"Just breathe naturally," "take a deep breath," "be conscious of your breathing" – these are some of the very familiar pieces of advice that have become quite fashionable, especially for therapists in many diverse fields. But what do they really mean? How does one actually go about "breathing" the way he/she is advised? What are the basic mechanics of an effective breath?

As a classical singer and a voice teacher for decades, I know that just talking about the breath is far from being sufficient. Singers and voice students need to know how to accomplish a controlled breath that will actually affect their voice perceivably and positively. They need to be taught the actual mechanics of their vocal instrument, which is a wind instrument, which relies on manipulated air for the controlled breath to function well or otherwise.

As a fervent practitioner of Chi Kung, I am convinced that a sound breathing technique is universal, intercultural, and timeless. A good breathing technique should support and reinforce any major discipline and skill that anyone wishes to undertake, and in no way should such a breathing technique contradict with any healthy undertaking.
What is Natural Breathing?

Breathing correctly is natural, but breathing naturally is not always correct.

What does it really mean to be doing something naturally? A person who is accustomed to walking pigeon toed feels very natural with the way he/she walks. A person who is accustomed to wearing a frown does it unknowingly. A habitual shallow breather inhales and exhales shallowly without hesitation. To these three people, they are doing their things naturally. Therefore, to suggest or insist that everyone should "just breathe naturally" can indeed be confusing and misguiding.

What is a deep breath? Attempting to suck in as much air as you are able with all your might will not necessarily produce a "deep breath."

To simply be conscious of your breathing doesn’t do much, unless you understand the how-to of correct, effective breathing, and have the understanding to differentiate between abdominal deep breathing and shallow chest breathing.

What is abdominal deep breathing? It is allowing your abdomen to participate in one of your most important activities – this act of breathing, which you perform every moment of your life.

To breathe correctly, you must think of your lungs as a relaxed container for air and the abdomen as the pump that draws air into the lungs.

The diaphragm is the sheet of muscle that separates the lung cavity from the abdominal cavity. When you inhale correctly, your lower circumference, which encompasses your lower abdomen, lower back and sides, should expand outward, causing your diaphragm to lower. This allows the lungs to elongate like an accordion held sideways, drawing in air freely and deeply. Shallow breathers incorrectly pull in
their stomachs and tighten their lower back muscles as they inhale, causing the diaphragm to push upward, resisting the current of inhaled air, and decreasing their lung capacity. Another type of shallow breather constantly hold in their abdomen, causing constant rigidity of the lower back, which often brings on lower back pain.

**Exercise 1. Are you a shallow breather?**

To find out if you are a shallow breather, try this simple test: put your palms against your lower abdomen, and blow out all the air. Now, take a big breath and monitor. If your abdomen expands on inhalation and air seems to flow in deeply to the pit of your stomach, you are on the right track. However, if your lower abdomen expands when you exhale, and compresses when you inhale, you are a shallow breather.

Physical posture and physical texture both greatly affect breathing. In other words, if you have perfect posture and are as stiff as a marble statue, proper breathing is not possible. We need to texture our bodies so that they are flexible, soft and supple. A good, relaxed posture brings about a more receptive container into which air can flow deeply and fully into the depth of our bodies, our center core. We know that inhaled air does not actually flow into our abdomens, but it is the sensation that counts.

**Exercise 2. Correct Breathing**
1. In a sitting position, all muscles, especially those of the legs, are more relaxed. In this position you can readily focus your attention on the abdominal muscles.
2. Sitting straight is important in order to form a right angle at the torso-buttocks junction. This position gives the lower abdominal area a maximum spread upward, which in turn allow greater breath capacity.
3. Sit up straight in a chair with your feet on the floor 6 to 7 inches apart. If the feet are too close together, the lower front abdominal muscle is restricted; if they are too far apart, the tailbone tends to stick out, resulting in a swayback that restricts the lower back muscles.
4. Place your hands against the lower abdominal wall with your palms inward, fingertips not quite meeting.
5. Place the tip of your tongue behind your bottom front teeth. Exhale through your mouth by blowing gently through slightly pursed lips to a slow count of 1-2-3-4-5. Begin the exhalation from the abdomen, simultaneously deflating the abdominal wall and adding inward pressure from the fingertips. On the sixth count, exert extra pressure to deflate the abdomen completely.
6. Place the tip of your tongue against the back of your top front teeth. Inhale through your nose as you create a yawning sensation in the back of the nose and throat to a slow count of 1-2-3-4-5-6. At the same time, expand the lower abdominal wall outward. On the seventh count, give the lower abdominal wall an extra push outward with an emphatic intake of breath to reach maximum expansion.
7. Without pausing, repeat the exhale-inhale sequence three times.
8. If you have never attempted to control your breathing before, you may feel slightly dizzy at this time. Don't be alarmed. Just relax for a few minutes before going on to the next exercise. (This is Exercise-1A, the first of a course of progressive exercises, quoted from my book "The Art of Breathing.")
Breathing and the Core

