

# PRANAYAMA



**Master the Art of Pranayama  
Breathing and the Ujjayi Breath**

**~ Yoga Breathing Techniques ~**

**by Adriana Sobi-Wilderman**

# **Pranayama**

## ***Master the Art of Pranayama Breathing and the Ujjayi Breath***

*(Yoga Breathing Techniques)*

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## Introduction

If you've ever taken classes in meditation or hatha yoga, then chances are you've heard the word "pranayama" thrown around. And if you've attended a class that's "updated" its curriculum to come across as less exotic to an American audience, then they've probably replaced that word with terms like "breath control," "pranic breathing," "energy expansion," or some other such phrase.

Whatever the case, they're generally referring to the same thing. *Prana* is the Sanskrit word for "breath" or "life force," but it can also mean "vital energy," as well as "spirit." *Ayama* means "to extend" or "to draw out," though it can also mean "restraint," "control," or even "stopping," in some cases.

According to the ancient Indian texts, there are both psychic and spiritual benefits to breath control, though we won't get into that here. Those same texts also claim that there are mental, emotional, and physical rewards for those who practice pranayama. And you know what? There's a growing body of medical evidence which supports some of those claims.

The relationship between breath and the autonomic nervous system has long been understood by doctors. The same applies to the breath's relationship to digestion, respiration, heart rate, brain function, sexual arousal, and so much more.

Without getting too technical, medical researchers now accept that certain breathing techniques have very real, very measurable, and very repeatable effects on the mind and body. This is good news, because the health benefits claimed by yoga and meditation practitioners for thousands of years are being proven by modern science.

Unfortunately, it also proves that the risks the ancient writers and practitioners

warned us about are also true. While pranayama is traditionally taught face-to-face by an experienced and qualified teacher precisely to avoid such problems, the risks involved are very rare. Problems usually arise in cases where practitioners try to go past their own limits and ignore their bodies' warning signals. This ebook will therefore cover only those safe to do on your own.

Pranayama is usually practiced together with hatha yoga, martial arts, and meditation. Nevertheless, it can also stand on its own because of its many benefits, some of which will be presented here.

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## Chapter 1: Some Words of Caution

There are currently more hatha yoga and meditation teachers in America than there are in India. While this means that the discipline is attracting a growing number of followers (which is good), it also means that not all are as qualified or as experienced to teach it (which is bad).

With so many yoga and meditation schools in America churning out teachers as if they were industrial factory goods, the standards of many teachers is highly questionable. Many of these go on TV, radio, and other forms of mass media, extolling the health benefits of hatha yoga and pranayama.

While these disciplines certainly have proven medical benefits, they also come with risks. Unfortunately, such are often downplayed, or not discussed at all. Such ignorance or deliberate glossing over is dangerous and irresponsible.

Professor Holger Cramer of the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany led a study on some of these dangers. In “Adverse Events Associated with Yoga: A Systematic Review of Published Case Reports and Case Series,” Cramer found that some of the more advanced forms of pranayama can lead to hematoma (swelling of clotted blood in tissues) and pneumothorax (air or gas in the cavity between the lungs and the chest wall, which causes the lungs to collapse).

In the March 2007 edition of *Emergency Journal*, A.S. Kashyap, K.P. Anand, and S. Kashyap, published a report called “Complications of Yoga.” In it, they claim that the Valsalva Maneuver was responsible for some cases of subcutaneous emphysema (when air collects in pockets beneath the skin or abdomen).

There is a vast body of Sanskrit literature which provides such warnings, but



they are unknown to the overwhelming majority of so-called teachers being mass produced out there. If you do find yourself in a class where the teacher claims there is absolutely no risk involved in doing pranayama, then get out of there as quickly as possible and try to get a refund.

Understand that your body has its own system of wisdom and warning, and that you should pay attention to it. Should you experience any discomfort such as dizziness, nausea, headaches, shortness of breath, or blurred vision, you should stop immediately and call it a day. Maybe even call your doctor.

People don't build up strength and stamina overnight. Those fit types started out slowly, building up their bodies over time and with much patience and perseverance. The same goes for pranayama. The benefits are there, but you have to be patient, consistent, and take it slowly — regardless of what your local gym yoga teacher might suggest.

