

THE YOGA OF Tibetan Breath

Breathing Practices for Healing
the Body and Cultivating Wisdom

ANYEN RINPOCHE &
ALLISON CHOYING ZANGMO

“Meticulously guides readers on how to awaken and perfect the power of innate energy to heal and enlighten.”

—Tulku Thondup, author of *Boundless Healing*

“These clear and practice-based teachings on purifying the wind energies are much-needed medicine for our times. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of dharma and an understanding of modern science, the yogas of the body, wind energy, and mind are presented in a fresh, lively prose that is a delight to read.”

—Tsoknyi Rinpoche

ABOUT THE BOOK

Modern science and classic spiritual traditions agree: regulating the breath leads to radiance and wellness of body, mind, and spirit. With the simple teachings and cutting-edge research offered in *The Tibetan Yoga of Breath*, you can start thriving just by integrating breathwork into your daily practice.

Basic Yantra Yoga techniques—also called wind energy training—are the key to achieving this kind of vitality, down to the cellular level. Anyen Rinpoche and Allison Choying Zangmo skillfully examine the teachings of Yantra Yoga and Buddhism through the lens of Western medical science. Their wise and accessible instruction reveals practices that are nourishing and transformative, delivering dramatic results—no experience with yoga or Buddhist meditation necessary.

ANYEN RINPOCHE is a tulku from Tibet of the Nyingma (Longchen Nyingthig) Tradition. He primarily lives in Denver, Colorado, where he founded Orgyen Khamdroling Dharma Center with a shedra (college) for Westerners. He is the author of *The Union of Dzogchen and Bodhichitta*, *Dying with Confidence*, *Journey to Certainty*, and *Momentary Buddhahood*.

ALLISON CHOYING ZANGMO is Anyen Rinpoche’s personal translator and a longtime student of both Rinpoche and his root Lama, Kyabje Tsara Dharmakirti. She has either translated or collaborated with Rinpoche on all of his books. She lives in Denver, Colorado.

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The Tibetan Yoga of Breath

Breathing Exercises for Healing the Body and Cultivating Wisdom

Anyen Rinpoche & Allison Choying Zangmo



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We offer this book and all of our effort toward its creation to the supreme Yantra Yoga master
Khenchen Tsara Dharmakirti Rinpoche and Nyakrung Tsunpo Dorlo Rinpoche.

*In all my future lifetimes,
May I never be separate from the perfectly pure Lama.
Having received the jewel of the glorious Dharma,
May I perfect the good qualities of the stages and paths
And swiftly attain the state of the Glorious Lama.*

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Since meeting Anyen Rinpoche more than thirteen years ago, I have heard many tales of the great masters of Tibet. Some of the most incredible and wondrous stories are those of one of his root masters, Tsunpo Dorlo Rinpoche, a great master of Yantra Yoga and the profound meditation tradition of Dzogpachenpo: the Great Perfection. The Great Perfection is the most profound style of meditation in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism presented in this book, that of the Nyingmapa Secret Mantrayana. The Great Perfection is complemented by the breathing and asana poses that make up an ancient style of Tantric Yoga, called *Yantra Yoga*. Yantra Yoga is the formal name of a contemplative tradition of working with the body's energetic channels, "wind energies" (which includes the breath) and vital essences.

Not everyone's body is suited to practice the strenuous asana poses presented in the tradition of Yantra Yoga. It is light-years away from the relatively gentle style of yoga many of us practice in modern America. However, Anyen Rinpoche often told me that the root of Yantra Yoga is working with the breath, and that all great yogis learn the basic breathing techniques of Yantra Yoga as part of their spiritual mastery.

Practicing Yantra Yoga has enabled the great yogis of India and Tibet to achieve miraculous feats such as personal healing even from incurable illnesses, the ability to withstand physical hardship such as a lack of food or warmth even for long periods of time, and, of course, the complete realization of wisdom, where one is liberated from all concepts of the ego and of dualistic perception. Dorlo Rinpoche was an unusual kind of Yantra Yoga master for the modern age. He exhibited behavior that reaches the level of a fairy tale, such as having such pure and controlled use of the breath that he only needed to breathe a few times an hour. Anyen Rinpoche's and my own root teacher, Tsara Dharmakirti Rinpoche, also relied upon the teachings on Yantra Yoga and the Great Perfection to completely heal himself from cancer in his younger years.

Anyen Rinpoche studied Yantra Yoga with Dorlo Rinpoche in a traditional retreat setting, during the coldest time of year in an earthen dwelling high in Kham, Tibet. The practitioners of that retreat studied *tummo*, the generation of inner heat, among other practices. Practicing in a harsh, frigid environment is essential to the practice, as it motivates the retreatants to practice extremely diligently until the body naturally generates heat despite the cold environment. At the culmination of the retreat, Anyen Rinpoche was tested in the traditional manner by allowing the shoulders of his unclothed body to be draped with a damp towel, which then had to be dried by the body's own inner heat.

The teachings on Yantra Yoga explain in detail the manner in which the purification of the breath acts as the cause for healing body and mind and, ultimately, for spiritual realization. The breathing practices of the Yantra Yoga tradition are referred to as "wind energy training" throughout this book. The basis for these practices is introduced in part 1, and the practice of wind energy training is introduced in greater detail in part 2.

