



UNLEASH YOUR POTENTIAL

Breathing into Resilience

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BBFYL: Skill #1: Circular Breathing





Benefits of Circular Breathing

We breathe every day. On average 12 times a minute, 720 times an hour, 17,280 times a day.

Rarely do you ever think about how you breathe or what could be different if you chose to breathe with more focus and intention.

A focus on breathing is part of almost all religions, ancient health practices and martial arts.

Yet clinical research [here](#) is showing again and again that breathing techniques are a huge benefit for a wide variety of situations.

In a landmark study explored the impact of circular breathing techniques, technically known as diaphragmatic breathing. The main benefit they explored were levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol is directly related to feelings of stress, anxiety

Studies demonstrate that learning control over how we breathe makes a significant positive impact on our health.



So, can you learn this? Absolutely.

Many of my clients and students learn this skill and how to apply it to everyday life within hours and days.

Making it “normal” takes longer, yet once you realize the benefits of this breathing style you will never forget it.



SCUBA and Circular Breathing

The process to attain a PADI scuba diving license includes the challenge to pay great attention to your breathing. When using a scuba, you are told not to breathe too fast (you run out of air quickly) or hold your breath (possibly suffer severe injury).

Knowing how to circular breathe makes all this so much easier. Why?



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First, by practicing circular breathing you are trained to understand the cycle of breathing.

Second, spending too much time at any stage is not “better”.

Third, though practice circular breathing becomes your new ‘normal’.



Circular Breathing, Step By Step

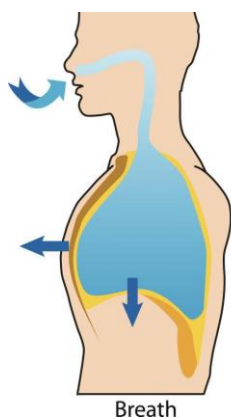
Inhalation Phase

I consider the start of a breathing cycle to be inhalation. Now you may choose to breath through your nose or mouth (both at the same time is tougher).

Most every source I have found that coaches breathing techniques recommends inhaling through your nose. Should you have health or medical reasons that prevent this – so be it.

In my experience breathing through your nose slows the inhalation. Mechanically it really should not be so different, yet it **feels** better when you inhale deeply through your nose.

As you inhale, it is crucial to let your tummy swell. What this does is allow your diaphragm to pull down. When your diaphragm pulls down, your lungs fill more deeply. ([Harvard Medical School](#)).



With circular breathing, the inhalation phase lasts for a count of 3 (slowly). As you inhale focus on pulling your diaphragm down by allowing your belly to push out.

Your breath should be gentle, slow and consistent.

The objective is to finish your inhale phase feeling there is no more room in your lungs for air.

Credit: [Medical News Today](#)



Inhale Hold Phase

Now, stop breathing in. Yet continue, very gently, the same motion of pulling your diaphragm down. Again, this is for a slow count of 3.

The inhale hold phase serves several purposes.

First, the air you just inhaled is rich with oxygen, at least when not at extreme altitude. By holding the inhale phase, you allow your lungs to ‘grab’ more oxygen and release more carbon dioxide to exhale. This extra oxygen flushes throughout your body and especially your brain.

Second, with extra oxygen reaching your brain and body, it allows for a lessening of the stress hormone cortisol. It also helps a range of other hormones, all adding up to improved relaxation. This good article on the [BBC website](#) references a wide array of research on the subject.

Third, as you practice over time you learn to be ok with the slight discomfort of holding your breath. By learning it is uncomfortable to hold your breath you become more aware of how often you hold your breath in daily life. Truly, we all do it to a greater or lesser extent. When we do, our stress levels increase.



Learning to become more comfortable in the inhale hold phase teaches you discipline, reduces stress, increases relaxation, and ultimately attunes you more to how you breathe when you are not thinking about it.

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Exhale Phase

After the 3 second inhale hold phase, many will feel a powerful urge to exhale strongly. That is, until you learn to control your breathing.

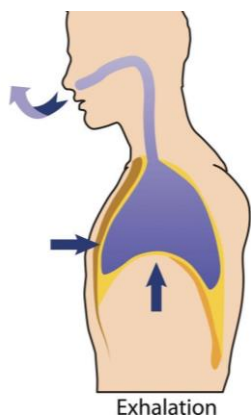
Our natural response after holding our breath is to exhale strongly and then inhale quickly. Circular breathing teaches us to take charge of that process rather than responding instinctively.

Instead, consciously think about how you will exhale.

First, exhale through your mouth, not your nose. Our objective by exhaling out our mouth is to try and empty our lungs as much as we can, without running out of air to exhale.

Second, do it **slowly**. Over time you will learn your lung capacity and be able to be running out of air to exhale just as the 3 seconds are up. This takes practice. Better to exhale too slowly than too fast. Don't want you passing out.

Third, focus on contracting your abdominal muscles or core to help squeeze out the last of the air in your lungs. This is done to flush out the carbon dioxide and leave more room when we inhale for oxygen rich air.



