Conscious, organic use of breath by the mother and her attendants has the power to profoundly influence labor and how a woman engages with it. The first action we take in any situation is a breath. The breath affects the lungs, immediately cueing the nervous system. The nervous system responds by sending messages, which impact our entire psycho-physiological system. Messages sent from the nervous system affect us physically, emotionally and mentally. If we alter how we breathe, we alter the constellation of messages and reactions in our entire mind-body organism.

When breath is diaphragmatic and flows smoothly, without exaggerated breaks or restrictions, it is physiologically not possible to be in a state of agitation. Breath has the compassion and the wisdom to support and assist us. (If body has wisdom, we might also surmise that breath has wisdom.) This is not a belief system. It is a practice. Practice, by its very nature, is not head knowledge. It is somatic. It deposits its knowledge into our body, into our muscles and into our nervous system. Then, when in a challenging situation, we are freer to respond instead of react. As a yoga teacher who attends births and has designed a childbirth education class and training based on sound yogic principles, I work hands-on with my clients to help them discover for themselves how breath affects their response.

Tension and anxiety increase the minute breath becomes erratic or restricted, but decrease the minute breath becomes diaphragmatic and flowing. Breath is either a source of subliminal disturbance or support. Haphazard chest breathing generates underlying disturbance, which increases tension and anxiety. As most of us know, tension and anxiety increase adrenaline levels. Adrenaline counteracts oxytocin output and impedes the natural process of labor.

Flowing, diaphragmatic breathing generates underlying support, which increases relaxation and contributes to the mother's sense of well-being. Relaxation augments oxytocin production and release, which helps to make labor more productive. It also lets the mother respond to labor with more confidence and steadiness. Thus, how the mother breathes has the power to alter how labor and birth unfold and to enhance the birthing process. Surprisingly, how we breathe not only influences how we respond to a situation, but it influences those around us. Few things in life are as comforting or reassuring as the sound and movement of smooth, rhythmic breath.

Breath is the link between mind and body. The mother can use breath in the midst of labor to relax her body and focus her mind, which reduces tension, anxiety, and pain. Because breath is literally and intimately connected to every action, becoming a conscious diaphragmatic breather has exponential results. It affects everything—from digestion to tension to how we handle challenges, and more.

Breath accompanies us wherever we go, whatever we do. It is our constant companion. It does not abandon us. Developing an ongoing relationship with breath is of great value. When you become a more conscious, diaphragmatic breather, you reap the rewards, and so does everyone around you.

The Simplest Practices Are the Most Profound

Breath can be either participatory and conscious or involuntary and unconscious. Our body breathes whether we pay attention or not. Conscious use of breath is a tool we can use to bring our system back into balance. To focus the mind and relax the body, attend the breath and allow it to become:

- Diaphragmatic, such that it fluidly moves the diaphragm, lower ribs, and belly without engaging the intercostal (rib) muscles of the chest or distending the abdomen.
- Flowing without jerks or restrictions
- Rhythmic and fluid, without exaggerated breaks
- Quiet and smooth, without noises. (This does not mean a laboring woman should not combine the exhalation with sound during her waves—more on that later.)

Do not be deceived by the simplicity of this practice. The simplest practices are the most powerful and profound. Fluid, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing is so effective that within forty seconds, a biofeedback machine records the body's physiological alteration. I witnessed this when I went through a series of biofeedback sessions as part of a holistic therapy program. Tension levels measurably decrease, and body temperature at the extremities measurably increases, indicating enhanced levels of relaxation. This is called the relaxation response.

Because the way we breathe instantaneously affects the mind-body system, breath has the power to turn an unnev-
ing situation around in less than a minute. Engaging the relaxation response by rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing is one of the most powerful tools a laboring woman can use to decrease pain during labor. The body is optimally designed to breathe diaphragmatically. Incidentally, all babies are diaphragmatic breathers. Babies come into the world the least developed of all mammals. Because their nervous system is not sufficiently developed at birth for them to use the intercostal muscles of the chest, babies cannot chest breathe.

The first breath is the demarcation line; the thread that draws us into life. It is the vital element that protects and ensures our crossing into this realm. And our last expiration, again, ensures our crossing. Deep inside, we know breath is life.