I grew up in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, as an ordinary, middle-class girl. Most of my childhood was spent feeling caught between two worlds. My yearning for a contemplative lifestyle existed in contrast to a society that believes in material wealth, status, and power as the ultimate measure of success. As a result, I experienced isolation, anxiety, and sleeplessness. My traditional American childhood gave me few tools to help me deal with these feelings. I was introduced to meditation and contemplative practice at the age of sixteen, after which I began practicing meditation seriously.

finally felt I had connected with the thing that was missing in my life. In my early twenties, I traveled to Tibet and then Nepal, where I met Anyen Rinpoche and became deeply involved in the contemplative and devotional practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Although I am a committed practitioner of the Secret Mantrayana tradition, I do not take lightly the discipline and diligence required to engage in many of its practices. Because of its strenuous asanas and poses, I have never thought of Yantra Yoga as a tradition I was capable of practicing. And tales of Anyen Rinpoche's own story of training in the middle of winter seemed magical and otherworldly to me, and completely out of my reach. However, as my understanding of Vajrayana practice has grown over the years, I began to learn some of the breath practices from the Yantra Yoga tradition that immensely improved my mental and emotional stability, as well as augmented my physical health. These were aspects that even I, an ordinary practitioner, could learn, use, and benefit from. I noticed a change in my ability to balance my body and mind in daily life situations, and I began to feel more comfortable with my ability to adapt to all kinds of environments and to work more compassionately with others.

As I prepared to write this book with Anyen Rinpoche, I delved into the medical research that has been done on the subject of the breath and on the health benefits of bringing the proper amount of oxygen into the blood, with the assistance of my Vajra Sister Sarah Teague Johnson. I was amazed by how the yogis of India and Tibet, prior to the invention of modern technology or research instruments, gained a thorough knowledge of the effect of the breath, proper and improper, on our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Not only did these classic masters understand the problems caused by improper breathing in a way that perfectly corresponds to modern medical science, but they also knew how to remedy these problems with very simple techniques. These breathing "treatments" and "cures" are as easy as working with posture, nasal breathing, and the elongation of the inhalation and exhalation. The benefits of these contemplative techniques can also be explained with a detailed understanding of medical science. How remarkable that the masters of old could have knowledge that is so true, so exact, and so pertinent to our health in the modern world.

In this book, we have attempted to offer the most useful information for those interested in starting to practice wind energy training, using medical science as a starting point. Yantra Yoga, with its rich oral and textual tradition, has its own parallel way of describing the negative effects of oxygen and carbon dioxide deprivation on the body, mind, and emotions. By weaving together the knowledge of these two sources, the modern and the mystical, we hope many readers of this book will be inspired to start working with the tradition of wind energy training.

Of course, this book offers only the most basic of teachings on wind energy training, those that are appropriate for any individual to start applying. For anyone who wishes to delve into deeper training and more detailed instructions than a book can provide, the importance of seeking out an authentic spiritual master cannot be overstated. An authentic teacher who has had a lifetime of training in Yantra Yoga and has become the close student of a master of this tradition will be able to give proper and complete instructions on this practice, and point out mistakes and pitfalls. In the West, we are used to thinking that a teaching-certification program is enough to make us a master at something since it confers a license to teach others. While this may be true of some subjects, wind energy training is definitely not one of them. True proficiency and skill is not gained in a few weeks or a few months. A few classes or retreats do not make a master!

While I do not claim to be a great practitioner of meditation, I have found that many of the physical and emotional conditions that I suffered from earlier in life, such as anxiety, migraine headaches, and chronic lung conditions, have disappeared since I began working with meditation, mindfulness, and the breath. I am not surprised to find that all of these conditions are associated with improper

breathing and a lack of balance between the oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. Meditation has not only helped to quiet my mind, it has also naturally brought greater balance to my wind energy which has helped to heal many of the imbalances in my physical and mental health.

I would like to be clear that we, the authors of this book, are not doctors. We believe in taking a holistic approach to the treatment of any physical, mental, or emotional imbalance. We believe that a combination of factors—working with wind energy training, practicing meditation, exercising, paying attention to diet and nutrition, following the advice of health care practitioners, and using Western and natural medications when necessary—is the most effective way to treat any imbalance. We urge you not to stop any treatment plan that you are currently following, but instead to add wind energy training to your current treatment plan. As you find greater balance in body and mind, you will be in a better position to evaluate or make changes to your overall wellness program.

In this modern world, so afflicted by famine, war, weaponry, genocide, and the swift and unknown effects of technology, how lucky we are that we have available the guidance of many rich spiritual traditions! May the teachings in this book alleviate the suffering of beings everywhere.

ALLISON CHOYING ZANGM

Why We Practice Breath Yoga

Breath Is Life

The Physical and Elemental Workings of Breath

AFTER THE CONSCIOUSNESS enters the mother's womb, the greatest support and condition for life is the breath. In this case, when we speak of the breath, we are not only speaking of the ordinary inhalation and exhalation of oxygen and carbon dioxide but we are also talking about the air element—one of the fundamental elements of life. Great classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle described the phenomenal world using the framework of the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth, and the harmony or discord. Like Western philosophy, the ancient traditions of Eastern philosophy, medicine, and meditation all place importance on the qualities and harmony of the four elements. The general Sutric tradition of Buddhism names the four elements and their properties as cohesion (water), solidity or inertia (earth), expansion or vibration (air), and heat or energy (fire). Tibetan Buddhist philosophy names five elements: air, water, earth, fire, and space. The fifth element, space, is unique and important because it is the quintessence of all phenomena; space pervades all material phenomena and makes it possible to recognize form. Space, conversely, is also the absence of form.

