

less. Subtle Breathing is based on the Buteyko Method of Reduced Breathing, as well as the description of Akasha Breathing from the yoga lineage.⁶

— PRACTICE 4.1: SUBTLE BREATHING

Learning to make the breath subtle by reducing rate and volume is a challenging task. The practice of Subtle Breathing several times a day in 10–15-minute intervals will affect your autonomic nervous system and your blood chemistry, especially if you tend to be an over-breather. Sprinkling the Subtle Breathing practice throughout the day maintains a level of svādhyāya, which can help you draw connections between your breathing saṃskāra and the state of your mind and body. This consistent reinforcement makes it easier to keep the breath slow and low and illuminates the times you fall back into your habitual patterns.

The practice of Subtle Breathing will assist you in the management of your EBA. View your dietary, speech, exercise, and sleep habits not as separate events, but rather as part of the larger prāṇavayu picture. Begin to piece together cause-and-effect correlations between your breath patterns and your physiological functions. In this way, pin the prāṇamaya to the forefront of your mind. Every choice symbolizes either a move towards greater function or a solidifying of the old pattern of imbalance. In essence, restraining and retraining the breath requires nothing short of constant vigilance. This is why prāṇāyāma is considered the greatest tapas practice of all!

At this point in your svādhyāya process, you probably have a good sense of your daily breath patterns and your average CP. While you may not identify yourself as being a chronic hyperventilator—remember, only approximately 10 per cent of the population have measurably low levels of CO₂—I would still recommend working with the Subtle Breathing practice to experience how it feels to refine the breath to a state of sūkṣma, or subtlety.

Subtle Breathing can be practiced seated upright in a chair, or on a cushion on the floor (Photos 1, 2, 3). Choose whichever position is most comfortable and relaxing for you. If the seated position is accompanied by pain or discomfort, it is best to work semi-reclined, or even supine with ample support under the neck and knees (Photo 4). This will relax the spinal musculature and facilitate undistracted focus on the breath.



Photo 1 Subtle Breathing on Chair with Hi-Low Hand Position



Photo 2 Subtle Breathing with Prop Support



Photo 3 Subtle Breathing Sitting on Floor



Photo 4 Supine Breathing with Support under Neck and Knees, Hands in Hi-Low Position—Arms Propped

More about the Subtle Breath

It is valuable to acknowledge at the outset that it is *much* easier (and more comfortable) for most people to breathe more than it is to breathe less. Breathing less is like portion control; It's a kind of air diet. As with caloric intake, we can become accustomed to higher quantities of substances than our body can process well. This applies to air much as it does to sugar and carbs. With habituation, the excessive volume becomes equated in our mind with the feeling of satiation. Even though reducing the load is healthier for us, it can sometimes feel like we're starving. Therefore, it is important to work with the subtle, reduced breath slowly and consistently. We need to reinforce our intention to change the way the brain is calling for breath. To make the change lasting and the practice sustainable, we also need to read our levels of tolerance accurately and not try to force or push the breath in a way that causes stress. The Subtle Breath requires a high degree of introspection and attention.

If you feel sleepy or drowsy during practice it is likely that you were not riding the edge of air hunger but rather stayed in your comfort zone. Gaining the benefit of Subtle Breathing requires dropping below the level of pure comfort to another state, one in which every breath requires attention and fine-tuning. Much like riding a surf board, you need to observe every wave and adjust your balance to stay afloat. You want to learn to calibrate as you practice, in order to keep yourself in what I refer to as the *zen-zone of tolerable discomfort*.

PRACTICE 4.2: SUBTLE BREATHING – FULL PRACTICE

Recommended practice: 4–6 times a day (for 3–5 minutes per session).

To gain the most svādhyāya from this practice, I recommend you take your CP before starting, and also again at the end. If you have a CP below 10 or any kind of cardiovascular condition, please build the practice slowly. Resist the urge to push, as this could elevate your heart rate or bring on feelings of anxiety. Even if your CP is higher than 10, you'll discover that pushing beyond your tolerance will likely result in you taking a large gasp of air reflexively, defeating the intention of the practice.

1. Sit in a Seated Mountain Pose with your spine erect (Photos 1 and 3).
2. Begin by taking your CP and make note of it. (Find instructions for taking your CP in Chapter 3.)

3. Place one hand on your chest, and your other hand just below the front of your rib cage, in the area of your solar plexus.
4. If your arm position is uncomfortable, use pillows or towels to prop your arms, so your neck and shoulders can relax fully (Photo 2).
5. Breathe softly through your nose.
6. Pacify the muscles of your chest. Quiet any movement in your upper rib cage. Relax tension in your neck.
7. Keep your lips together throughout the practice, for inhalation and exhalation.
8. Emphasize a soft lateral flare of your lower ribs with the inhale, and a gentle inward contraction with the exhale.
9. Place attention on the feeling of your breath as it passes through your nostrils.
10. Progressively lighten the movement of your breath as if making the breath “invisible.”
11. As you breathe in, visualize the Subtle Breath permeating every cell within you, as if you are breathing in space rather than air.
12. Consistently lighten the exhale so it becomes thread-like, imperceptible.
13. Throughout, maintain a silent breath with all movement becoming less discernible with each cycle.
14. Discover the soft edge of air hunger, where you are not “starving,” yet are aware of a desire to take in more.
15. Maintain a sustainable level of “hunger” without pushing yourself into the need to gasp for a breath for another 3–5 minutes.

