

Breathing and Yoga

You may wonder why breathing is so important and why it is focused on so much in yoga. Breathing and life are intimately connected. Life begins with our first breath and ends with our last. In yoga, the life force or energy that keeps the body alive and healthy is called “Prana” and the major way that we receive this prana is through breathing. In yoga, the breathing practices are called Pranayama. “Prana” means life force or energy and “yama” means to control, master or restrain. So the practice of Pranayama means to control the flow of prana or life force in the body through the practice of breathing techniques. If your prana is low or weak, your body is deprived of the necessary life force energy necessary to stay healthy and function effectively. All the functions of your body are governed by prana. This “control of prana” means improved functioning of all our organs and systems--respiratory, circulatory, digestive, glandular and nervous. This results in greater resistance to disease, greater calmness, mental peace and more productivity.

The quality of your life can, and often is, dependent on the way that you breathe at any given moment. We are bio-engineered for mind/body balance. The mind/body connection is a reactionary process that systematically works in our bodies to constantly monitor input taken in through the senses, perceived through the mind and experienced in the body. We react accordingly to each and every moment as it is happening. It is really amazing. If we are afraid, adrenaline is secreted alerting us to the fear, our bodies become over stimulated and usually tense up, mentally we become irrational, and our breathing becomes erratic (short, suspended or hyperventilating). If we smell something nice, we interpret it as pleasurable so we remain calm, relaxed and breathe normally. When we are mad, we breathe rapidly and our bodies tense up. No matter what we are doing, feeling or experiencing, our breathing is directly involved in the mind-body connection. If you change one thing within the process, the rest is also changed. Say you were scared because someone startled you from behind. You would react accordingly with elevated adrenaline and physical tension, and your breath would freeze temporarily. But when you turn and see that the person is your friend, you relax, the fear dissipates and your breathing goes back to normal. Your breath rate will constantly change according to whatever you are doing. Or you could change your breath rate to control how and when you react to the environment you're in or the experience you are having. This control can be obtained by having a better relationship with your breath. This is why pranayama is so important.

We have all heard people say calm down, take a few deep breaths, relax. But have you ever really done it? Breathing is for the most part an automatic function of life that usually goes unnoticed. For breathing to become a voluntary function there needs to be a conscious interaction between the breath and the one that is breathing. Through this intentional breathing, you begin to develop a relationship, one that will continue to grow as you continue to practice. Because breathing happens even when you're not doing it on purpose, you may find it difficult to breathe intentionally; your mind may wander, you may become confused (am I breathing in or out now) or you may forget to stick with it. This is normal. Don't think that you can't do it, or that it's too difficult for you. Like any relationship, you must be patient. It gets better in time.

Pranayama is usually practiced sitting with your back straight in a chair or on the floor. It is important that you're in a position that is comfortable for you. You should, as often as possible, breathe through your nose. Nasal breathing is more beneficial, it is less wasteful and it is very calming due to its involvement with the parasympathetic nervous system. If at first you find it difficult to breathe through your nose, then use your mouth; as time goes on you will eventually be able to switch.

As a beginner to Pranayama, you should start with just observing your breath so you can become comfortable with the whole experience. Once you are relatively familiar with just being an observer, begin to actively participate by encouraging each breath to go deep and slow. When this is comfortable you are ready to begin your first yogic breathing or Pranayama technique.

The Complete Breath (Dirgha Pranayama)

Also called "Yogic Breathing" or the "Three Part Breath"

This breathing technique consists of long, slow, deep breaths that with your help will fill the three chambers of your lungs (abdominal, thoracic and clavicular), or lower, middle and upper. It is similar to filling a glass with water. As you pour the water into the glass it fills from the bottom up. Likewise, as you breathe in you draw the air down to the lowest portion of your lungs and continue to breathe in until you have filled them up.

This breath is easiest to learn while lying down on your back. Once you've practiced this breath a few times, try it sitting up.

1. Start by resting your right hand on your belly. As you breathe you will notice that your belly rises or expands on the inhalation and sinks down or contracts on the exhalation. Get used to how this feels. This is "diaphragmatic breathing." Do this several times. Next, as you exhale and you notice your belly sinking or deflating as the breath nears completion, contract your abdominal muscles to help push the last bit of residual air out of your lungs emptying them completely. Do this several times.
2. Place your left hand on your lower ribs (below your collarbones and above your belly); this is the thoracic region of the ribs. As you breathe in; first fill the abdominal area and then channel the air up into the middle chest. You will feel the ribs expand under your left hand. As you exhale again help the breath out by contracting your abdominal muscles. Do this several times.
3. Finally, move your right hand up to your clavicular region (collarbones) and as you breathe in, draw the breath first into the lower and then middle and finally into the upper chest. You will feel your chest expand up under your collarbones. As you exhale again, help the breath to completion by contracting your abdominal muscles. Continue practicing this for several minutes. Let your breath move through you in a wave-like motion. The breaths should be smooth, slow and intentional. As you become more familiar with this breath, you can gradually increase the amount of time you practice it. If at any time, you become frustrated or anxious, go back to normal breathing until you're comfortable again. As you continue to practice this breath, you will eventually find it very soothing and relaxing. This breath can be practiced anywhere and at any time.

Benefits:

- Relaxes the body and calms the mind
- Energizes the entire body
- Oxygenates the lungs
- Regulates breathing patterns
- Massages abdominal organs
- Improves digestion and elimination
- Calm breathing reduces pain
- Can be practiced anywhere and any time

Contraindications:

- Recent abdominal surgery
- Untreated high blood pressure
- Should be practiced on an empty stomach or one to two hours after eating

The Ocean Breath (Ujjayi Pranayama)

As with Dirgha (complete) Pranayama, the ocean breath is performed by taking long, slow, deep breaths with the addition of slightly contracting the back of the throat in the area of the glottis producing a hissing sound. It sounds similar to the sound of air escaping from a tire or the sound heard from a seashell held next to your ear.

As with any Pranayama exercise, you should sit with your spine straight in any position that you can hold comfortably (on the floor, in a chair or lying down) for several minutes.

1. It is easiest to experience this breath if you hold your hand up in front of your mouth and imagine that you are holding a small mirror, and as you exhale your breath fogs up the mirror. The sound you produce (hissing) is the Ujjayi sound.
2. After you have done this several times, try relaxing your nostrils and breathe out in the same way. As you become comfortable with this breath on the exhalation, begin also doing it on the inhalation. The breath should be long, slow and comfortable with a steady hissing sound as you breathe in and out. The continuous sound should flow as a result on the breath. The sound does not need to be broadcasted out, but should be easily heard if someone sat beside you.
3. As you continue to practice this breath, gradually lengthen the inhalations and exhalations as much as possible without creating any tension or anxiety or feeling deprived of oxygen. You can also incorporate the Complete Breath with this Ujjayi Breath. As the pace of your breath slows down naturally, you may notice a pause or space between each breath. This suspension is natural. Be conscious of the whole experience; the sound, the rhythm and the space between the breaths to keep your awareness anchored on the present activity, Pranayama. As you continue this breath, you will become very relaxed, mentally and physically.

Benefits:

- All the benefits of the complete breath
- Enhances concentration
- Good for meditation

Contraindications

- Same as Complete Breath

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