

Introduction to Pranayama and Yogic Breathing

Breathing is so simple and so obvious we often take it for granted, ignoring the power it has to affect body, mind and spirit. With each inhale we bring oxygen into the body and spark the transformation of nutrients into fuel. Each exhale purges the body of carbon dioxide, a toxic waste. Breathing also affects our state of mind. It can make us excited or calm, tense or relaxed. It can make our thinking confused or clear. What's more, in the yogic tradition, air is the primary source of prana or life force, a psycho-physio-spiritual force that permeates the universe.

Pranayama is loosely translated as prana or breath control. The ancient yogis developed many breathing techniques to maximize the benefits of prana. Pranayama is used in yoga as a separate practice to help clear and cleanse the body and mind. It is also used in preparation for meditation, and in asana, the practice of postures, to help maximize the benefits of the practice, and focus the mind.

Below are several of the most commonly used forms of pranayama.

Ujjayi

Ujjayi is often called the "sounding" breath or "ocean sounding" breath, and somewhat irreverently as the "Darth Vader" breath. It involves constricting the back of the throat while breathing to create an "ah" sound -- thus the various "sounding" names.

Benefits

Focuses the mind
Increases mindfulness
Generates internal heat

How to do it

1. Come into a comfortable seated position with your spine erect, or lie down on your back. Begin taking long, slow, and deep breaths through the nostrils.
2. Allow the breath to be gentle and relaxed as you slightly contract the back of your throat creating a steady hissing sound as you breathe in and out. The sound need not be forced, but it should be loud enough so that if someone came close to you they would hear it.
3. Lengthen the inhalation and the exhalation as much as possible without creating tension anywhere in your body, and allow the sound of the breath to be continuous and smooth.

To help create the proper "ah" sound, hold your hand up to your mouth and exhale as if trying to fog a mirror. Inhale the same way. Notice how you constrict the back of the throat to create the fog effect. Now close your mouth and do the same thing while breathing through the nose.

When to do it

During asana practice
Before meditation
Anytime you want to concentrate

Dirgha Pranayama Known as the "complete" or "three-part" breath, dirgha pranayama teaches how to fill the three chambers of the lungs, beginning with the lower lungs, then moving up through the thoracic region and into the clavicular region.

Benefits

Promotes proper diaphragmatic breathing, relaxes the mind and body, oxygenates the blood and purges the lungs of residual carbon dioxide.

How to do it

Sit with your spine erect, or lie down on your back. Begin taking long, slow, and deep breaths through the nostrils.

1. As you inhale, allow the belly to fill with air, drawing air deep into the lower lungs. As you exhale, allow the belly to deflate like a balloon. Repeat several times, keeping the breath smooth and relaxed, and never straining. Repeat several times.
2. Breathe into your belly as in Step #1, but also expand the mid-chest region by allowing the rib cage to open outward to the sides. Exhale and repeat several times.
3. Follow steps #1 and #2 and continue inhaling by opening the clavicular region or upper chest. Exhale and repeat.
4. Combine all three steps into one continuous or complete flow.

When to do it

During asana practice
Prior to meditation
Prior to relaxation
Anytime you feel like it

Nadi Shodhana Nadi Shodhana, or the sweet breath, is simple form of alternate nostril breathing suitable for beginning and advanced students. Nadi means channel and refers to the energy pathways through which prana flows. Shodhana means cleansing -- so Nadi Shodhana means channel cleaning.

Benefits

Calms the mind, soothes anxiety and stress, balances left and right hemispheres, promotes clear thinking

How to do it

- Hold your right hand up and curl your index and middle fingers toward your palm. Place your thumb next to your right nostril and your ring finger and pinky by your left. Close the left nostril by pressing gently against it with your ring finger and pinky, and inhale through the right nostril. The breath should be slow, steady and full.

- Now close the right nostril by pressing gently against it with your thumb, and open your left nostril by relaxing your ring finger and pinky and exhale fully with a slow and steady breath.
- Inhale through the left nostril, close it, and then exhale through the right nostril.

That's one complete round of Nadi Shodhana --

- Inhale through the right nostril
- Exhale through the left
- Inhale through the left
- Exhale through the right.

Begin with 5-10 rounds and add more as you feel ready. Remember to keep your breathing slow, easy and full.

When to do it

Just about any time and any where. Try it as a mental warm-up before meditation to help calm the mind and put you in the mood. You can also do it as part of your centering before beginning an asana or posture routine. Also try it at times throughout the day. Nadi Shodhana helps control stress and anxiety. If you start to feel stressed out, 10 or so rounds will help calm you down. It also helps soothe anxiety caused by flying and other fearful or stressful situations.

Courtesy:

<http://yoga.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&sdn=yoga&cdn=health&tm=18&f=10&tt=14&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.yogasite.com/pranayama.htm>