

# Yogic Breathing

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To practice yogic breathing, find a quiet place with no distractions. You can sit on a chair, or on the floor or even lie down on your back. It is important to feel comfortable, and if sitting, to keep the back upright, not slouching forward or leaning back in your seat. Try to practice once or twice daily, even if only for a few minutes. Find a time that is best for you. For most people that is in the morning before the day's events begin or in the evening before bed.

The ancient yogis of India developed a system called Pranayama, for understanding and utilizing the power of breath. In Sanskrit the word Prana stands for life force; this life force is happening within and around us at all times. The Sanskrit word Yama means to control or master: we learn to control the movements of our breath, which contains prana or life force.

As we begin to look at how we breathe, we begin to understand who we are and how we feel.

The breath is a great indicator of our current emotions. If we are stressed or anxious our breathing becomes shallow and rapid. If we are relaxed and comfortable our breath is even and smooth. When we learn to change the pattern of our breath we can change how we feel and how we relate to those around us.

Efficient breathing activates the parasympathetic branch of our autonomic nervous system and the relaxation response. With efficient breathing we feel calmer, happier and more clearheaded, our blood pressure lowers and our heart rate decreases. Healthy breathing improves our immune response. With breath control we can also learn to manage pain and increase our ability to concentrate. Focusing on our breath is the first step in learning how to meditate.

Inefficient breathing activates the sympathetic branch of our autonomic nervous system; this is connected to the "fight or flight" response to danger. When this occurs our belly tightens, we only breathe into the upper lungs, our breathing speeds up, digestion slows, adrenalin is released into our system and we are ready to run for our life. If, because of stressful events in our life, we are constantly in this state of "fight or flight", we will feel drained, nervous and subject to anxiety or panic attacks.

In the average day we take about 20,000 breaths in 24 hours or 14-15 breaths per minute. If we learn to breathe deep into the lungs, using their full capacity, we can slow our breath down to 8-12 breaths per minute. Our rate of activity dictates how we breathe. In bed we need to bring about 8 quarts of air into our lungs per minute; sitting up we need 16 quarts per minute; jogging we need about 50 quarts per minute. The more slowly and deeply we inhale the more oxygen we receive with each breath. We each have a specific breathing pattern, and some are more effective than others. Fewer breaths per minute slow the heart rate down, and the heart doesn't have to work so hard to oxygenate the blood. Our lungs are incredible. If we could open up each one of the little alveoli or grape-like sacks that make up our lungs we could blanket a basketball court. Through a set of complex systems, the alveoli of the lungs pass the oxygen into our blood. The blood then travels out to all of the cells in our body, which burn the oxygen for energy. If we take short quick breaths, just into the upper portion of our lungs, the blood will receive less oxygen with each breath and our heart will have to pump harder to pass more blood through the lungs.

The first and simplest of breathing exercises is to simply watch your breath. Don't try to change its flow or depth, just observe it with your mind. Often after just a few moments of observing the breath our mind begins to wander. If this happens just gently draw your mind back to the breath. Notice the feeling of air entering your body: where do you feel it first, in the nostrils or throat? Do you feel the coolness of the air entering your nostrils and the warmth as it exits? Perhaps you mainly feel the inhalation and exhalation in your chest or abdomen as it rises and falls with each

breath. The practice is to observe. You can do this for a few minutes before beginning other breathing exercises.

## **Pranayama Breathing Techniques**

The practice of Pranayama can be done any time. Let your body be your guide, be aware of its signals and listen. Progress slowly and gently, according to your abilities. Discontinue practice if you feel any pain, discomfort, or lightheadedness. Do not do deep inhalations if suffering from hypertension, heart problems, or depression. Practice on an empty stomach. Pranayama calms the mind, generates energy for the body, and allows focus for the practice of postures and meditation.

### **Ujjayi Breath/Ocean Sounding Breath**

Technique: Come into a comfortable sitting or reclining position. Take several long, slow breaths through your nose. Contract the back of your throat while making a soft hissing sound as you inhale and exhale. To practice, imagine you are fogging a mirror and making the AHHH sound as you do, now practice with your mouth closed making the hissing sound through your nose. Inhalation and exhalation can be as long as comfortable. Keep your mental focus on the breath. Once you are comfortable with Ujjayi Breath it can be used during the practice of yoga postures, relaxation and meditation for greater strength and focus.

### **Deep Abdominal Breath – Diaphragmatic Breathing**

Technique: Come into a comfortable sitting or reclining position. Take several long, slow breaths through your nose. Bring your breath deeper into the abdomen with each succeeding inhalation, feeling your abdomen expanding upward. As you exhale allow your stomach to flatten and at the end of the exhalation gently contract the abdomen to expel the last of your breath and cleanse the lungs of stale air. Practice of deep abdominal/diaphragmatic breathing will stimulate and strengthen the lungs, diaphragm, heart and abdominal muscles.

### **Durgha Pranayama/Yogic Complete Breath or Three-Part Breath**

Technique: Come into a comfortable sitting or reclining position. Take several long, slow breaths through your nose. On the inhale fill the three chambers of the lungs, starting with the bottom section or abdominal region, then filling the mid-section or thoracic region and finally the upper lung or clavicular region. Slowly exhale and allow the air to flow out of the lungs in a natural way, contracting your abdomen to expel the last of the breath. Continue to take several breaths in this way, feeling the gentle rise and fall of your breath as it expands the abdomen then your midsection and finally your upper chest and under the collar bone. Practice of three-part breath will relax the body and calm the mind. It will also strengthen the abdominal muscles, diaphragm, heart and lungs. It will help improve digestion and elimination and can help to relieve menstrual cramps. Three-part breath can be practiced during postures, meditation, and relaxation and at any other time.

### **Nadi Sodhana Pranayama/Alternate Nostril Breath**

Technique: Sit upright. Using your right hand, place your thumb on the right side of the of your nose and place your ring finger on the left side of your nose, with the index and middle finger resting on the forehead or bent into the palm of your hand. Beginning on the out-breath, breathe out and in with the right nostril then close that nostril with the thumb and breathe out and in with the left nostril, then close the left nostril with the ring finger and breathe out and in with the right nostril. Continue moving from right nostril to the left nostril, always starting each side with an exhalation. Practice for 2 to 5 minutes.

Alternate Breath Counting: On the out-breath mentally count to four slowly and on the in-breath mentally count to four slowly. Make each count last about one second, then switch nostrils and repeat. Breathe in this way for four minutes