

Suspending the Breath

Often instruction is given to just 'hold the breath.' This causes many students to lock the breath in, pull the chin in, tighten the neck and throat muscles, and stiffen the tongue. This homespun technique can create great pressure in the eyes, back of the skull, heart, and neck. Holding the breath in that way for longer than ten seconds stops the breath by creating an opposition between different muscle groups that power the breath.

This can be dangerous. Each time you do this improper technique, you train the subconscious to repeat the mistake when you are not fully alert.

Doing it Correctly

You can train the subconscious correctly, and it will serve you well even when you do not consciously direct the breath. To suspend the breath means to relax the muscles of the diaphragm, ribs, and abdomen that are responsible for the constant motion of the breath.

To suspend the breath on the inhale:

- Inhale deeply.
- Bring the attention to the clavicle and upper ribs. Lift the upper ribs slightly and fix them in place.
- Relax the shoulders, throat, and face.
- Pull the chin in.
- Become still and calm.
- If you feel the urge to exhale, inhale a tiny bit instead.

To suspend the breath on the exhale:

- Start with a complete exhale.
- Pull the navel point back toward the spine.
- Lift the lower chest and diaphragm.
- Let the upper ribs relax and compress.
- Do not bend the spine and ribs when you try to exhale completely— that would interrupt the action of the diaphragm.
- Pull the chin in.
- Become still and calm.
- If the muscles start a reflex to inhale, consciously exhale a little more. This can extend the length of suspension significantly without any strain or struggle.

Benefits of suspending the breath:

- The goal of suspending the breath is the gradual reconditioning of the nervous system.
- Breath suspension allows for integration of the body systems.
- Suspending the breath in can temporarily raise the blood pressure.
- Suspending the breath out lowers the blood pressure, relaxes circulation.
- Suspending the breath in impacts the sympathetic nervous system.
- Suspending the breath out impacts the parasympathetic nervous system.
- Suspending the breath allows for centering, and training in the use of good judgment under pressure.
- On the suspended breath you can experience *shuniya*—zero. Shuniya is a deep stillness, into which you can plant a seed—*bij*—to create a new rhythm or pattern of being. In shuniya the Kundalini flows.

Points to Remember when Suspending the Breath:

- Remember that the brain will trigger breathing in when the carbon dioxide (CO₂) level of the blood rises too high. It does not react to a loss or gain of oxygen. The cue is taken from the CO₂ level. If you prepare to suspend the breath by taking several complete exhales where you blow out the CO₂, you will hold the breath longer and with more comfort.
- If you begin to experience dizziness or disorientation, stop. Dizziness is not enlightenment. You must build this practice with determined regularity and patience. Pushing past your capacity will not help.
- Throughout the practice create a calm internal spot in your awareness and observe the changes of the body and mind.
- In all practices where the breath is suspended in or out, remember that the goal is a switch in metabolic activity, nervous system balance, or emotional control.