

Chapter 1: The Breath

The Breath is the key to all sounds we create using our voice. Correct breathing techniques will give a singer greater dynamic control and power of the voice.

Without our breath, there can be no sound.

Breath is the essence of life, for without our breath, we would have no life. In many different traditions, the life energy inherent in breath is considered sacred.

This energy is called "*prana*" in the Hindu traditions.

In the Orient it is called "*Chi*" or "*Ki*".

The Hebrew word for breath is "*Ruach*" which is the same as the Hebrew word for "spirit".

Even within our own Western bibles are written the 'Word' or life giving "Breath of God".

There are many different theories on the proper way to breathe; whether the breath should be taken in through the nose or the mouth.

Inhale the way that is most comfortable for you.

However, you should also pay close attention to your posture, by being relaxed and keeping your spine as straight as possible, whether in a sitting or standing posture.

This will make it easier to take deep breaths.

I often sing sitting in a half lotus or standing in the base posture taught to me by Sifu Anthony Wee.

Base Posture: Stand with the feet parallel, around a shoulder width apart with the knees slightly bent. Place your weight 60% on the toes and 40% on the heels. Tuck your bottom down just enough to make your spine very straight. Feel a strong connection to the earth through your feet as you inhale into the diaphragm area. Relax your entire upper body as if it was floating upward straightening your spine.

I find from this base posture I can breath easier and move into other postures or dance styles, while I sing.

Sitting Posture: Sit comfortably on a cushion with your legs crossed.

You may have your feet in half or full lotus position, (these are postures used in Yoga).

You may sit however feels most comfortable as long as your spine is kept as straight as possible by using strong diaphragmatic breathing, (or breathes in to your stomach area.)

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While there are different theories in the way to make an in-breath, there seems to be a universal agreement that the breath should go

down to the diaphragm first.

There are many reasons for this, including the fact that you can inhale with up to **twenty percent** more lung capacity, by breathing into this region first.

The diaphragm is located at the bottom of the lungs above the stomach, just above your naval. Refer to the picture on the opposite page.

Take a deep breath now and observe your body.

If your lower rib cage and stomach are expanding when you take this breath, you are doing diaphragmatic breathing.

However if you notice your shoulders and chest rising and the stomach and lower ribs are not moving, you are not breathing from the diaphragm. You could also be very tense.

By breathing into the diaphragm first, it allows us to take much more air deeply into the lungs.

It can also be much easier to do than other breathing, which only uses our upper lungs.

Breathing into the lower abdominal area not only lowers the blood pressure but creates a balanced and relaxed perspective useful in all life situations. Diaphragmatic breathing expands our lung capacity and enhances the life energy we take into ourselves.

This breathing is natural.

Have you ever noticed how a new born baby breaths, and how they can make such a loud sound? They naturally use their diaphragm.

To learn to use your diaphragm when you breathe, simply focus your intention on bringing the air down to the bottom of your lungs.

At first, you may consciously have to physically expand your rib cage and your stomach area.

Most of the time it will help to lie on your back and put your hands on your diaphragm.

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When you take a breath in, feel the area above your stomach expand, and allow the air to fill the diaphragm.

Hold that breath for a few seconds and feel the area contract as the air is expelled from your lungs.

You can even push out the diaphragm muscle as you breathe in, and contract it as you breathe out.

Feel how you can control the breath by breathing with the diaphragm.

Be aware of your shoulders so that they don't rise and fall with the breath.

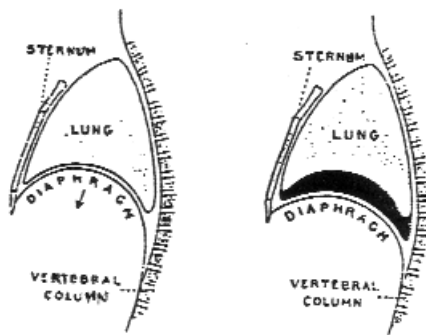
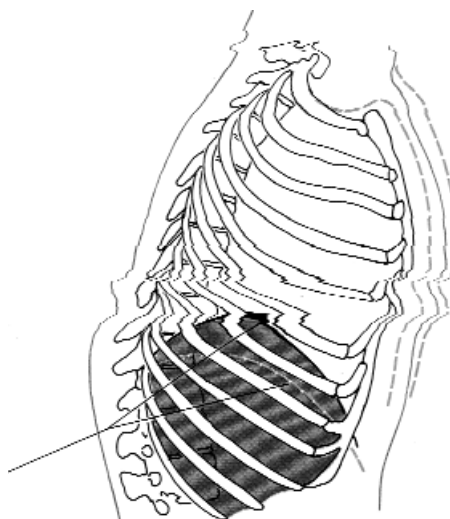
Many people have learned incorrect breathing techniques and will raise their shoulders in anticipation of using the upper lungs.