Classical Eastern and Western philosophy both tell us that the elements are the building blocks of life. But what does it mean to say “breath is life”?

Etymology and the history of language itself show us that breath has always been linked to life. In the linguistic roots of Latin and Greek, the names given to the soul or the spirit are directly connected to or synonymous with the breath. The Latin words *animus* (spirit) and *anima* (soul) are the same as the Greek *anemos*, meaning “wind.” Another Greek word for wind, *pneuma*, also means “spirit.” Our ancient ancestors often associated breath with the soul, since breath takes on a misty, ghostly shape in cold weather.¹

Historically breath is what gives us our soul or spirit, but we also know that breath quite literally sustains life. The strength and vitality of the body is maintained through the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide at a cellular level. In fact, as we will demonstrate, Western medical research shows that our overall health is directly related to how we breathe.²

HOW WE BREATHE

Breath is physiological, psychological, a conditioned behavior, and a voluntary action; it is a dynamic and multifaceted, vital function of the body. Physiologically, breathing occurs automatically based upon the metabolic demands of the body. The word *metabolic* is used to describe a biochemical process within the body—the buildup of some substances and the breakdown of others. On a cellular level, breathing brings about the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide that has built up in the blood. For example, when we are running at full tilt or when we have a high fever, our body needs more oxygen pumped quickly throughout our body. Our heart rate and our breathing rate are linked for this reason; they both speed up and slow down at the same time—and this all occurs behind the scenes without any conscious effort on our part. We feel the effects of this without needing to understand the science of

anatomy behind it, let alone have a medical degree.

Breathing is also influenced by our psychological condition: our perceptions and emotions. We each have a particular emotional temperament, which may be influenced by genetics, our family environment, and our life experiences. Because of these variables, our breathing rate, depth, and quality change in reaction to emotions: when we think about something in the past that upsets us, anticipate something exciting in the future, or experience a challenging situation in the moment.

Breathing is also a conditioned behavior, a habitual response. Over time, repeated reactions to inner and outer conditions become ingrained tendencies, like any practice or habit. We unconsciously associate breathing patterns with stimuli, and therefore breathing patterns are reinforced and generalized. The more often certain emotions are associated with certain experiences, the more breathing will shift and settle into a pattern, which may not always be healthy. For example, you may have a coworker who is difficult to work with and says unkind things that are upsetting. After repeatedly experiencing this, you may feel anxious, your respiratory rate may increase, and you may carry extra tension in your shoulders while at work. Perhaps this coworker leaves for another job, so the direct stimuli are no longer there to agitate you. However, the body's pattern of increased breathing rate with tension in the upper back and shoulders may continue—the behavior has become automatic and generalized to being at work, rather than being around that coworker. In other words, our bodies can confuse conditioned response with natural function.

The voluntary control of breathing is an important and unique characteristic of the body. What other visceral functions are we able to directly control? None! We can learn to influence other visceral functions such as our heart rate or our blood pressure, but we are not able to directly control them. We can hold our breath, or breathe faster, or breathe slower, at any time, by choice. Why does this control matter? It matters because breathing is the link between our inner and outer experiences—we take air from the outside world into the body with every inhalation. It is also the link between the physical and emotional reactions we have to those experiences. In other words, what is happening within our bodies and minds is channeled through our breathing. But the flip side of this statement is that the way we breathe can also change what is happening within our bodies and minds.

We can think of the control of our breathing as existing along a continuum, from being entirely controlled by the body (unconscious) to being entirely controlled by the mind (conscious). On one end is the physiological/automatic aspect of the breath, determined solely by the physiological requirements of the body. Moving along the continuum, we find the conditioned/behavioral; this is where our body confuses conditioned behavior based on emotions and perceptions with natural function. Physiological function is altered through repeated behavior and experiences of the mind. Conscious behaviors have transformed into unconscious physiological reactions. Next, we arrive at the psychological/perceptual/emotional qualities of the breath: how we breathe in response to our emotions and perceptions based on what is happening in the mind at that moment. The interaction of thoughts in the mind produces an accompanying physiological response. And on the far end of the continuum, we find the voluntary aspect of the breath, where the breath is directly controlled by our mind. This continuum shows that breathing is the dynamic link between the mind and the body. It spans our physical needs as well as our emotional reactions: it represents our whole experience in the body.

Research shows that our behavioral breathing patterns are so pervasive and habitual that even during REM sleep, when the body is resting the most deeply, voluntary breathing patterns can still control how we breathe.³ Again, our bodies confuse conditioned response with natural function. Breathing is distinct from other bodily functions because it is something we can directly control through awareness and training. Unlike our heart rate and other core mechanisms, which we can only influence indirectly, each of us has the power to change the way we breathe.

Two Types of Voluntary Breathing

Western medicine recognizes two types of breathing patterns. These two types of breathing patterns correlate with the area of the body where the breathing occurs, and are called thoracic and abdominal breathing. *Thoracic* refers to the thorax, an area of the chest encased by the ribs. *Abdominal* refers to the area below the diaphragm, or around the navel. Learning the differences between the two types of breathing makes it easy to understand the basic philosophy and techniques presented in this book.