**Use Breath to Discern How a Woman Is Coping with Labor**

By observing a laboring woman’s breath, you can easily discern how she is coping with labor. Her breath pattern will cue you as to when she needs assistance. When her breath flows fluidly, she is managing. When her breath becomes erratic, rapid, shallow or choppy, or exhibits long pauses, she needs assistance. If the mother’s breath becomes choppy or exhibits long pauses, she is using breath to fight the waves by pitting her strength against the force of contractions. If her breath rises to the upper chest and is erratic, rapid and shallow, or if she hyperventilates, she is using breath to run away from the rising force of contractions. These patterns increase tension, which increases anxiety and pain.

When breath is haphazard, rapid, shallow or exhibits long pauses, it cues the nervous system to release fright, flight or fight responses. Then tension, anxiety and pain levels soar. Getting through labor with recurrent fright, flight or fight cues is like scaling a cliff that goes straight up with no rope to hold onto. When you assist the mother to re-establish flowing breath, it is like giving her a rope so she can continue her climb. Knowing when to intervene with breath and having skills to help the mother re-establish a fluid, flowing breath greatly reduces anxiety and pain in labor.

**Focus on Breath**

A focus on breath keeps both the mother and her attendants centered and grounded in the moment. You cannot breathe in the past or in the future. By focusing on the breath, you help the mother stay focused in the now. Most women can deal with one breath, one wave of labor at a time.

When a woman cannot release tension from one wave, she carries it into the next wave. As tension accumulates from one wave to the next, labor becomes overwhelming. Then the mother either accelerates or shuts down the breath in an effort to cope. Rapid, shallow breathing, hyperventilating, or temporarily holding the breath seems to help the mother cope in the moment. But the result is escalating pain, which creates a downward spiral.

Simple intervention with her breath prevents the spiral from continuing. When the mother receives assistance to re-establish a fluid breath pattern, she not only immediately reduces or eliminates fright, flight or fight cues, but she releases rigidity in the diaphragm, which greatly reduces tension levels in the entire body. Rhythmic, flowing breath reduces tension between the waves, as well as during the waves, which in turn reduces pain.

**The Importance of Nostril Breathing**

Nostrils are designed to filter, warm and moisturize air before it reaches the lungs. During nostril breathing, air flows through the nasal turbinates. Nasal turbinates increase the velocity of air and stimulate nerve endings, which go directly into the brain and positively affect brain function. Inhaling through the mouth uses more energy, bypasses the important stimulation of nerve endings in the nostrils and is dehydrating. Since conserving energy and keeping the mother hydrated are important, nostril breathing is preferred.

Inhaling through the mouth stimulates the upper lobes of the lungs, which then cues the nervous system to release fright, flight or fight responses. Since the mother’s nervous system and sense of well-being are intimately connected to breath, inhaling through the nose helps the mother travel through labor with less distress. Use a decongestant spray to unclog her nasal passages if she gets congested.

**Use Soft Gazing and Simple Breath Awareness**

As an attendant at birth, it is wise to have a continual peripheral awareness of the quality of the mother’s breath. The best way to be aware of the mother’s breathing is to apply the soft gazing technique. To use soft gazing, relax and align your body, soften your eyes, let your breath flow and take in the mother’s breath pattern with a soft, wide-open gaze. If you cannot detect how she is breathing, tune in and breathe with her.

There will be times when you are exclusively focused on the mother’s breathing. But this is not a prescription to hover over her breath; that will irritate her. Encourage her to let the breath flow like the surf of the ocean. The mother can focus on the breath both during the waves and between the waves. Simple breath awareness grounds her in her body and helps her relax. Use breath awareness until it no longer works.

**Intervention Strategies**

**Hand-on-Upper-Abdomen Technique:** If the mother needs to find a more effective breath pattern, intervene by using the hand-on-upper-abdomen technique. To use this technique, place your hand on her upper abdomen between her lower ribs and navel. Your warm hand on her soft upper abdomen, above her contracting uterus, gives her a place to center her attention. Do not press too hard, but press firmly enough to give her a focus as to where to bring her breath. Get close to her and say: “Breathe into my hand.” Her goal is make your hand rise with the inhalation and fall with the exhalation.
If she cannot find the way to a more effective breath pattern say: “Make my hand move with the inhalation.” At the same time, apply slightly more pressure on her soft upper abdomen to help guide her breath to your hand. Your goal is to help her find a more natural flowing breath rhythm and un-restrict the diaphragm. The hands-on-upper-abdomen technique may take a few waves to establish. Be gentle, but be persistent. The mother may want you to leave your hand in place because your warm hand stabilizes her and gives her a focal point to breathe into during the wave. Cue in to her comfort and adjust the pressure of your hand accordingly.