## **Chapter 2: The Dos and Don'ts of Practicing Pranayama**

It's best to practice pranayama out in the open, preferably in the countryside where the air is clean and healthy. For obvious reasons, this isn't possible for everyone, especially those who live in congested cities.

If you have to do it indoors, choose a room that's clean; free of mold, damp, and dust; as well as one which has excellent ventilation. A room that's been newly painted is not a good idea for obvious reasons, even if you keep the windows open.

Never perform pranayama immediately after eating. Doing it on a full stomach can lead to digestive issues, such as diarrhea or constipation, bloating, lethargy, and abdominal pains. You should wait at least two hours after a meal before doing pranayama, but it also depends on how you feel. If you're still feeling full after three hours, then wait a little longer.

While there are certain forms of pranayama that can be done to assuage hunger and thirst, it's best to do them only when you've mastered the basics, so we'll cover them last. If you're starving, eat something then wait at least two hours before doing pranayama. If you take a light snack, such as a banana, a one-hour wait will suffice.

All exercises should be performed with empty bladders and bowels. Also, be sure to set aside enough time for this practice. If you're in a hurry, there's a temptation to just go through the motions to get it over with, which renders it useless.

If you have breathing problems (such as asthma), it's best to consult your primary care doctor about what you can and can't do, as well as how far you can

go. As to pregnant women, it's best to consult with a professional. There are medically certified and qualified hatha yoga teachers who specialize in pregnant women, so you might want to look them up.

Those with colds, coughs, and acute constipation should not do sitkari pranayama. Sitali pranayama is also a no-no for those with colds, coughs, and tonsillitis. If you have high blood pressure, avoid surya bedhana pranayama and bhasrika pranayama. The latter is also not recommended for those suffering from heart diseases and ulcers.

If you have low blood pressure, don't do ujjayi pranayama. In some cases, ujjayi is also not recommended for those suffering from hypertension and heart problems. Those with ear problems (such as otitis media, glue ear, or swimmer's ear) should stay away from bhramari pranayama.

Sometimes, even after consulting an expert or your physician, you might experience some discomfort, especially when starting out. At the risk of sounding overly repetitive, remember that your body has its own wisdom that you should pay attention to and obey.

## **Chapter 3: Preparation Before Beginning**

Except during haṭha yoga exercises, pranayama must be performed upright with the back straight, and with your jaw parallel to the floor. Tilting your head down or backward, as well as slumping your shoulders or back, can restrict the flow of air through your throat or stomach, which can cause dizziness or nausea.

### **Sit properly**

Despite maintaining a straight and upright posture, you must relax as much as possible. While it may seem like a good idea to use a chair with a back rest, it isn't. Some back supports force you to lean forward, while others invite you to lean backward. Still others keep you completely upright, but the angle of the seat puts uncomfortable pressure on your spine and buttocks.

While yogis traditionally sit cross-legged on the floor, we're not doing hatha yoga here. If you're more comfortable sitting on something other than the floor, then choose either a stool or a backless chair. Avoid deep cushions that swallow you up. You want something that'll allow you to sit upright comfortably, as well as help you maintain that posture for at least five minutes.

### **Relax**

Tense your feet, scrunching them up into a ball, and hold them that way for a slow count of three. Then let go. Enjoy the relaxed feeling your feet should be exuding.

Repeat the process with your calves, then your upper legs, then your thighs, then your stomach, then your chest, then your arms and hands, then your neck, jaw, and face. Be sure to spend at least three seconds tensing each part, then a few

seconds enjoying the relaxed feeling before moving onto the next body part.

While you don't have to do this each time you sit for a session, that type of fully-relaxed feeling is what your *entire* body should be experiencing before you begin.

### **Breathe correctly**

Most pranayama exercises are done through the nose, and very rarely ever through the mouth. Further, almost all exercises require you to breathe into your abdomen, what is known as belly-breathing. Only in some cases will the breath be taken into the chest. You must therefore learn to isolate your breathing properly.

Unless otherwise specified, keep your lips closed and your jaw relaxed. If you're doing the latter correctly, there should be a gap between your upper and lower teeth. The tip of your tongue should also be pressed against the back of your upper teeth.