Note: If you slow the breath beyond what is sustainable, the volume will increase. If you lower the volume too much, the rate will pick up. Find the *tolerable* level of low and slow breathing and maintain that for the duration of the practice. (Use a timer or stopwatch.)

1. As you come out of the practice, release your hands and relax your breath.
2. Continue to breathe gently through your nose.
3. Notice the contrast between your normal breath rate and volume and the effect of Subtle Breathing on your system.
4. Continue to breathe naturally for 1–2 minutes, allowing your breath to settle.
5. Repeat another round of Subtle Breathing, building to 3–4 minutes as is tolerable.
6. Rest again and observe.
7. If possible, do another round, building to 4–5 minutes.

8. Eventually build your tolerance to sustain your Subtle Breathing time to 5–10 minutes per round (take a 1–2 minute resting-breath break between rounds as necessary).
9. End the practice with a period of natural breathing for 2–3 minutes.
10. Take your CP again.
11. Track this information on the Subtle Breathing Chart below.

Note: The lower your CP at the start, the more quickly you will experience sensations of breathlessness. Work gently, always maintaining a quality of relaxation even while experiencing the challenge of breathing less. You may experience a variety of sensations that are unusual as you practice. These are quite normal and may include:

- sensations of warmth in the limbs or center of your body
- sensations of cold in the limbs or center of your body
- an increase of saliva in your mouth
- a sense of moistening in your eyes or slightly glazed/diffused gaze
- a clearing of your nose—especially if there was congestion prior to practice
- an opening of your sinus passageways
- a feeling of calm, alert awareness in your mind
- relaxation in your body without sleepiness.

It is helpful to monitor your heart rate (HR) by taking your pulse at your wrist or at your throat before and after practice as another means of self-regulation. This will also give you an opportunity to gain insight into how the practice is serving you. I recommend taking your HR after your CP. At the end of a good Subtle Breathing practice your CP will increase by a few seconds and your HR will decrease or remain unchanged. A CP that is lower and HR that is higher indicates that you pushed beyond your capacity. Please note that daily fluctuations in both CP and HR are normal within 1–4 seconds/beats. This process is non-linear. That is to say, your breath pattern is reflective of your lifestyle, inclusive of the whole *prāṇamaya* in addition to the usual *vṛttis*, such as thoughts and feelings: sleep patterns, dietary habits, exercise routines, and emotional states. All of these will affect the numbers and the felt sense during the practice. The Subtle Breathing Tracking Chart will help you see patterns of connection between your breath and your life more clearly.

EXAMPLE**Subtle Breathing Tracking Chart**

Date	Time of day	CP before/ after	HR before/ after	SB	Comments/Reflections
7/12/19	7 a.m.	16/ 18	72/72	3 min. rest 4 min. rest	<i>I still find it really hard to settle into the SB with the first round. My chest feels tight and I have to fight the desire to take a big breath. The second round is easier and I do feel some warming of my hands (which is great because they're always cold!) and more saliva in my mouth. By the end of the practice I feel more relaxed. I especially notice less tension in my neck and jaw. My mind feels quieter too.</i>
7/12/19	3:00 p.m.	15/19	72/68	4 min. rest 5 min.	<i>The morning was super hectic and I had lunch with friends, so was gabbing a lot. Then, my daughter called and she's having a hard time, so I ended up talking to her for nearly an hour. I had to take a nap after that, I was so drained. I felt better when I woke up and took the dog for a 30 min. walk, which was refreshing. Read a little bit and then remembered to do my practice. At first my CP was lower than in the morning and felt a little pushed (maybe it should've been 14), but I was able to settle into the Subtle Breath more quickly and it felt very relaxing. I don't think I've felt it quite like that before. My ending CP was quite a bit higher than when I started and my HR lower. I was happy about that. Felt a bit more energy than usual through the evening.</i>

CP = Comfortable Pause (note before/after); HR = heart rate (note before/after); SB = Subtle Breath (length of time of practice, e.g. 4 minutes)

Subtle Breathing Tracking Chart

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■ **Additional resources**

Patrick McKeown, author of the Oxygen Advantage, offers a downloadable reduced breathing app that has served many of my students well, as they are learning this practice. With his lovely Irish accent, this app is like a yoga nidra (a particular type of guided meditation), and provides a fabulous way to begin the day, or to help you reduce the breath to prepare for sleep. It is available through the iTunes app store: [ButeykoClinicInternational Self Help Program](#).