When we are at rest, abdominal breathing is generally considered the healthiest pattern. Abdominal breathing primarily relies upon the contraction and relaxation of the muscle beneath the lungs called the *diaphragm*. The diaphragm pulls air into the lower part of the lungs. However, when our bodies need more oxygen, such as during strenuous exercise, our body may involuntarily supplement abdominal breathing with thoracic breathing. In thoracic breathing, air is pulled into the upper part of the lungs.

As the name suggests, thoracic breathing comes from the accessory breathing muscles in the upper chest and rib cage rather than the diaphragm. Thoracic breathing is shallower and faster than abdominal breathing, and often includes active or forced exhalation. The passive relaxation of the diaphragm is accompanied by active contraction of additional muscles that forces the air out of the lungs, rather than simply allowing the diaphragm to relax, as during abdominal breathing. In other words, in thoracic breathing, we are contracting muscles to exhale, rather than just allowing a contracted muscle to relax.

Exercise 1

LEARN HOW YOU BREATHE

To experience these two styles of breathing, try this exercise: Place one hand on your belly and the other hand on your heart. Now take a deep breath. Did you feel your rib cage elevate and expand? That is thoracic breathing (exaggerated, of course, by the deep inhalation). Now take in a deep breath but concentrate on not moving your rib cage. Instead, slightly push your stomach out into your hand. Try to breathe so that the hand placed over your heart does not move. This is abdominal breathing. Repeat this a few times, exploring the subtleties of the muscle groups working, until you can feel the difference.

THE SCIENCE OF THE BREATH

When we are physically and mentally healthy, these two styles of breathing work together. When the body's metabolic demands require an immediate short-term energy boost, thoracic breathing supports this increase. Thoracic breathing is not necessarily unhealthy; it is just less efficient. When we are at rest, abdominal breathing is more efficient than thoracic breathing. It is slower, deeper, and more calming to the body and mind, which intuitively leads to the feeling that abdominal breathing may have positive, cumulative health effects.

Just as abdominal breathing can have a long-term beneficial effect on the body, the absence of abdominal breathing may indicate an absence of health or the presence of a medical condition. Indeed, medical research shows that people who are ill take more thoracic breaths even when at rest than

people who are healthy.⁴ Some medical conditions, such as heart disease, asthma, cancer, and cystic fibrosis, are associated with higher breathing rates—patients breathing in two to three times more air in a minute than healthy people.⁵ Excessive thoracic breathing is not uncommon; in fact, surveys suggest that 60 percent of ambulance runs in major US cities were to provide medical care for persons suffering from symptoms directly related to “overbreathing,”⁶ also called *hyperventilation*.

Oxygen in the blood. What are the effects of thoracic breathing when we are at rest—in other words, breathing in excess of the metabolic demands of the body? When we overuse the accessory breathing muscles—the muscles in the shoulder girdle as well as the chest wall—as we do when we engage in thoracic breathing, the upper lungs quickly fill with air. However, oxygen exchange is less efficient in the upper lungs. The lower lungs are six to seven times more efficient at exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide, due to gravity, which pulls the blood supply into the lower lungs, giving more time for oxygen and carbon dioxide to exchange. Thus, breathing with the upper lungs provides the body with less oxygen than breathing with the lower lungs.⁷

Carbon dioxide in the blood. However, less oxygen in the blood is not the only issue; less carbon dioxide in the blood is also problematic. Carbon dioxide is necessary for oxygen to be released within the bloodstream, and it is also an important vasodilator; it opens the blood vessels so that blood can flow through. Additionally, a lack of carbon dioxide causes the smooth muscle in the digestive tract and connective tissue to contract, which restricts blood flow.⁸ When the blood vessels constrict, the blood is unable to carry the necessary amount of oxygen to the organs and brain, and the heart also has to work harder to circulate blood throughout the body. When we breathe too shallowly and too rapidly, such as when we breathe thoracically at rest, carbon dioxide is exhaled faster than it is produced, and carbon dioxide levels in the blood decrease. Even though it seems like we are getting more oxygen into our bodies when we breathe rapidly, we are not. Breathing thoracically at rest decreases carbon dioxide levels in the blood, which in turn deprives the tissues of the body, including the organs and the brain, of oxygen.⁹

pH balance in the body. And there is more scientific evidence that links the effects of breathing to our health and wellness. Too little carbon dioxide in the blood results in a higher blood pH, increasing blood pH from 7.4 to 7.5.¹⁰ This can lead to a medical condition called *respiratory alkalosis*. Respiratory alkalosis may sound like a complicated disorder, but we can understand it by relating it to what we know about systems in balance. When a system, such as groundwater, becomes either too basic (alkaline) or too acidic such that its pH is not in equilibrium, it becomes unhealthy, and its ability to sustain life becomes compromised. The same is true of the blood. If blood pH is out of balance, in this case too alkaline, that imbalance spreads throughout the body. The blood’s ability to sustain our body’s overall health becomes compromised. Respiratory alkalosis is associated with many chronic health conditions, and can be an early or intermediate indicator of cardiac and pulmonary disorders, diseases that affect the heart and lungs.

Cell function. Additionally, the cells in our bodies behave differently depending on how much oxygen is available to them. Some doctors and medical researchers believe that reduced cellular oxygenation is the driving force behind many chronic diseases. *Cell hypoxia* is a disorder in which cells are deprived of oxygen, and some research shows that cell hypoxia encourages the growth of cancerous tumors.¹¹ Also, when the cells in the heart-muscle tissues are deprived of oxygen, this results in heart problems and a painful heart condition called *angina agony*. Other diseases, such as diabetes,¹² cystic fibrosis,¹³ asthma,¹⁴ bronchitis,¹⁵ osteoporosis,¹⁶ and gastrointestinal disorders,¹⁷ are all associated with low amounts of oxygen in the brain or other bodily organs.

