

retention (*bahya kumbhaka*) which is more challenging but allows us to practise the hardest part of a performance dive in a shorter distance, time or depth.


Through the process of apnea diving I've learnt a lot about myself and how to manage the negative thoughts that encroach what is otherwise a peaceful practice. For me it's a form of meditation. By challenging the frequent thought of 'I need to breathe', I can steadily extend my breath hold. The trick is knowing the difference between a mere negative thought and an essential thought of 'I really do need to breathe now!' This is achieved through awareness and practice.

Health benefits

My relationship to the breath-hold is important because if I approach it with a negative attitude then I'm unlikely to achieve my goal. My mantra is to 'become comfortable with discomfort'. You need to be relaxed to hold your breath. In a way, apnea is a sport of competitive relaxation. In the four years I've been freediving I've learnt to better manage work stress and overcome anxiety in other areas of my life.

Scientists are now using breath-holding for medical purposes in respiratory conditions such as asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD) and also hypertension, migraines and stress-related disorders. The Butyeko method is the most commonly known technique, using controlled breathing and pauses to prevent hyperventilation and help sufferers manage their symptoms. Several freediving friends with asthma have almost completely overcome their condition through breath-hold training.

Yogis are said to measure age by the number of breaths we take, so perhaps by slowing down our breathing and extending the pause every once in a while we'll add a few years to our life. Or more importantly we can find ourselves in a moment of pause and enjoy being present with the stillness, before life sweeps us on.

A word of caution: If you're new to *pranayama* and *kumbhaka* then ask an experienced teacher to help you, starting with short retentions. Apnea is potentially harmful if practised in water without supervision. It's always best done with friends and with an instructor. 

Rebecca Coales is a yoga and freediving instructor, and the British record holder in the Dynamic No Fins discipline of freediving (omdiver.co.uk)