

The Calming Breath

Though breathing is often taken for granted your breath is quite literally your life. You could survive for days without food or water but without breath only for a few minutes. In the West, we are beginning to understand what Eastern civilizations have known for centuries – the simple act of conscious breathing can restore vitality and stimulate healing on all levels of the mind, body and spirit.

The long exhalation during the calming breath stimulates the longest nerve in your body called the vagus nerve. Though yogis and meditators have known about this for thousands of years Herbert Benson, a Harvard cardiologist, discovered that it was scientifically true and coined this discovery “the relaxation response”. In an article in Time magazine Dr Benson credited the ancient practice of meditation for already knowing what science had to prove.

You can practice the calming breath as part of your meditation or anytime you would like to bring more peace to your day. Noticing the pause at the end of the breath and the beginning of the new breath allows for a time of stillness, space and further relaxation.

You can do this practice sitting or lying down. Adjust the count making it comfortable for your body but keeping the exhalation slightly longer than the inhalation.

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position being mindful of your posture and relaxing your abdomen. Take a few breaths noticing the natural rhythm of your breathing without trying to change it in any way.

On the next inhalation, slowly start counting to yourself 1-2-3...gently retain the breath for a count of 1-2

Now slowly exhale for a count of 1-2-3-4... you are exhaling a little longer than the inhalation... before the next inhalation there is a pause as the breath is naturally retained... notice this stillness as you count 1-2

Begin your next inhalation... 1-2-3... a pause of stillness for 1-2... then the exhalation of 1-2-3-4... pause for 1-2... and begin the next inhalation.

Continue for another few breaths.

As you end this breathing exercise notice how your body is feeling, any sensations, any changes. Give gratitude to yourself for your practice.