Deep abdominal breathing promotes full exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide. An important point to be aware of is that the word *deep* refers to the depth of breath in the lungs. Research shows that this type of breathing can slow the heartbeat and lower or stabilize blood pressure.¹⁸ A low

resting heart rate and low blood pressure are general signs of good health.

THE BREATH, WIND ENERGY, AND WELL-BEING

The breath is not only a source of support for the physical body; it is also a support for mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the breath are easily understood in the context of traditional Tibetan language and philosophy, where the air element is central to all of life—including all of our physical, mental, and spiritual experiences.

In the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, the element of air and the breath are tied together through the word *lung* (Tib. *rlung*), which is embedded with several layers of meaning. *Lung* describes not only the breath, the movement of air we call wind, and the basic atmosphere around us, but it has the additional meaning of “wind energy.” From the point of view of Tibetan medicine, physiology, and the practice of meditation, the physical body is permeated by five types of wind energy, which support the body’s most basic functions, such as circulation, digestion, and excretion. Therefore, according to Tibetan medicine, the breath is part of an intricate system of wind energy that regulates and supports the body’s health. For this reason, we often use the words *breath* and *wind energy* interchangeably. However, while the breath is one form of wind energy, referring to wind energy speaks to our entire bodily system, and all of its physical, mental, and emotional components. Tibetan medicine tells us that when all the wind energy is in balance, all of the body’s basic systems work efficiently and we feel healthy.

Although there are some differences in the style of explanation, the results of imbalanced wind energy are very similar to the explanations given by Western medical science. From the point of view of Tibetan medicine and physiology, when wind energy becomes too excessive and builds up in the upper part of the lungs, as occurs during thoracic breathing, this can result in a condition called *nyin lung* (Tib. *snying rlung*), literally “heart-wind.” When we experience *nyin lung*, the wind energy in the region around the heart and lungs has become too strong and too agitated.

Heart-wind has mental and emotional effects as well as physical ones. When we experience heart-wind, the region around the heart can feel agitated and fiery, especially inside the rib cage, making us feel impulsive, agitated, and short-tempered. The excessive energy of heart-wind can manifest in different ways. The agitation and volatility of heart-wind can lead to anxiety and restlessness. Or, experienced over a long period of time, the chest and lungs can feel energetically heavy and make us experience feelings of depression. The manifestation of heart-wind depends on the temperament and disposition of the person, as well as what the sensation of heart-wind feels like in the body.

Tibetan medicine sees heart-wind as the basis for all kinds of systemic imbalances. In terms of our bodily health, the medical tantras state that it is a source of pulmonary and cardiac disorders such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and heart attack.

According to our Tibetan tradition, heart-wind does not only result from habitual breathing patterns. Extreme emotional states, such as rage or despair, can produce heart-wind. These strong emotions can raise the level of wind energy in the upper part of the chest, and result in an immediate, severe physical and emotional reaction such as a heart attack or suicidal thoughts. Heart-wind is a condition that can be calmed through taking traditional Tibetan herbal medicine in conjunction with breathing practices such as are taught in chapters 4 through 7 of this book, to correct the voluntary breathing pattern.

Wind Energy and the Emotions

We may think of the breath as something that is simply related to the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide and that keeps us alive. However, wind energy not only supports our ordinary bodily system but it also quite literally drives our emotions. Thus, it is more than simply the experience of inhalation and exhalation. Wind energy is also the physical rush of energy that accompanies all of our feelings and sensations. If we examine the body and mind carefully, we notice a connection between the breath and how we feel. When the breath is calm and relaxed, we notice that the body's energy is also calm, especially in the areas of the abdomen, lungs, and chest. As a result, the mind becomes clear and we feel relaxed and even-tempered. We feel that we can take things as they come and that we are capable of dealing with whatever life brings us.

On the other hand, when we are emotionally upset, we may notice that we breathe harder and faster or that we are unable to inhale deeply and exhale fully. We notice a sense of pain, heaviness, or dullness in the abdomen and chest area, or even throughout the whole body, and that the mind is agitated by thoughts or overpowered by emotion. This overpowering energy manifests in all sorts of neurotic ways, such as depression, obsession, fear of intimacy, fear of trust, or feelings of grandiosity or inadequacy. Research has associated breathing patterns with specific emotional states—and it has also shown that we can influence our emotions by the way we breathe.¹⁹ In addition, Western medicine connects our psychological state with respiratory alkalosis. Respiratory alkalosis is associated with a lower pain threshold,²⁰ with feelings of discomfort and agitation,²¹ and with imbalances such as anxiety and fatigue—all the result of less efficient oxygen delivery to the tissues and organs, including the brain. Some research states that dysfunctional breathing is as high as 5 to 11 percent in the general population, 30 percent in asthmatics, and up to 83 percent in those who suffer from anxiety.²²

When putting things in the context of wind energy, all of these emotions are simply an expression of imbalanced wind energy. However, even though all of these states of mind are a sign of unbalanced wind energy, they feel very different. And though the experiences of neurotic mind, energy, and emotions can appear and feel very different from one to the other, in every single case the mind can be thoroughly pacified and calmed through working with the breath.