Once you have learned to breathe correctly, the act of breathing can supply you with ample oxygen, as well as generate an inner vital energy (chi), which can be directed and channeled to any part of the body at will for healing and self-empowerment. Compressing and expanding our lower abdomen with every exhalation and inhalation stimulates our core, thereby nurturing a center for our mental and physical stability.

Chi Kung is an ancient Chinese discipline of utilizing the breath in coordination with appropriate movements and meditation to cultivate and harness chi energy for personal power and healing. In Chi Kung practice, "Chi" represents the very basic vital energy of mankind and the universe. Chi is vital to our wellbeing and for sustaining all human activities. Without chi, a person dies. In Chi Kung, the "dan-tien," which I frequently refer to as the "core," is the seat as well as the generator of chi energy.

Exercise 3. The Lotus

Imagine a large lotus blossom within your lower abdomen. As you inhale, the blossom gently and gradually opens, blossoming fully within. As you exhale, the lotus closes steadily, bringing in all its petals and becoming a bud once again. Visualize the movements of the petals as being controlled at the center of the bud and not by each petal individually.
Like energy, the core is an abstract entity. It is a sensation of vitality situated a few inches below the navel. The entire body is coordinated from this center of balance. Compare this to the hub of a wheel where all the spokes come together, balance, and coordinate as a whole. All our body’s extremities and activities are coordinated and balanced at this energized supportive center. Our extremities can include any functional parts of our body such as our fingers, our feet, and even our tongue. It is when these parts are mentally and cellurally connected to the core that they can function with ease and versatility. The tongue can be looked upon as the thermostat that measures tension in the body. If the tongue is tense, the body cannot relax, and visa versa. In fact, the condition of our tongue indicates the condition of our wellbeing. Chinese herbalists (doctors) begin diagnosing a patient by first inspecting his/her tongue.

Recently, at a workshop I presented for a Parkinson's disease support group, I worked with an elderly gentleman whose hands have been trembling constantly for more than a decade. By leading him to breathe deeply toward his core, then leading him to focus his mind on controlling his hands at the core, he was able to stop the tremor. Of course it wasn't a permanent cure. He will need to work at the technique I showed him to reap long term results. I asked him to compare controlling his hand in the way he would fly a kite. One does not fly a kite by getting up in the sky and pushing it around. It is more effective to control the kite at the other end of the string, which he is holding onto while standing on solid ground, thus manipulating it with remote energy. The many people in the room that evening loudly applauded his accomplishment.

At various other workshops I have presented, it wasn’t infrequent that asthma sufferers spontaneously found relief as soon as they got the knack of abdominal breathing and were able to shift their attention of pumping for air with their lungs, to pumping with their abdomen. This
shift of control results in relaxing the bronchial tubes, throat, clavicular and chest muscles, allowing air to flow more freely.

Empowered Breathing

In a nutshell breathing correctly and drawing energy and control from the core can produce amazing results. It will help you reduce tension, improve sleep and promote healing. It will improve your voice, energy level, mood, physical grace, coordination, and sense of wellbeing. It will enhance virtually any endeavor you pursue be it in singing, athletics, theater, yoga, meditation, and more.

According to the principle of Chi Kung, chi is directed by the mind as we breathe deeply. We can lead chi to any location in the body by leading our awareness to that spot, especially as we exhale. To experience leading your chi, try this very basic imagery.

