

One Meditation #3, March 2025: **“Deep Breathing—The Incredible Sigh”** (Apr. 8, 2025)

Welcome to the third issue of One Meditation—one more meditation—and thank you for being part of it. Monthly subjects range from new to ancient, Western to Eastern, and scientific to spiritual. I’ve meditated and researched it for about 60 years and have graduate degrees in the field. My website is www.richardjewell.org. Thanks again for being here! – Richard

ONE MEDITATION #3 (updated), March 2025: DEEP BREATHING—THE INCREDIBLE SIGH

What is it about a really deep sigh? Sometimes it’s one of resignation; other times, happiness, peace, or even joy. The Secret of the Sigh is, perhaps, that it is a brief window into deep breathing.

When we breathe deeply, say hundreds of scientific and medical studies, we slow the rate of our heartbeat, lower blood pressure, and, state recent studies, may decrease anxiety. Thus science meets spirituality. Breath has been celebrated and recommended for thousands of years from earliest scriptures to contemporary spiritual and medical guides. A simple deep-breath sequence just requires 8+ seconds per cycle:

- Inhale deeply with chest and stomach for at least 4 seconds.
- Exhale deeply with chest and stomach for at least 4 seconds.
- Repeat.

Some basics: The “perfect” breath is about 10-12 seconds long and is typical worldwide in chanting, says James Nestor in *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*. He also details how regular inhaling through your mouth leads to ill health. Most experts suggest roughly the same number of seconds for inhaling and exhaling. Caution: don’t practice deep breathing while driving, until you’re used to it. And if you like to hold your breath for a few seconds, that’s okay: for example, popular “box breathing” uses three or four steps: inhale 3-4 seconds, hold for the same, exhale 3-4 (and, if you want, hold for a final 3-4).

Why is an 8-second full breath, above, a minimum? Normal breathing is shallow: about 3-4 seconds per full cycle, awake or asleep. But researcher Teruhisa Komori reports in *Mental Illness Journal*, “8 breaths per minute shifts the balance” to deeper calmness. This is about 8 seconds per breath. Komori describes how it activates one’s parasympathetic or “rest-and-digest” nervous system and its vagus nerve. Scientists say the parasympathetic slows our heartbeat, lowers blood pressure, creates damper eyes and nasal congestion, relaxes muscles, and activates digestion and elimination. It also encourages deeper awareness.

For slightly more advanced breathing, try yoga *pranayama* (“breath control”). On your out-breath, expel even more air by contracting all of your stomach and also the muscles at the base of your spine (in a “Kegel”). This process strengthens and energizes digestion and elimination systems.

How many times should you breathe deeply? In general, even a few great sighs can lower blood pressure. (Try it when you check your own.) Twenty deep breaths change your hour. And fifty (ten minutes) can uplift your morning, afternoon, or night. Try a Minute of Sighs, or take a “Breath Break” at work: no one will notice, and it will make you more mindfully effective.

Zen expert Thich Nhat Hanh says in several of his books that paying attention to your own breathing for half an hour is a wonderful method for learning mindfulness. In addition, mindful or meditative chanting, singing, yoga, tai chi, and spiritual dance involve deep breathing. Silent-meditation practices recommend it, too, as a starter for the first several minutes—or even as part of a complete meditation. I practice it for ten minutes or more at the beginning of each meditation session.

In many spiritual traditions, the word for “breath” is the same as for “spirit” or “life force.” In the West, it is the Hebrew *ruach*—or *ruhah* in the Aramaic of Jesus of Nazareth; *pneuma* in Greek; and *spiritus* in Latin. In the East, it is the Hindu *prana*, Chinese and Taoist *chi* or *qi*, and others.

In short, the act of taking deep breaths can lead to calm, awareness, and love. You can solve a trouble in daily life and improve inner awareness—all with Incredible Sighs.

Next Month: NOISY MEDITATING—WHY CHANT, HUM, OR SING?

Peace, Strength, Joy

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