Of course, change will not happen immediately. But generally speaking, over a long period of time working with the breath is effective at cutting through all types of neurotic tendencies, because it brings the wind energy into balance. As the wind energy is brought into balance and becomes more stable, neurotic tendencies lessen and even begin to disappear.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we call this style of practice *wind energy training*, or *the purification of wind energy*. We call the broad tradition of purifying and working with the wind energy *Yantra Yoga*. Some traditions of Yantra Yoga also include complementary asanas, or physical poses and postures. While these asanas cannot be practiced by everyone, since every person has different physical capabilities, wind energy training can be practiced by anyone, at any moment, regardless of age or physical condition.

Much research has been done to show that working with the breath benefits not only our physical health but also our mental and emotional well-being. Tibetan Buddhism would also add to these the aspect of spiritual well-being. This research clearly shows that working with the breath balances the two components of the autonomic nervous system by enhancing parasympathetic nervous activity (enabling body and mind to relax) and decreasing sympathetic nervous activity (which causes the body to feel anxious or overly alert). It also improves respiratory and cardiovascular function, decreases the negative effects of stress and the production of stress hormones, and improves physical and mental health.²³

On a macro scale, the air element is vital to the life of all beings in the universe. On a human scale, air is also vital to the manifestation of the ordinary world around us. The atmosphere and the environment around us mirror the way that wind energy supports our own physical, emotional, and spiritual life.

Weather changes are related to the movements of warm and cold air masses called fronts. According to Western science, the tilt in the earth's axis as it orbits the sun causes different parts of the world to receive more heat, which manifests as the four seasons. The movement of warm air brings spring to the world around us, causing the environment to bloom full of color. Rain and thunderstorms, hot and cold temperatures, the falling of snow, and extreme weather such as blizzards, tornadoes, and hurricanes are all disturbances of the air element.

And just as natural disasters occur when there is strong agitation in the air, so it is in the minds of humans. This is simply the law of nature. Imbalance brings the opportunity for great destruction. Wind energy has the same relationship to our mental and emotional energy as it does to the environment and atmosphere. When the wind energy is wild, agitated, or imbalanced, it manifests as physical illness in the body or as mental suffering, neurosis, or any other extreme state in the mind.

We also know that when the air element is harmonious, calm, and in balance, we tend to feel happy. When the sun is shining, the weather is warm, and the air is calm, life feels abundant, and we feel comfortable. Harmony in the elements makes it easy to feel good.

One additional piece of information will help us understand how truly powerful wind energy training is. From the point of view of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, each of the elements itself is holistic. This means that the air element is not separate from the others; rather, it includes them. The air element contains aspects of water, earth, fire, and space, just as all of the other elements each contain an aspect of air. So when we work with any one of the five elements, we work with all of them. For example, the air element in the atmosphere has aspects of warmth or cold (fire), of moisture or dryness (water), of lightness or density (earth), and of expansiveness or contraction (space). Therefore, when there is an imbalance in the wind, all of the elements will fall out of balance. If the air element becomes dominant, then the aspects of water, earth, fire, and space will become weak and unstable. As a result, when one element is out of balance, an entire system becomes unstable, such as in the case of the atmosphere being disrupted by a hurricane or tornado. On the other hand, when each element is balanced, the whole system is balanced—just like a beautiful spring day. When we balance the wind energy, we bring stability to the systems of body and mind. And this is how wind energy training results in physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

HOW BREATH OFFERS PEACE OF MIND

We have shown how breath is the main support for life. We have also explained why training in the breath is the essential method for achieving peace of mind for oneself, which enables us to help and support those around us. Finally, we have said that it is through training in wind energy that we can heal and release all physical and mental suffering completely. Ultimately, this is the experience of wisdom, or realization. It is said in the Buddhist teachings that there is no human being who does not wish for happiness, but among all those beings who are wishing for happiness, it is extremely rare to meet a person who actually knows how to find it. Working with wind energy gives us the opportunity to find authentic happiness day and night.

From the point of view of the Buddhist scriptures, an ordinary healthy being takes about 21,600 breaths in a twenty-four-hour period. Western medicine also says that the average number of breaths

per day is around 21,000.²⁴ If we practice mindfulness and appreciate training in the breath, we have an incredible number of opportunities to balance the body and mind every day. When we recognize the opportunity that training in the breath provides, we give ourselves a gift: the opportunity to transcend ordinary suffering.

Working with the breath provides us with a unique opportunity for healing because the breath is something that is with us all the time, every moment. It does not matter whether we are awake or asleep, working or sitting, lying down or doing something active—the opportunity to train in and be mindful of the breath is always with us.

In the Tibetan tradition, not only spiritual realization but other mystical accomplishments such as perpetual youth and extreme longevity arise from training in wind energy. From the point of view of Tibetan Buddhism, if we train diligently in the wind energy until our practice becomes stable and we learn how to calm and purify any agitation that arises, this can lessen symptoms of physical illness and our lifespan will naturally increase. Also, because we are healthy both inside and out, the color and appearance of our complexion can become youthful and glowing. When we are mentally and emotionally balanced and healthy, it shows.

Usually, when we think about how to make ourselves happy, we seek something on the outside, an external object or event. We look for something that we think will complete us; “If I only had ‘this’ I would feel better.” But when we train in wind energy, we do not need to look for anything outside of us. We do not need to go to the store and buy anything to make ourselves feel less empty, lacking, or unhappy. We do not need to turn on our laptops, televisions, or video games to distract us from how we feel, because we are able to influence our own sense of physical, emotional, and spiritual balance at any moment by working with the breath. The breath is something that is readily available to us simply because we are human beings. We do not need anything else to qualify. How marvelous!

