



Circular Breathing

Circular Breathing - What is it and how to do it

There is a big myth when people talk about circular breathing with the didgeridoo - it is NOT breathing in and out at the same as that is a physical impossibility - though it may look and sound like that. It is being able to breathe in while still making a noise with air that is left in your mouth.

What is Circular Breathing?

Circular breathing is a skill that requires practice, much like driving. Knowledge before you start is a key element - if you know what's supposed to happen there is more chance of you succeeding. Learning to circular breath can take some time, years in some cases whereas for others it can be picked up almost instantly.

In a similar way to patting the top of your head with one hand, whilst making a circular motion with your other hand, placed on your stomach. It is a matter of co-ordination and control of that co-ordination.

It is physically impossible to breathe in and out at the same time, although you can breathe in through your nose or mouth they both join at the back of the mouth at the top of the throat leaving one passage for the air to travel. But the body is a marvellous thing, if it is busy doing something like eating or drinking it is able to stop the food or drink from going into the lungs. It does this by moving a flap of muscle called the epiglottis across the top of the tube that carries air to the lungs (called the trachea), allowing liquid or solid to pass down the pipe leading to your stomach (called the oesophagus).

Although this happens naturally, you can control it, and will become apparent as you learn and develop your didgeridoo playing techniques.

How to circular breathe - Getting Started

Once you have mastered the concept of circular breathing you can play around with all the variances that go with it, however getting the hang of it is the main focus at this point.

Ok to demonstrate the process of circular breathing (try or imagine) your mouth is full of water with your cheeks puffed out. Holding that water in your mouth you can still breathe in and out of your nose. When you release the water from your mouth you can do so by squeezing your cheeks inwards and opening your lips just slightly will produce a stream of water. Try or imagine this again but concentrate on spitting/releasing the water when you take a breath in through your nose.

As you squeeze the water out, air is breathed in. Replace the water with air and repeat. Puff your cheeks out and hold it for a few seconds then, whilst breathing in squeeze the air out. Don't worry about making a noise or anything else - it is building a familiarity of the technique with your muscles and with your mind.

Using your jaw can help. When your cheeks are puffed out, lower and raise your jaw. Notice how your cheeks will go in and out with this jaw movement. When squeezing the air out, raise your jaw slightly, it will improve the effectiveness of your breathing outwards.

Having become used to this, try it with the didgeridoo (air not water). Don't worry about playing a drone at first, literally repeat the above exercise but with the mouthpiece of the didgeridoo against your lips. You will feel a difference as there is now back pressure from the bore of the didgeridoo i.e. the air you are breathing out is under pressure in a confined column and not being released into thin air.

Again, repeat this until you are happy you are familiar with the action.

Now introduce a drone, does not matter how long, just get a drone on the go. Then concentrating on the previous exercise, end the drone by squeezing out the air from your cheeks and taking a breath

in. Needless to say but I will anyway - practice this until you are familiar with it - it will become easier the more you do.

Depending on how well you get used to this you will find that when you stop playing having squeezed the air out and breathed in through your nose, that your lungs have air and that you are ready to blow another drone. So now, try and play a drone ending in a squeeze and sniff, then try and play a second drone with the air you have breathed in. At first it may stutter, not be continuous and sound awful (it did when I learnt!), but don't worry its just practice. Using the care analogy again, its like changing gear on a car - at first the gears may crunch and the car judder forward, even stalling, but soon, once you are familiar with changing gear , pressing clutch etc the motion becomes smooth and the gear changes smooth.

If there is a gap in playing, a stutter or complete stop to the playing, try again but next time try to make the gap less, the stutter smaller and so on. Don't try too hard - the harder you try the harder it is - at first I almost gave up because I just couldn't get it to work, then picking up the didge and saying I'm going to play and not bother with circular breathing - it happened - so keep going even if at first you don't succeed.

Ultimately you will be able to take several squeeze and sniffs without stopping - when you do - well done you have learnt to circular breathe!

Smoothness

At first the breathing will not be smooth as you will be unused to the technique. This is common with almost everyone, focus on what it is you find difficult to do or what sounds awful and try to find the root cause. For example a mistake often made is to try and breath out with too little air left - remember to try and keep your lungs 50-75% full at any one time. Another is trying to breath in too much air in one go - you do not need to breath in to lung capacity but enough air to continue playing until the next breath.

In practicing and developing your playing the 'sniff' will become shorter and made with less effort, the squeezing of your cheeks will become smooth.

Different Ways To Circular Breathe

The squeeze and sniff technique is but one of several techniques that can be used to circular breathe. If you think of your body as a complicated organic machine made from lots of parts, all working together (most of the time) to create the being that is you. Your lungs contain the air that your breath in, the diaphragm along with other muscles control upward and outward pressure in exhaling the air, the air itself travels along passageways in your throat, passes through your vocal chords into your mouth where your tongue, jaw, cheeks and lips control the final release of the air.

Utilising and developing these parts will help your playing giving you greater versatility and the ability to play more complex rhythms and for longer.

It is possible to use your tongue as a kind of pump to help force air to escape as can raising your jaw, also using your diaphragm to help with circular breathing. All these techniques I will be looking at separately and in detail later on.

Practice Exercises

Here are couple more exercises on top of the one mentioned above you can practice to help develop your circular breathing.

- 🌈 Place a drinking straw in your mouth and blow air out through it. Place a finger in front of the straw so you can feel the air from the straw on your finger. Now try to circular breathe. Once you have mastered this technique you will feel a continuous (if somewhat erratic at first) flow of air against your finger.
- 🌈 This exercise will help develop strength in your cheeks and mouth making it easier to circular breathe (and play in general). Place a balloon in your mouth and start to blow it up, but instead of blowing it right the way up and tying a knot, blow it up with closing of the part you blow into. In other words as you blow into the balloon, you will have more pressure to breath against. Use your cheek muscles in a squeezing action to pump air into the balloon. When you achieved a balloon that is ¼ to 1/3 full, allow the air to fill your mouth and then pump it back in to the balloon. Repeat this process but do not overly strain yourself. Build up gradually. Initially your cheeks will ache from the effort but they very quickly build up the power to sustain the blowing quite easily.

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