Exercise 4. Leading Chi

1. Imagine a shiny copper penny at the back of your navel.
2. Gradually move the penny backward an inch or so, then 2-3 inches downward. At this core location, spin the penny slowly and watch it glow. Mentally cause the penny to move easily towards your right hip, then lead it down to your knee, then down further towards your ankle, then towards your toes. Feel your toes warming with chi energy. Leave that penny where it is, and relocate your mind behind your navel where
you will mentally create another copper penny. Imagine the same movements with this one, leading it leftward and downward. Feel your left toes also warming up with chi.

3. Lead your mind back to the core location, and place your palm against your lower abdomen as you relaxed your entire body and mind.

We were all born with the natural instinct of breathing deeply. Watch a sleeping baby. Its stomach rises on inhalation and lowers on exhalation. As we go through life, we are influenced – by our peers, teachers, parents, even the media – to hold in our stomachs constantly, causing us to become shallow breathers. Relearning what we used to do as babies is simple. One of the worst habits many people acquire is lifting their shoulders on inhalation. People routinely recommend taking a big breath and then they demonstrate it visually – by lifting their shoulders. Remember that when you breathe correctly, the diaphragm should lower, allowing the lungs to elongate. Lifting your shoulders has the opposite effect, raising the diaphragm just as you are initiating a breath. This pushes against the flow of inhaled air, making every inhalation more laborious, using unnecessary effort with every breath. The persistent straining of shoulder breathing often develops into chronic aches and pains in the shoulder, neck and back, which may spread to other parts of the body.

You may have observed great classical singers, wind instrumentalists, and other "professional breathers" who sometimes during performances seem to lift their shoulders as they take a big breath. But if you observe more closely, you will notice that they first fully fill their lungs from the bottom upward, then add more air, maximizing their lung capacity at the top.

**Breathing and Pollution**
Many people have concerns about breathing deeply in metropolitan areas and thus inhaling polluted air. Keep in mind that breathing involves both inhaling and exhaling. Knowing how to exhale fully enables us to eliminate any stagnant air that may have collected in our lungs.

**Abdominal Breathing: the basic foundation for health**

I firmly believe that this fundamental abdominal deep breathing technique must be mastered as a basic foundation for healthy human existence. It is especially important for those with plans to venture into specialized disciplines that require specialized breath manipulation: for instance, panting for rebirthing or during natural childbirth, temporary reversal of abdominal breathing for certain forms of Chi Kung regimen, and suspended breathing for certain physical or mental disciplines. Without being equipped with a firm fundamental breathing technique where one can reflexively switch back from where ever he/she had taken off to, breathing-wise, how precarious or even scary such an unpredictable situation can be.

Let's exaggerate and compare the above breathing matter to the necessity of knowing how to walk confidently before embarking on tap dancing, ballet, or the intricate footwork required for excellence in various sports or other physical performances. In spite of mastering specialized footwork, we obviously need to have the capability to revert instantaneously and reflexively, from dancing, jumping or whatever stance, back to walking as ordinary humans. Otherwise, we might end up stuck as jumping kangaroos, skipping birds, or waddling penguins without knowing how to switch back to the ordinary human mode of walking firmly on two feet.
We begin life with the first breath, and end with the last. All those breaths in between are up to us individually to enhance and make the most of. The way we breathe affects the wellbeing of every fiber in us, and everything we think or feel or do. We breathe more than 20,000 times a day. If we can improve just a little with each breath, imagine the consequence this will have on this, our journey through life.


For more than thirty years, Nancy Zi gave voice lessons including intensive breathing techniques in her private studio as well as at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. It is her policy not to give private consultation on breathing exclusively on an one on one basis as she is neither a medical doctor nor a licensed therapist, taking into consideration that people with breathing problems may come from all walks of life and sometimes have precarious hidden physical afflictions. She does, however give breathing workshops in which her main aim is to instruct, encourage and help participants to become their own teacher on breathing. Her book The Art of Breathing and its companion video are effective tools and aid for working towards accomplishing individual endeavors whether they be in sports, singing, meditation, martial arts, healing, improving health, etc.