

360-Degree Belly Breathing with Jamie McHugh

"The usual psychodynamic foundation for the self experience is that of hunger, not breath. The body is experienced as an alien entity, that has to be kept satisfied, the way an anxious mother might experience a new baby. When awareness is shifted from appetite to breath, the anxieties about not being enough are automatically attenuated. It requires a settling down or relaxing into one's own body. When this fluidity moves to the forefront of awareness...there is a relaxation of the tensed self...and the emergence of a simpler, breath-based self that is capable of surrender to the moment." - Mark Epstein¹

The intention for this handout is to create an initial context for the practice of **360 Degree Breathing**, with its focus on accessing and expressing the movement of the breath in all three dimensions. This is the basis for all subsequent somatic explorations within the **Embodied Mindfulness** protocol, a body-based approach to traditional meditation practices I have developed over the past 20 years².

Embodied Mindfulness explores the inner landscape of the body with the essential somatic technologies of breath, vocalization, self-contact, stillness and subtle movement. Coupled with individual variations and experimentation, these practices over time become a reliable container for focusing and sustaining mental attention while pleurably cultivating bodily calm and clarity.

The Central Diaphragm

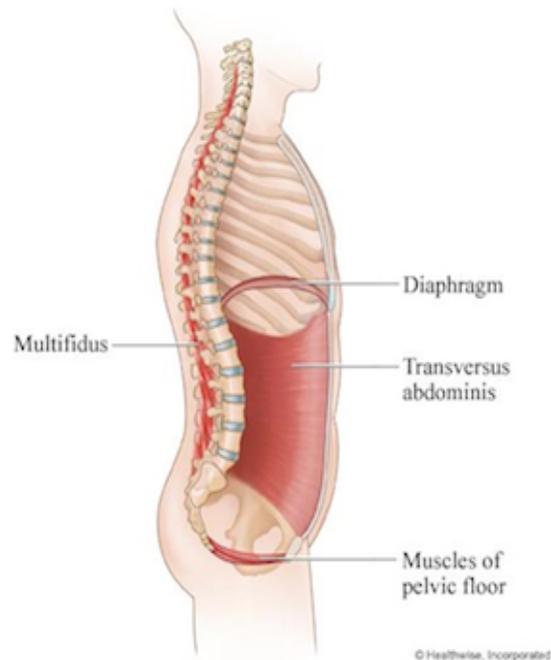
The central diaphragm, a dome-shaped muscular sheath that divides the thorax (chest) and the abdomen (belly), is the primary mechanism for breathing. It is the floor for your heart and lungs and the ceiling for your belly. The central diaphragm is a mostly impenetrable divide, with a few openings through it for the aorta, vena cava and the esophagus. Each time you inhale, the diaphragm contracts and flattens out a bit as it presses down towards your pelvis. Each time you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and floats back up towards your heart. The motion of the diaphragm impacts the barometric pressure in your chest: the downward movement of the diaphragm on the inhale pulls oxygen into your lungs, and the subsequent exhale expels carbon dioxide into the world as the diaphragm releases upwards.

The movement of the diaphragm is twofold: **involuntary** and **voluntary**. Breathing just automatically happens - you don't have to think about it. This is what I refer to as "ordinary, effortless breathing", our homebase and point of return. Breathing is also chosen and voluntary; you can change the tempo (quick and slow), range (small, medium or large) and quality (smooth and abrupt) of this movement to "charge up and chill out" at will. This fluctuation back and forth between the automatic and the chosen diaphragmatic action is one of the foundations of physiological and emotional "self-participation", where self-settling through attention to the inner sensory feedback of interoception and proprioception is paramount.

Watch these 2 brief videos to get a visual image of your diaphragm in motion:

<https://youtu.be/hp-gCvW8PRY>

<https://youtu.be/w1QyU9hyHRM>



Beginning Sitting Practice

“When your back becomes straight, your mind will become quiet.” – Shunryu Suzuki

What does it mean to have a “straight back”? What are the inner coordinates and outer parameters of this position in space? And what kind of environment is needed to support this uprightness? This simple orientation to sitting can create more comfort, ease and support in your structure, which will stimulate more fluidity in your breathing and your thinking. *Valuing and seeking bodily comfort and ease are simple yet profound acts of self-kindness.*

As you sit on a chair, begin with two points of focus for consideration: body and environment. Can I sit upright with ease and comfort on this chair? If not, what changes can I make with my body and how can I adapt the environment of this chair to meet my needs? Since we are all various heights, it is not surprising a one-size-fits-all chair would need adaptation. Don't be content with your first solution - experiment until you find just the right configuration.

