

## **THE NINE-ROUND BREATHING PRACTICE – 3 VERSIONS**

The nine-round breathing practice is used as a preparation for other meditations. It is a method for calming the mind and clearing away disturbing thoughts, particularly the three “poisonous” attitudes of anger, attachment, and ignorance. Three versions of this practice are explained below, the first two are more simple to perform, and the third, from the Vajrayana tradition, is more complex. You can practice whichever one you find most helpful.

### **VERSION 1**

Sit comfortably in the meditation posture, with your back straight. Let your body relax; let go of any tension. When you are ready, begin the nine-round breathing practice. This practice can help your mind to become more calm and focused.

- 1) For the first three breaths, breathe in through the right nostril and out the left nostril. If you wish, you can use your forefinger to block off the left nostril while you breathe in, and to block off the right nostril when you breathe out.
- 2) For the next three breaths, breathe in through the left nostril and out through the right nostril. Again, you can use your forefinger to block the nostril you are not using for each breath.
- 3) For the last three breaths, breath in through both nostrils, and out through both nostrils.

With each breath, keep your mind focused on the breath, on the sensations you can feel at the nostrils as the breath goes in and out. Do not let your mind be distracted by thoughts or anything else. You can do the practice one, two or three times before doing other meditations.

### **VERSION 2**

Do the practice as explained above, but when you breathe in, visualize that you are breathing in blissful white light—symbolizing all the perfect qualities of the enlightened beings, such as wisdom and compassion. This light fills your entire body and mind, and your body becomes clear and pure, and your mind becomes peaceful and positive.

And when you breathe out, visualize that you are breathing out smoke or fog—symbolizing your restless thoughts, distractions, and any negative emotions that are in your mind. This smoke goes out and completely disappears in space.

### **VERSION 3**

This version of the nine-round breathing practice comes from the Vajrayana (or Tantric) tradition of Buddhism, and involves visualizing the three main channels of your subtle nervous system and clearing them of negative energy. There is an intimate relationship between our mind and the subtle nervous system. This is a psychic system composed of thousands of thin, transparent, subtle channels. The mental energy flows through our body within this system. The three principal channels—known as the central, right, and left channels—run parallel to and just in front of the spinal column.

## THE PRACTICE

Sit comfortably in a cross-legged posture or on a chair or meditation stool. Start by imagining that your body is hollow, like a balloon....

Then visualize the central channel: it is a transparent, hollow tube, a finger's breadth in diameter, and straight as an arrow. It runs from the crown of the head to the navel *chakra*, four finger breadths below the navel; running through the center of the body just in front of the spine. It's blue in color.

Then visualize the right and left channels: slightly thinner than the central one. The right channel is red, and the left is white. They start from the right and left nostrils respectively, travel upwards to the top of the head and then curve over to run down through the center of the body, on either side of the central channel. The three channels all join at the navel chakra, a few inches below the level of the navel.

- 1) Breathe in through the left nostril, visualizing the air traveling through the left channel all the way down to the navel chakra, then entering the right channel. The air travels up through the right channel and leaves the body through the right nostril. Imagine that all your energy of **attachment** or **desire** is pushed out of your body along with the breath, and this negative energy then completely disappears in space. Repeat three times.
- 2) Breathe in through the right nostril, imagining the air travelling down through the right channel to the navel chakra, then up and out through the left channel. All your energy of **anger** or **aversion** is pushed out of your body with the breath, and disappears. Repeat three times.
- 3) Breathe in through both nostrils, bringing the air down through both the right and left channels to the navel chakra. From there the air enters the central channel. Imagine that the air travels up through the central channel and out through the top of your head, pushing out all your energy of **ignorance**. Repeat three times.

Doing this practice once should suffice to prepare the mind for meditation, but you might feel like repeating it a second or third time if your mind is more agitated or restless.

If you find it difficult to visualize the three channels, you can do the practice just with the breath, feeling that as you breathe in and out you are clearing out your disturbing thoughts and energies.

As an additional aid to the practice, you can visualize that as you inhale, you breathe in the pure energy of all enlightened beings in the form of blissful, radiant white light, and as you exhale, you breathe out your negative energy in the form of smoke or pollution, which disappears in space.

You might also find it helpful to block off the opposite nostril to the one you are inhaling or exhaling through—e.g. while inhaling through the right, you block off the left, and while inhaling through the left you block off the right. Your breathing should be slow and deep throughout the exercise.

*Prepared for the How to Meditate weekend seminar taught by Sangye Khadro at Maitreya Institute in Amsterdam, 23-24 July, 2011.*