There may be times when your hand disturbs her during the wave. When that happens, remove your hand. Go with her specific comfort level, which is always changing. You can continue to cue her with hands-on-upper-abdomen technique between the waves and remind her, “Breathe here.” You can also cue her with the phrase “Let your breath flow like the surf of the ocean.” This gives her an idea to work with.

Placing your hand on her upper abdomen provides great assistance. It gives her a focus and helps her to consciously use breath to reduce anxiety, tension and pain.

Sounding Technique: When breathing into your hand ceases to work, try the sounding technique with the exhalation. This technique has a physiological basis, in that sounding helps to regulate the breathing. It elongates the exhalation and frees the diaphragm, which relaxes the whole body. Make a low sound—aaabbbbbb—near her ear. Make the sound to get her going and encourage her to say aaabbbbbb with you. Using the aaabbbbbb sound also helps her to relax and release her jaw and mouth.

In ancient maps of the face, the jaw corresponds to the pelvis and hip joints. The tongue corresponds to the sacral area. The mouth corresponds to the pelvic floor and cervix. Thus, relaxing the jaw and softening the mouth helps to eliminate unnecessary tension in the cervix. Let her find her own sound and her own rhythm. The idea is to connect the pain to the sound and groan it out.

I have attended labors where we sounded together through most of late active and transition labor. This technique can be extremely effective. If you are comfortable doing it, sound with her. This comes naturally to some, as we have the desire to enter into another’s sphere to support them. Say “Good job. Move the pain out with the sound.” This gives her an idea to work with.

Women often get into a rhythm with sounding; it becomes a ritual, which is soothing and focusing. The long exhalation un-restricts the diaphragm and relaxes her body, labor instead of using it to resist or run away. She diminishes pain as she relaxes her body and creates a focus.

The mother may be silent or make subdued sounds between the waves. Encourage her to let the end of the wave wash away with a sighing exhalation. You can also combine sounding with the hand-on-upper-abdomen technique periodically to help her remain grounded and centered. Be aware of your own breathing and comfort. Offer fluids. Let her rest.

While many more strategies to assist a laboring woman are covered in my book, Fathers at Birth, using these few simple techniques can greatly impact how a woman copes with labor. (I also clue my clients in that simple diaphragmatic breathing is documented to reduce blood pressure, heart attack risk, and much, much more!) I’d love your feedback!

Rose St. John is the author of Fathers at Birth: Your Role in Bringing Your Child into the World (www.fathersatbirth.com). As an E-RYT 500, T 500 yoga instructor, she works with pregnancy, birth preparation and transition labor. She studied with Swami Rama, master of Raja Yoga and pranayama (breathing), and founder of the Himalayan Institute.

Sounding Technique: When breathing into your hand ceases to work, try the sounding technique with the exhalation. This technique has a physiological basis, in that sounding helps to regulate the breathing. It elongates the exhalation and frees the diaphragm, which relaxes the whole body. Make a low sound—aaabbbbbb—near her ear. Make the sound to get her going and encourage her to say aaabbbbbb with you. Using the aaabbbbbb sound also helps her to relax and release her jaw and mouth.

In ancient maps of the face, the jaw corresponds to the pelvis and hip joints. The tongue corresponds to the sacral area. The mouth corresponds to the pelvic floor and cervix. Thus, relaxing the jaw and softening the mouth helps to eliminate unnecessary tension in the cervix. Let her find her own sound and her own rhythm. The idea is to connect the pain to the sound and groan it out.

Hands-on-upper-abdomen technique and the sound gives her a focal point. Many women feel they are actually moving the pain out with the breath and the vibration of the sound. The inhalation naturally rises after spending the exhalation in sound, and the breath takes on a healthier rhythm.

Each mother finds her own sound, which can be roaring and primal, or it may be subdued, more like a sigh, depending on the mother and where she is in labor. By connecting the pain to the exhalation and sound, she gets the breath flowing with her