torso than it does lying down). As you observe each inhalation and exhalation, let your mind relax.

The Payoff

The rewards of this training are quite remarkable. You will find that you have a tool to maintain your equilibrium in situations where you used to become tense and uncomfortable. Your everyday level of internal tension will lessen, allowing you to move your body and concentrate your mind with greater ease. As you continue on the path of yoga, diaphragmatic breathing will serve as a foundation for many other practices. And when fears seem overwhelming in the course of daily living, you will have an internal friend to comfort your mind. All in all, as you improve the quality of your breathing, you will improve the quality of your life.

Rolf Sovik, Psy.D., holds a doctorate in clinical psychology. His doctoral project examined the effects of breath training in the treatment of panic disorder. He is the president of the [Himalayan Institute](http://www.himalayaninstitute.org), and serves as the director of the Institute's branch center in Buffalo, New York.

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