Like the inhale phase, our goal here is to learn the skill to time our breath to maximize this phase.

Learning to exhale fully like this may introduce you to something new ... using a full breath rather than “shoulder breathing” – lots of shallow breaths that bring less oxygen per breath.

Credit: [Medical News Today](#)



Exhale Hold Phase

Finally, we reach what some people call the most uncomfortable phase of circular breathing, the “exhale hold phase”.

Like each phase of circular breathing this lasts for a count of 3 as well. From experience I have felt and seen many others struggle to stay relaxed and composed for the full 3 seconds when they are new to the training.

For me, this phase serves many powerful lessons.

First, resisting the desire to inhale takes discipline, a strength that is both mental and physical. When you practice this enough, you have taught yourself that you can do things that take mental and physical discipline. Say for example, wearing a mask in public places when is uncomfortable and you do not necessarily want to. You can choose to have the needed discipline to continue, in part learned through circular breathing.

Second, this step strengthens your diaphragm. The diaphragm is a muscle. Holding a flexed muscle, like a bicep, helps makes it stronger. By resisting the urge to inhale briefly, you make your diaphragm stronger. This helps to pull in deep breaths when you need them.

Third, this is another way to train your mind to manage discomfort. We are surrounded by discomfort in daily life. What people say and do, that life does not always go the way we wish.



Learning the discipline of seeing, feeling, and not immediately reacting to discomfort delivers so many benefits. Mainly, you learn to become more intentional and less reactive.

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Circular Breathing Applied

In my practice, I coach executives on how to use circular breathing.

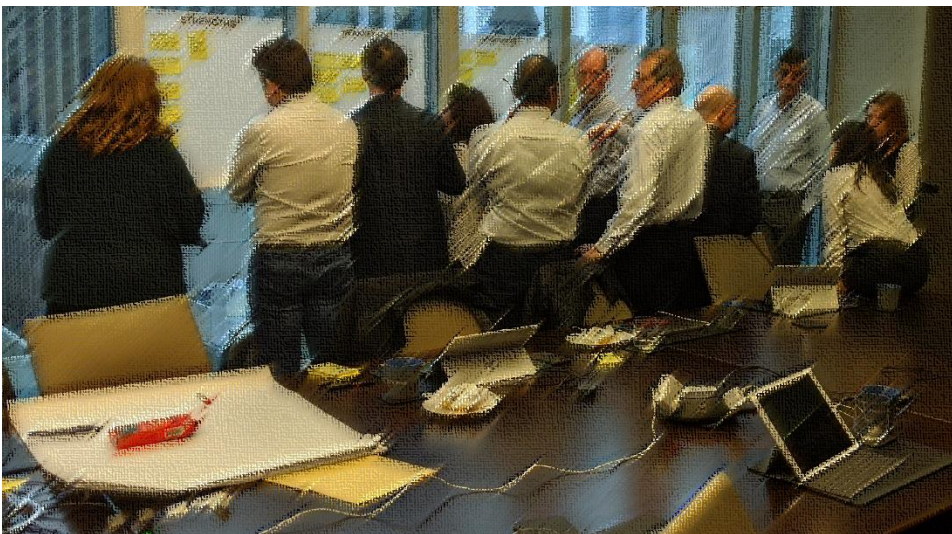
One client, within the first 2 weeks, contacted me to share their amazing story about the benefits of circular breathing.

This client is very passionate, expressive and spontaneous. Often, the energy they bring to a meeting can be a little overwhelming, especially to the more introverted people in the room.

This person wanted to change that dynamic and had read and watched many techniques to change how meetings progressed. But nothing changed.

So, when we talked, I was delighted to hear that before and during meetings, they had practiced circular breathing. This was only one part of their training, yet it delivered results that surprised them.

They felt calmer, more able to take a breath and wait for others to respond, rather than dominating the meeting.



As time went on and they practiced more, it became easier and easier to modify how they organized, lead, and participated in meetings.

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My Backstory



As an athlete, I started with hockey and when young, never gave much thought to breathing as part of the skill of the sport.

Many championships and awards came my way thanks to coaches and teammates.

Hockey taught me the discipline of being on and a key member of a team.

From hockey I then added skiing and spent almost 20 years on the Canadian Ski Patrol, rescuing injured people. Again, teamwork was paramount, yet self discipline was key too. Arriving onsite with someone severely injured, to do your best for them you need to learn self-control.

Then, to my great delight, over 10 years ago I began training in several martial arts – Taekwondo, Kung Fu, Karate, Hapkido and weapons. To my amazement, the process of martial arts taught me more about myself, provided more lessons in mental / physical discipline and focus than all the years of other sports and training to date.

By education I am a human biologist and neuroscientist. As I dove deeper into my martial arts journey, I began to connect the dots of the benefits and why they were happening. Now as a 4th Dan black belt, there is so much I now understand that helps me fulfill my self declared purpose.

To learn more about our offers, teaching, speaking, coaching and performance improvement, please reach out to me at unleashed@kirbyjames.com.