You can easily unlearn this habit.

You will find that taking a diaphragmatic breath is a relaxed and easy thing to do.

It will increase the amount of breath you take in, and enhance the energy you put into your body and singing voice.

The purple area in the lower part of the rib cage is the Diaphragm.



Breathing Exercises

Exercise 1:

Lie on your back, place your hands on your belly.
Rhythmically count and breathe consistently in time to a clock or metronome.
Breathe in through the nose for 3 seconds.....Hold for 3...
Blow out through the mouth for 3...
Continue for several minutes or as long as possible
Then try to increase the in and out breaths to 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, & 10 seconds
This will help to increase your lung capacity, and it will strengthen the diaphragm.

Exercise 2:

Lie on your back with your feet slightly raised.
Place your hands on your lower rib cage.
Take a deep breath in (to the count of 3), then slowly release a long controlled exhalation through the nose.
Repeat several times.

Exercise 3:

Lie or sit with your spine straight.
Breathe into the diaphragm for 3 seconds, hold for 1 or 2 counts, then exhale for 6 seconds.
Repeat for a minimum of 5 minutes.

Exercise 4:

Sitting or standing with your spine straight and place your hands on your lower abdominal region.
Take three short breaths down to the diaphragm each with a second pause between them.
Feel the outward extension of the lower ribs.
Then exhale three breaths, each with a second pause between them.
Repeat this several times feeling a deeper control of the breath through the use of the diaphragm.
Check that there is no upward shoulder movement.

Any of these exercises practiced 15min a day will encourage diaphragmatic breathing to become a natural part of every day life.
It will increase the lung capacity, lower blood pressure, and make you feel relaxed.

To increase difficulty and strengthen the diaphragm muscle, try placing a book or two on your stomach whilst practicing the lying down exercises.

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Exercise 5:

Repeat the deep breathing and exhale on a sustained `MMM` sound of comfortable pitch. You should feel your lips vibrate creating a “ticklish” sensation.

Exercise 6:

Repeat the diaphragm breathing and exhale on a softly articulated `SSS` sound. See how long you can take to complete the exhalation. when your breath control is secure you should be able to do this for 45 seconds without strain.



The Quick Breath

When we are singing, there is not always enough time to take long breaths in, in fact sometimes, we have to breathe in an almost unnoticeable fashion.

So I have developed what I call The Quick Breath.

To do this, simply breathe in through the **mouth** (you can get more air in quicker there because its a bigger space than the nose and the air does not have to travel up and down the sinuses) as if you were yawning. The yawn position creates more space for the air to travel down the throat.

As you do this, physically push out the diaphragm muscle.

This will create a suction down and instantly fill the lungs with plenty of air.

Try to inhale with as little noise as possible in a relaxed manor.

Sometimes when using a quick breath, you may feel like you haven't actually received a lot of air into the lungs, when actually you have.

It is just that the air is full in the diaphragm and not in the upper lungs where most people are used to feeling a good deep breath. It is also more of a “top up “ breath than a good deep breath that fills the entire lungs.

It takes a little practice to get used to the feeling of breathing in this manor and know that that there is plenty of air in the lungs.

This type of breathing comes in extremely handy when we sing repetitious scales or melodies with long phrasing.

Our Instrument Is Our Body

It is very important to be relaxed and let go of all tension as we move through all the breathing and vocal exercises when we sing.

Correct breathing immensely helps this, especially those nerves when we are performing or competing in a competition.

Sometimes it is good to physically warm up the body before and during singing. Particularly the face, neck, shoulders, and arms.

Massage your face especially in and around your jaw line and up to your ears.