Do you need to move your pelvis forward on the chair or back? If you move your pelvis back, do you

get the necessary support from the back of the chair for your pelvic bowl? If the back of the chair is too far away and/or makes you lean back into space, place a small cushion or two between the back of the chair and the base of your spine. With your back supported, are your feet on the floor? If not, place a folded blanket or a cushion under them.

With your pelvis and feet in place, take a few full breaths to stabilize your pelvis and let your weight drop down through your sitz bones into the chair. By lowering your center of gravity, the upper body receives more support from the core muscles of the lower body - you don't have to work so hard to maintain uprightness. Finally, rock on your sitz bones forward, backward and side-to-side. Movement awakens bodily feedback so you can feel where center is in this moment. That sense of center will continue to change throughout the duration of the practice period so feel free to periodically adjust your position.

Once you have found this initial orientation, the next step is the combination of breath and self-contact. Our diaphragm is a 360 degree phenomenon that stabilizes and mobilizes our sides and our back as well as our front. Becoming aware of the diaphragm's movement not only creates different patterns of muscular activation - it also changes the brain's map of the body and how we perceive ourselves. This change of orientation over time recalibrates our alignment and how we settle in ourselves, with awareness of our back in equal proportion to our front and sides.

We are not *ahead* of ourselves, nor are we *behind* ourselves; we are present and centered - literally, metaphorically, and even spiritually.

360-Degree Belly Breath

*"To stop your mind does not mean to stop the activities of the mind.
It means your mind pervades your whole body." – Shunryu Suzuki*

Sit comfortably and place your hands on the front of your belly. With each inhale, become aware of the forward movement of your belly swelling. Then, with each exhale, notice the release of your belly and the settling back to center. Give this action and each subsequent action at least 5-7 breath cycles. Intersperse this way of breathing with ordinary, effortless breathing by letting the body breathe automatically. Return time and again to ordinary breathing, letting go of the focus and the effort to rest in the aftermath.

Now, slide your hands to the sides of your belly. Notice with each breath cycle how your belly moves laterally out to the sides on the inhale and then settles back to center again on the exhale.

Now, slide your hands to the back of your belly. (You may wish to make contact with the back of your hands instead of your palms if it is more comfortable.) With each inhale, focus on the movement into the backspace - this will be much smaller than the movement to the front; and with each exhale, the movement settling back to center.

Finally, connect all three directions: your belly radiates out 360 degrees on the horizon with each inhale, simultaneously moving forward, backward, and out to both sides, and then settles inward with each exhale.

Finish with open awareness – scanning your whole inner landscape from feet to head, back to front, and center to extremities, and letting your body breathe itself, as you notice what is alive in you now.

Inhale – Belly Radiates Outwards; Exhale – Belly Settles Inwards

*“The belly is an extraordinary diagnostic instrument. It displays the armoring of the heart as a tension in the belly. Trying tightens the belly. Trying stimulates judgment. Hard belly is often judging belly. Observing the relative openness or closedness of the belly gives insight into when and how we are holding (on) to our pain. The deeper our relationship to the belly, the sooner we discover if we are holding in the mind or opening into the heart.”
– Steven Levine³*

The contact of your hands on your belly helps the mind pay attention to the subtle movement created by the inhale-exhale cycle of the diaphragm. This movement combination of tactility and interoception focusing on the belly shifts attention into our “second brain” (the enteric nervous system) and signals the mind it can rest. More pleasurable sensation is often accompanied by an emergent feeling of safety as you settle into sensing the rhythm of a slower, more even breath, creating a feedback loop between bodily/somatic ease and mental calm.

Naturally, there can be hiccups along the way so it is not all unicorns and rainbows! By giving the mind bodily tasks to accomplish, particularly in relationship to deepening and expanding the movement of the breath, we ease the self into a slower, more receptive state of being. Yet, in this receptive state of ease, whatever is in the background of awareness can arise and slip through the “border control”, sometimes taking us by surprise and causing distress.

Depending upon the nature of the information, there are layers of action strategies that can be progressively taken to modulate and buffer what arises:

Tether your awareness to the breath rhythm with hands on your belly to stay present as a witness.

Next step up: open your eyes softly and look around to orient in your present environment.

Further step up: breath flow, hands-on belly, eyes open a wee bit looking around, and adding simple movement, like rocking a bit in all directions or expressing an exhale as a sigh, a yawn or a hum.

Note: If you find your personal resources are insufficient, find a guide to work with one-on-one to discover your own individual path for increasing the “window of capacity”.

Above all, be gentle with yourself – take your time – cultivate your garden – and enjoy your breath!

1. Epstein, Mark - Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective (1995)
2. A more in-depth article about Embodied Mindfulness can be found here:
<http://www.somaticexpression.com/documents/FINAL.pdf>
3. Levine, Steven - Meditations (1991)