The quality of our breathing, of our inhalation and exhalation, reveals a great deal about our stance toward life. By observing, by sensing, our breathing we can greatly increase our awareness of ourselves. As we observe our breathing we may become aware, for example, of how the extent and comfort of our inhalation reflects our readiness and ability to embrace life at that moment, and how the extent and comfort of our exhalation reflects our readiness and ability to let go, to trust something other than the accouterments of our self-image. We may notice how during fear or other strong negative emotions we restrict the overall flow and duration of our breath by contracting various parts of our body in order to reduce the energy available for feeling, and how during more pleasant emotions we increase the flow and duration of our breath to take in more energy and thus to feel more.

Our Breathing Is Influenced by Our Emotions

Through awareness of our breathing, especially through self-sensing, we not only learn about the subtle, constantly changing needs of our bodies, but we also begin to learn about the ways in which our emotions and our breathing influence each other, our health, and well-being. By listening to the sensation of our body, especially our breathing, not only when we are in quiet circumstances but also when we are in the middle of the difficult situations of our lives, we become aware of connections between parts of ourselves that ordinarily escape our attention. By sensing the way our breathing changes in relation to changing circumstances, as well as by sensing the attitudes, tensions, postures, and emotions that arise in these same conditions, we begin to learn, with exacting detail, about the intimate relationship of our breathing to our overall sense of ourselves. This new, direct knowledge of ourselves in action, including our breathing, gives our brain and nervous system the knowledge and perspective it needs to help free us from our habitual psychophysical patterns of action and reaction. Self-sensing helps create new connections between existing neurons in the brain and nervous system. These new connections help increase our overall awareness, and promote greater sensitivity and flexibility in our perception and behavior.

Three Kinds of Breathing

As we begin this work of awareness through breathing, we will begin to learn something about the basic principles of breathing and how these principles relate to our health and well-being. We may observe, for example, that there are three basic kinds of breathing: the balanced breath, the cleansing breath, and the energizing breath. In balanced breathing, the time required for inhalation and exhalation is more
or less the same (depending on what we are doing). Balanced breathing, however shallow or full, reflects the automatic, mostly unconscious equilibrium of our lives. In cleansing breathing, exhalation is much longer than inhalation. This kind of breathing sometimes takes place spontaneously as a sigh or moan when we are physically or emotionally overloaded with tension, or when we have been hyperventilating (breathing too much air too quickly for the circumstances in which we find ourselves). The long, slow exhalation helps turn on the parasympathetic nervous system, enabling us to relax. In energizing breathing, inhalation is much longer than exhalation. This kind of breathing sometimes takes place spontaneously as a yawn when we are tired or bored. The long, deep inhalation helps turn on the sympathetic nervous system, preparing us to take action.

**Breathing Fully and Naturally**

For many of us, our way of breathing manifests only a small portion of our full breathing capacity. Many of us are fast, shallow breathers—that is, we breathe mainly in the top of the chest. If we are to live full, vital lives, however, we need to learn full, natural, authentic breathing, which utilizes to some extent all the breathing spaces of the body (depending on what is appropriate at the moment), not only the breathing space of the chest, but also, and more importantly, the spaces of the pelvis, belly, and back. This helps the diaphragm move freely and effortlessly through its full range of motion, without any unnecessary tensions impeding its movements.

Natural, authentic breathing can have an enormous beneficial impact on our health and well-being, and even on our spiritual development. But for this to occur, we need to learn how to sense ourselves from the inside and to release the various unnecessary tensions that are part and parcel of our self-image—tensions that are reflected clearly in our breathing. For it is these tensions, which are closely linked to our habitual patterns of thinking and feeling, that consume our energy and undermine our health and well-being. It is through the work of natural, authentic breathing that we can begin to get in touch with the energy locked into these tensions, and free up this energy for our health, well-being, and awareness.

http://www.authentic-breathing.com/breathing-awareness.htm