

# Yoga and Breath for Musicians 1

By David Wilson

*Time is Breath*, G.I. Gurdjieff

## **BREATH, BODY, MIND AND LIFE**

The use of effective breathing to improve mental and physical health goes back many thousands of years. Natural, full-body breathing powered by the lower belly is essentially our birthright. As infants our bones, muscles, organs and entire spinal column would undulate with the pulse of our breath. In *The Breathing Book*, Donna Farhi states:

*Breathing affects your respiratory, cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal, muscular, and psychic systems, and also has a general affect on your sleep, memory, ability to concentrate, and your energy levels.*

As we are challenged by the rigors of life, we begin to tense our body and breath in order to “hold firm”, just as we would hold onto a tree during a strong wind. Dealing with increased levels of psychological stress increases the tempo of our internal metronomes, and our chemical, cellular and neurological paces quicken. In an effort to sustain this hurried rate, our muscles often learn to remain tense, expending valuable energy. Eventually, we begin to constrict our primary respiratory muscles (the abdominals, intercostals and diaphragm), flooding the body with adrenaline in order to cope with the situation. The body then relies on the secondary respiratory muscles (scalenes, sternocleidomastoid, trapezius, and pectoralis minor) to sustain the pace. However, the secondary system exists only to assist with stressful situations; it is not designed to power our cardiovascular system on a constant basis. Furthermore, the continual tensing of these muscles weakens their strength, inducing other

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muscles to overwork in order to pick up the slack; this often leads to injury. Society’s ideal of the “flat, rock-hard stomach” also encourages shallow breathing, as we obstruct the diaphragm’s natural descent into the abdominal cavity. This creates a lack of connection to our “font of strength” in our lower belly, decreasing our efficacy and self-confidence. As we gulp shallow inhalations and truncate our exhalations, we begin to feel as if we “can’t get a full breath”. These harmful events eventually lead to the pH balance of the body shifting, favouring acids over alkaloids, which in turn creates more stress, and further weakens the immune system. Naturopaths, Breath therapists and Homeopaths have identified this vicious cycle with Asthma, Sinusitis, Bronchitis, Ulcers, High Blood Pressure, Depression, Anxiety, Indigestion, Hyperventilation, PMS, Headaches, and Chronic Fatigue. There is an alternative to ingesting sugar, caffeine, or other stimulants to artificially increase our energy levels. Consciously returning to natural,

unhindered breathing allows us to release physical tension and re-vitalize our body and mind.

Breathing is effortless, but after many years of ingraining unhealthy habits of tension, the breath becomes effortful; conscious relaxation techniques become necessary. We should not be forcing the body to breathe, but instead, learning how to get out of the way, allowing the body to breathe naturally. This restores the inherent calm of the mind, enabling us to better cope with the frenzied activity of daily life.

## **BREATH, BODY, MIND AND REHEARSAL**

Western society encourages individual expression, yet the practice of assertion often lacks positive reinforcement. As a result, many people are not speaking (much less singing) with their true voice. Amateur singers may have spent days, weeks, or even years breathing shallow, and nervously speaking from their throat; “using the voice” equals stress. It is unrealistic to expect the amateur singer to magically change these ingrained habits exclusively for weekly rehearsals. Kenny Werner, in his book *Effortless Mastery* writes:

*A person might give up music for reasons of insufficient talent, when upon closer inspection it becomes clear that... many people are crippled by an inability to focus and by a sense of being overwhelmed. These problems are often mistaken for laziness or lethargy.*

The already overwhelmed singer, with her concentration levels pushed to the maximum, and worried about letting down her conductor or fellow choristers, works hard to achieve the correct pitches, rhythms and text. On some level, singing and music has been equated with fear. If this continues, the singer will exhibit ungrounded behavior. Flighty giggling, lack of concentration, anger, an overly rigid or slouched sitting posture may all be attempts by the singer to deal with anxiety. The sound will be inflexible, as many singers (especially men) will clench their abdominal muscles inward, take too much breath too high in the chest, and push from their larynx in order to “lead the section” and create a “full sound”. Legato singing will be impossible. As the secondary respiratory muscles strain, the singer will begin to feel chronic tension in his upper back and neck. The impetus of the breath will leave its proper “font of strength” position, rise higher in the chest, create improper airflow, and lead to over-singing. As breathing becomes impaired, the singer will feel they have less sustaining power. Incorrectly assuming they need more air, they will inhale with great effort, move the abdomen strongly upwards, thrust the chest forward, and lift the shoulders. Proper support and breath management has now been abandoned. According to Master Great Nothing of Sung-Shan in the famous *Taoist Canon on Breathing*:

*As for the proper inner breath, it is called the Embryonic breath. Since it is naturally inside you, you do not have to seek outside for it.*

Standing rigidly during warm-ups will not help release these difficulties, as they are already tight from the inside-out. Releasing this tension will facilitate a smoother rehearsal. A method to combat this rigidity is to have the singers move and stretch before and during vocalizations. Throw the arms in the air on high notes, stomp the foot to encourage uninhibited entrances, vocalize with sirens and laughter: anything to activate their