Give your neck a rub or pat and then shake out the arms in a twisting manor. Roll your shoulders using your breath to set your pace.

You could also move the mouth to its extremes from wide to small or like a cow chews around with a flat jaw one way and then the other.

Or just do a big yawn and stretch the whole body into it.

Take a big breath in and on the exhalation groan an Ah sound.

Jogging and swimming are two of the best forms of exercise that help to increase the lungs capacity.

Personally I like to do regular Yoga (stretching and deep breathing), Pilates, as well as sound meditation to help my breath control.

As our instrument is our body, we have to consider the effects that life's experiences have on our voice. Smoking, drinking coffee or lack of sleep are some things that may dry out, weaken and irritate the vocal chords and the physical body. A singer needs to maintain their body in good condition so that the singing voice can be at its optimum potential. A good diet with plenty of water and regular exercise will assist in a singers development.

There are many ways to warm up, stretch and release tension in the physical body and all are recommended and help the aspiring singer.



Soul and Heart Breathing

Once you have mastered the art of breathing down into the diaphragm first, you can then begin to move the air up into the heart area (upper lungs) as well.

The diaphragm is situated above the navel at the lower rib cage, around our Solar plexus area (refer to Chapter 5 for an explanation of Chakras), a place where we humans receive and give a lot of energy and feelings from.

Breathing into this area will strengthen and balance our emotions, our spirit and our soul.

When we sing from this area we connect with the raw energy of many experiences we have had making the songs strong, dynamic and powerful. However it is important to also connect with our heart as we sing to give our song a lightness of tone, enjoyment, happiness, and contentment of the sounds we are making now.

This can be achieved by allowing the breath to flow up from the solar plexus/diaphragm and into the heart as we breath and sing.

This has led me to an exercise I call Soul and Heart Breathing.

1. Breathe deeply into the diaphragm.

Continue to inhale and focus your intention on raising the breath into the heart area.

There is some slight chest movement, but take care not to raise the shoulders other than in the natural movement of the body's breath from the diaphragm to the chest (heart/upper lungs) area.

Notice how the air ripples up the body.

Exhale firstly from the heart area and allow the breath to return to the centre (diaphragm area).

Continue to exhale squeezing the diaphragm till there is no air left.

Repeat this exercise with long inhalations and exhalations.

2. I learned a similar exercise when I was studying Chi Kung Breathing with Sifu Anthony Wee.

Standing in the Base Posture begin to breath exactly as in the exercise above.

Allow the hands to float up with the breath, palms facing inward, and slightly upward, from the soul to the heart area.

On a slight pause rotate the hands towards the earth.

As you exhale, allow the hands to float down the body towards the earth.

On a slight pause rotate the hands to resume an inhalation and repeat exercise several times.

This exercise will balance and centre you and begin to teach you how you can move the breath and "Chi" energy up and down the body.

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Something the Sifu once said to me that is very important, is that our breath must be **optimum not maximum**. Our breath is our internal life energy force, and is a lot more powerful than many might imagine.

I remember one of my first Chi Kung classes and I was breathing very strong and deeply into my diaphragm, when I fainted and fell over. The Master caught me and I had to sit out the rest of class. That night I had a fever and was very sick, the next day I was fine.

It is also very important to have a good, clear focus of intent when breathing into this region.

This begins to develop as we count the breath in a rhythmic manor, which will soon become automatic and very relaxed, like all the vocal exercises.

In Chi Kung the focus is for meditation and healing.

When we sing songs, we are focussed on performing, enjoying the music and delivering the message that the song may bring.

The use of singing and chanting for healing purposes has only recently been scientifically studied. However many ancient cultures have used the voice as a healing tool for thousands of years. If you are interested in learning more about using the singing voice as a healing tool check out...

The Sound Foundation at www.sacredsound.com

...a sound network that runs classes and workshops all over the world.

Diaphragmatic breathing is the key to good vocal technique.

This tool gives a singer greater dynamic control and power of the voice, whilst minimizing strain.

Something that I say to all of my students is that...

“Its always about having more breath to pull off that fancy note, phrase, or challenging song, and I am still learning to use my breath in a strong and powerful way to achieve my own highest standard.”

The diaphragm breath also relaxes the entire body, especially the areas in and around the vocal chords in preparation for singing.