Finding Stability in Wind Energy Training

What does it mean to gain stability in wind energy training? Someone who has achieved stable and balanced wind energy is someone who has a steadfast and even-tempered mental state. Although steady, that person is not stubborn. They are mentally flexible, patient, and not easily disturbed or agitated—like a large body of water without a lot of movement on the surface. Not only would that person’s mental state be pliant and balanced but they would also be calm, relaxed, and healthy.

How many of us can describe ourselves this way? Be honest. We like to project a sense of confidence and well-being to others. And when we perceive others, we have the tendency to think that they are happier, more confident, and less neurotic and agitated than we are. However, when we honestly assess our own state of mind, most of us have the tendency to be emotionally imbalanced in one way or another, whether that tendency manifests as being sharp-tongued and impatient, withdrawn, or generally dissatisfied and skeptical. Whenever the mind is dominated or overwhelmed by a particularly strong pattern of thoughts or emotions, many different kinds of physical and mental sufferings ensue.

For example, some of us experience imbalance as the tendency for worry and anxiety. Our wind energy is so consistently unstable that we have become accustomed to the feeling of instability. The moment we feel calm in the mind, our wind energy immediately becomes unbalanced again and manifests as worry and anxiety. We all know people who have this tendency, or we have this tendency ourselves: it’s as if we simply need something to worry about. We may think to ourselves, “I don’t have any reason to be worried about this,” but we find we are unable to stop. The reason we are unable to stop these mental patterns is that we have become comfortable with, and in some cases addicted to,

the feeling of elemental instability, of unstable wind energy. At times, we can feel frightened or hesitant to go beyond our ordinary mode of being.

Why Wind Energy Training Is for Everyone

Based on everything we have learned so far, then, it seems that training in wind energy and attempting to balance the elements within the physical body is not something that only Buddhists should focus on. Western science and Buddhist philosophy agree that calm, relaxed breathing makes us healthier. Because the breath is such an excellent and abundant support for life and vitality for every being on the planet, everyone can benefit from training in the breath, working with the inhalation and exhalation.

THE POSITIVE RESULTS OF PRACTICE

One of the positive effects of wind energy training is that the number of times we need to breathe in one day lessens. We may notice this when we sit down to meditate often and become mindful of the breath; there will be gaps of time where we do not need to breathe. In the case of accomplished realized practitioners who have trained in any style of breath practice from one of the traditions of Asia, including Qigong, Tai Chi, and Yantra Yoga, the number of breaths taken in one hour can become very few. The result of such practice is clarity and peace of mind, and unshakable physical health. Why is this?

Western medicine answers this question in part by noting that ill people need to breathe more often than healthy ones.²⁵ However, this does not explain why breathing less often also benefits our mental and emotional health. The Tibetan tradition often uses metaphors to explain such complex or intuitive ideas, which can be difficult to understand through more direct means. In this case, if we compare the energy of the physical body to a body of water, then we can access the logic behind this statement.

Each time a gust of wind blows over the ocean, ripples and waves cause movement and agitation on the water's surface. However, when the air is calm, so is the water. It is just so with the mind. The more often we breathe, the more agitated the energy of body and mind becomes. By breathing less frequently, we begin to achieve elemental harmony. This is exactly how it is, in the case of a great yogi—as the number of breaths in a minute, an hour, a day begins to lessen, the wind energy becomes increasingly stable and balanced. Feelings of extreme mental suffering become less and less over time, so much so that the potential exists for these feelings to completely disappear. This is one way of describing the experience of realization, which will be explored more in later chapters.

Additionally, from the point of view of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, there are 424 classes of illness that can arise in the body. According to these teachings, because of the lessening of the number of breaths, the wind energy within the body becomes more stable, more even and relaxed, and thus releases all classes of illnesses from the physical body as well.

Throughout history, the majority of the great yogis in the world, no matter what other practice they were training in, accompanied their practice with an aspect of wind energy training, or breath yoga. Although the specific techniques of breath yoga used by these yogis may have been different, they each had the common result of self-healing the body and mind and the achievement of longevity. Their lives imply that the qualities of physical and mental well-being are directly connected to wind energy training.

Of course, we may not all be able to attain the realization of a buddha or become a great sage in the

lifetime, but wind energy training can still benefit us tremendously. Wind energy training not only results in extraordinary wisdom and realization, as described above, but it also results in ordinary worldly wisdom. When we have the qualities of calm and relaxation in body, speech, and mind, we are able to accomplish more, and with better-designed plans. We make clear and thoughtful decisions and have more harmonious relationships. We avoid doing things that are at odds with our personal goals and integrity, and do not sabotage our own growth. We avoid making impulsive decisions, or speaking impulsive words, ones we may regret later. When we lack chaos on the inside, the world outside reflects our sense of inner harmony.

If we train in wind energy, each of us has the ability both to discover a more joyful life here and now and, ultimately, to cultivate wisdom.

Working with Breath and Neurotic Mind

THE MIND'S FUNDAMENTAL nature is not neurotic and emotionally afflicted. It is of limitless kindness and compassion. However, because we have become so used to the experience of mental and emotional instability, we rarely catch a glimpse of this fundamental nature. In this chapter we will gain a sense of how our habitual and unexamined patterns of thought are directly linked to our breathing and drive our reactions in life, leading to happiness or unhappiness. We will also learn about how wind energy influences our state of mind moment by moment.

