

The Fundamental: Breathing

“In this very breath that we take now lies the secret that all great teachers try to tell us.”

– Peter Matthiessen, award-winning author, naturalist and zen teacher

In Latin, the word “inspiration” literally means “to breathe in spirit.” Breathing is the link between the mind and the body, and therefore, an essential mind/body principle. Additionally, in Pilates and many other mind/body techniques, the breath is used to enhance stability by engaging the core muscles.

The natural flow of our breathing is affected by both physical and mental stress, so it will change daily. Therefore, the movement of the breath in the body will also need to be “tuned into” daily.

If you place your fingers lightly on the bottom ribs, you can become aware of their movement. Ideally, the higher ribs play only a minor role in the breathing process. As you inhale, the diaphragm, which is attached to the bottom ribs, drops and stretches. It moves from an inverted dome-like shape to a more straightened, even slightly dish-like shape. This helps the lungs to fill, as well as creates pressure within your trunk. As you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and moves upwards.

Alongside its function in breathing, the diaphragm assists the abdominal muscles in increasing the intra-abdominal pressure that is important when stabilizing the lumbo-pelvic girdle for lifting movements. In Pilates, this mechanism is engaged when using lateral breathing.

The Pilates breath is a relaxed and full breath pattern that

focuses the mind and allows concentration on the movement or exercise being performed. The breath should be complete, thorough and purifying. As a general rule, exhale with exertion.

- Inhale and exhale through the nose.
- Fill lungs from the bottom and empty from the top.
- Complete, thorough and purifying; use lateral, upper lobe and back breathing rather than deep abdominal breathing.
- Connect the mind and body with the breath; focus on exhalation to engage powerhouse.
- Inhale during the longest lever movements (think inhale on the point of effort).
- Exhale as you flex or rotate the spine.

The Fundamental: Breathing is a great way to begin a lesson to help a student center their mind and body, relax their spinal erectors and gain greater awareness of the breath.

Lie supine with the knees bent and allow the arms to be in a comfortable position.

Expand the rib cage three-dimensionally with every breath – ribs moving forward, sideways and backward on inhalation. As abdominal muscles are held lightly contracted, exhale completely. Feel the breath move in the body like a wave or an accordion, one breath connecting to the next.

“To breathe correctly squeeze every atom of air from your lungs until they are almost as free of air as is a vacuum.”

– Joseph Pilates