

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE...

How can you turn something you do every day into a seasonal mood booster? Writer Karen Swayne discovers a natural high that's under your very nose

I know, I know... going to a retreat to learn how to breathe sounds like the ultimate in woo-woo indulgence. We do it instinctively from birth and, having made it this far, we must be doing something right.

But, says Alan Dolan, aka the Breath Guru, we can all learn how to do it much, much better, and by doing so, reduce tension, gain sharper focus, enhance wellbeing and give ourselves a spiritual detox to boot. With a full-on combination of work, family, a gruelling commute and with Christmas fast approaching, free energy on tap sounds super-appelling, so I book myself into the Lanzarote villa where Alan runs his connected breathing retreats.

'Jean shorts, grey T-shirt – look for the hippy :)', reads his text message when I land at the airport where we're due to meet.

Slightly dishevelled, but instantly engaging and interested, Alan is a well-travelled soul who's lived in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, before settling in the Canaries. He has called Lanzarote his home for the past 15 years, drawn by the year-round sunshine. As we drive through the dramatic black lava landscape, he explains why he's on a mission to help the stressed out slow down, find some space and trust in the healing power of their own body. It's clearly going well – among his fans is actor Naomi Harris, and we're travelling in a smart and very

unhippyish Range Rover.

Why breathing? 'Most people only use a fraction of their lung capacity,' he says, 'Conscious, or connected breathwork allows us to access much more than that, and infuse the body with oxygen and energy. All it takes is a little bit of practice. Basically, it's meditation for people who can't meditate; a way of pressing pause on our 24/7 lives.'

I'm all for that, but surprisingly nervous – what if I'm no good at it? Still, I'm happy to find that the villa is a zen-like delight; cool, minimal, stylish rooms surround a pool, Buddhas gaze benignly down from walls, and the mountain views are spectacular. With no alcohol, caffeine or meat on offer, I'm looking forward to



a physical detox, as well as body reset in time for the festive season.

Alan works with small groups of three or four people at a time, and joining me are Jim, a retired teacher from Fife who is here to get space to reflect, and Liz, a clinical psychologist from London who had a one-off session with Alan in the UK and wanted a deeper experience. We will soon know the intimate details of each other's lives; it turns out that this breathing thing can be rather exposing.

Pinned to the kitchen wall is the day's schedule, which doesn't look too gruelling:

8.15am: ginger and apple shots and smoothie
10am: massage
11.30am: one-to-one breathe session with Alan
1pm: lunch
4pm: group breathe session
5.15pm: dinner
8pm: hot tub
9pm: self practice

It's something of a surprise to find myself staggering around just a few hours later like a spaced-out zombie, desperate to lay my head down and sleep.

First up is the massage (more of a full body workout), which is designed to open up the body to prepare it for the breathwork later. In the strong, skilful hands of Martin, the air is pushed out of my lungs, while the combination of shiatsu, reiki, deep tissue and craniosacral work leaves me shattered. But, before I have time to draw breath, it's straight to the therapy room for my first one-to-one session.

Cross-legged on cushions, Alan explains that our regular breathing is so shallow that we only use around 25% of our lung capacity. Breathing through my mouth will allow me to draw in more air down to the lower lungs and flood my red blood cells with oxygen. Most importantly, I must stay 'connected', with no pauses between inhaling and exhaling.

I soon get the hang of it and almost immediately feel the physical effects. It starts with a tingling in my hands and arms. Alan has primed me to expect a sensation like pins and needles or Champagne bubbles flowing through my veins, but this is way more intense. They are throbbing, as if my body is expanding Incredible Hulk-style, as the blood rushes around. At times, the

pressure is so great that it's as if someone is pressing down on my body.

It's unnerving, but as Alan murmurs positive affirmations, such as 'I am good enough', and gently applies acupressure to stress points, mainly my hips and collarbones, the hour flies by. Afterwards, I feel charged with energy, like one of the women in Naomi Alderman's futuristic novel *The Power* who can take down men by pointing a finger at them and zapping them with electricity.

Tottering to my room, I catch sight of myself in the mirror; pupils dilated, I look dazed and confused – in a way I haven't been since I used to go clubbing (decades ago). Can I really do four days of this? I crash out and go straight to sleep. Later that day, I attend the group session, which is slightly less intense. There's a different energy in the room, but the physical sensations remain.

The following morning, I wake after a fitful sleep

with a pounding headache, which continues on and off over the course of my stay. As the days drift by, I find I'm unable to focus on anything; I can't concentrate on a book or look at a screen. Jim, Liz and I spend our time talking about our experiences or simply sleeping. A beach walk feels like a major expedition – the thought of Christmas shopping is simply unimaginable. But, in our final one-to-one session, Alan says, 'Let's see if we can get you to Nirvana...'.
With each breathing session, I've gone deeper into my body and, by now, the feeling is comfortingly familiar. While I wouldn't call it blissful, it feels more natural and when the session ends, I surprise myself by finding tears flowing down my cheeks. The strange thing is that I don't feel sad or emotional, in fact, I feel strangely calm, but every sensation is heightened – touch, sound and vision – it feels quite psychedelic, with the brightness turned up to max. 'There you go, you made it,' says Alan. 'Just wow!', I scrawl later in my journal.

Back home, and doing daily 10-minute sessions every morning, my exhaustion is a distant memory. I feel charged with energy and ready to handle anything the festive season (and Southern Railway) can throw at me. Connected breathing is one of the best antidotes to stress and anxiety, and at this busy time of year, I'm using it to find calm in the chaos.

NOW GET BREATHING

The beauty of the conscious breathing technique is that it can be done anywhere you can find a bit of privacy. Start with a five-minute session at the beginning or end of the day and increase up to 10-15 minutes.

1. Lie on your back on the floor in a safe, secure environment where you won't be disturbed. Place a pillow under your head and shoulders.
 2. Begin to use your mouth to breathe – make sure it's open wide enough by checking you can get your index finger between your upper and lower teeth.
 3. Breathe deeply into your abdomen, aiming for just below your navel. Imagine you are inflating a balloon in your stomach with each inhale.
 4. Without pausing, take a short breath out – a gentle puff, as if fogging a mirror. The emphasis is on the inhale, the exhale is a short, soft sigh.
 5. Your breath needs to flow, so imagine that it is like a swing, continuously moving.
 6. Once you have finished, close your mouth, and breathe through your nose. Notice any emotions and physical feelings and allow them to just be.
- For more information and guided sessions, download the *BreathGuru* app (£4.79, Google Play Store, £3.99, iTunes).