SELF-ATTACHMENT AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

From the point of view of the general Buddhist teachings, the basis for neurotic mind, or the dualistic mind that is overpowered by emotions and thoughts, is self-attachment. It can also be called *self-cherishing*. We may feel that the word *neurosis* only applies to extreme emotions and thought patterns. However, from the point of view of Tibetan Buddhism, neurosis is any trace of self-attachment or afflictive emotion. Until we completely realize the nature of wisdom, we all possess a neurotic mind.

True awareness of our own self-attachment and self-cherishing is elusive. We often do not feel like we love ourselves at all. In fact, many of us feel we do not even like ourselves. We may be inclined toward self-deprecation, insecurity, and feeling that we are never good enough. However, feelings of insecurity and undervaluing ourselves like this can be self-attachment in disguise. In other words, they can cause us to turn inward and be focused on ourselves, rather than focusing on supporting others and the greater community. This lack of confidence and disparaging of ourselves can make us emotionally and spiritually unavailable; we become isolated and distant from our friends and family, failing to offer them support in their time of need.

Because these feelings are so prevalent within our culture, the idea of self-acceptance has come to the forefront of emotional and spiritual healing. And self-acceptance, when it is not self-attachment in disguise, is also an important part of the Buddhist teachings. Accepting ourselves for who and what we are right now helps us make changes in our lives; we can understand both our capabilities and our limitations and ultimately transcend them. We can let go of the past and focus on what we are doing right now. With an attitude of self-acceptance, we can forgive ourselves for mistakes made in the past and the part we played in those situations.

Often, we focus on “what is wrong with us,” but true self-acceptance is not just about accepting our shortcomings. All human beings possess many wonderful qualities as well. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, we all have the ability to be loving and compassionate. We all have the ability to change and improve on the qualities and abilities we have now. We are all worthy of the love and affection of others. This is part of our underlying nature, which the Buddhist teachings describe as “basic goodness.” This basically good nature is something that all beings possess simply as a result of being alive. The Buddhist teachings give the example that even terrifying, carnivorous animals such as lions and tigers are basically good, because they care for and would even give their lives for their offspring.

The Buddhist teachings also state that we all have what is called *Buddha Nature*. Buddha Nature is something that dwells within all of us: it is the mind's potential to express wisdom. *Wisdom* here refers not only to the qualities of worldly intelligence and knowledge that make us adept and successful at dealing with life's problems, but it also refers to a nondual, altruistic state of mind that is not limited in any way. Such a mental state is difficult to imagine because it is completely beyond our ordinary experience. But from the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, we do not need to do anything to possess this quality. Like basic goodness, Buddha Nature is something we have inside of us naturally, simply because we are alive.

STATE OF MIND IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE BREATH

We have a tendency to think that what we see in the world outside of us is actually, objectively real. But the world that we see outside of us is a reflection of our own minds. We may question the truth of this statement, but it does make sense when we reflect on our past experiences. In hindsight, we realize that different choices were available to us, even though we could not see those choices then. As the saying goes, "If I had known then what I know now . . ." We have all reflected on the past in this way, and this normal thought pattern that we all engage in demonstrates that our experiences are indeed subjective, not objective. Everything that we experience is colored by the mental ideas, filtered perceptions, and beliefs that we have at any given moment. Although we may have brief moments of calmness and clarity, the great majority of our time is spent reacting to situations and people around us based on how we feel. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it is taught that how we feel and our mental state are directly related to how we breathe, and the quality of our wind energy.

Logically speaking, this connection between our state of mind and our breathing seems to have some merit. Most of us are aware that when the breath is relaxed, the mind and temperament are relaxed. But how does the wind energy push those deep thoughts and emotions to the surface? As it turns out, we are much more familiar with this phenomenon than we might expect.

One example many of us are familiar with is the strong urge to act out our emotions when we are upset. Through the lens of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, this is a direct result of unstable wind energy. For example, when we feel agitated, angry, or impatient, hot wind energy arises and gathers below the rib cage around the heart; we often express anger at whoever is in front of us, regardless of whether that person is connected to how we feel at all. We blurt out more than we mean to say because the accumulated wind energy in our chest makes us incapable of keeping our feelings inside and making decisions about what we would like to communicate. Likewise, when sadness and despair arise, we can become overwhelmed. We start to feel numb and disconnected from others or ourselves, even failing to take care of our basic needs. The feeling of anxiety, or mental obsession, is also fueled by wind energy. When we are overcome by this expression of wind energy, we may feel that we need to do something, anything, no matter what it is. As a result, we often make rash and impulsive decisions that we later regret. In these cases, imbalance in the wind energy leads to an imbalance in the mind, which manifests as imbalance in ourselves, our environment, and our relationships. The outer is a reflection of the inner.

So-called "high" wind energy—which occurs when wind energy builds up high in the chest instead of dwelling deep within the abdomen and belly—can also cause us to perpetuate self-destructive patterns. We may know that bad things happen when we act in a certain way. We may want to avoid these negative outcomes, and even anticipate how emotionally unmanageable our lives will become if we create a chaotic situation. Yet, agitated wind energy fuels our thoughts, driving us until we act on our impulses and create the exact situation in our lives that we wish to avoid. It seems like v

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