## Chapter 4: Adham Pranayama (Abdominal Breath)

If you look at infants and toddlers, they breathe through their stomachs naturally, a process called diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing. Only later do we start breathing through our chests, known as clavicular or collarbone breathing. The latter is not healthy as it does not maximize our use of oxygen and does not adequately release toxins.

Adham pranayama is the default, so only continue with the rest when you've mastered this exercise. Sit in front of a mirror (not really necessary). Exhale, spread your fingers apart, and place your palms on your stomach, making sure the tips of your middle fingers meet above your belly button. Now inhale and bring the breath directly into your stomach while keeping your chest relaxed.

If you do this correctly, your fingers should spread wide, the tips of your middle fingers should pull apart, and your shoulders should not rise (if you can't tell, get yourself in front of a mirror). If your shoulders do rise, then you're still breathing with your chest and have not isolated your abdomen correctly. Think of your in-breath as the process by which you blow up your stomach like a balloon. Think of your out-breath as pulling your stomach into your spine.

Pace each breath by doing a slow count of three each. As you breathe in, think, "one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand," then repeat the count as you breathe out. Starting out with a count of three is recommended. As you get more comfortable with the process, you can increase the count to ten, but don't push it. Do only what you feel comfortable with.

A second variation is to breathe in directly into your stomach for a fixed count, hold your breath for a fixed count, then exhale for a fixed count. After a one second pause, inhale once more. A third variation is to inhale, hold your breath, exhale, then hold your breath, all with the same count. If you're starting out with a count of three, for example: inhale for a count of three, hold your breath for a

count of three, exhale for a count of three, hold your breath for a count of three.

Clavicular breathing is useful when being active, but when you're not, it can lead to stress. According to traditional Indian medicine (called ayurveda), it can also lead to digestive upsets, constipation, and gynaecological problems. Your diaphragm is like a second heart. Breathing into your abdomen allows it to suck in more venous blood which improves general circulation.

This should be done for about five minutes in the morning before breakfast, and again in the evening before dinner. Doing so not only relaxes and focuses you, it can also reduce stress, tension, headaches, and menstrual pain.

## Chapter 5: Nadhi Sodhana Pranayama (Alternate Nostril Breath)

According to the Sanskrit texts, alternate nostril breathing balances the nervous system, focuses the mind, and improves concentration. Before any meditation or prayer, therefore, this pranayama is usually recommended to give “oomph” when asking the divine for something. In ayurveda, this exercise is believed to fight colds, maintain body temperature, and improve the circulatory and respiratory systems.

A study conducted at the Tagore Medical College & Hospital in India seems to confirm some of this. Researchers led by Dr. D.V. Sivapriya found that it can also improve pulmonary function. Their paper, published in the 2010 edition of the *Recent Research in Science and Technology*, also claims that those who practiced this pranayama for 45 consecutive days showed improved cognitive abilities.

This exercise is also called aniloma viloma, which ayurvedic doctors recommend for lethargy, gout, excessive fat, and mucus. It also claims that this pranayama will ensure regular bowel movements, as well as mitigate eating and sleeping disorders.

Take your right hand (or your left, if you’re more comfortable with that) and press your thumb against your right nostril. Place your index finger above your nose (at the spot between your brows) to balance your hand. Your middle finger should rest against your left nostril.

Exhale and empty your abdomen of air. Plug your right nostril with your thumb and your left nostril with your middle finger. You are not to push down on your nostrils, but plug them by squeezing your thumb and middle fingers together very gently with your nose in-between.



Unplug your left nostril and breathe in with it to a slow count of three. Plug it back up and exhale out of your right nostril for a slow count of three, then breathe in with the right nostril for a slow count of three, and exhale out of your left nostril for a slow count of three. This is one full nadi sodhana cycle.

A variation involves the use of the jalandhara bandha (throat lock). Unplug your left nostril, breathe in, then plug it up and hold your breath. Unplug your right nostril and breathe out of it, then breathe in with it. Plug it up and hold your breath. Exhale with your left nostril. This is also one full nadhi sodhana cycle.

The time you spend inhaling, holding your breath, then exhaling, should all be equal. So if you spend three seconds inhaling, you should also hold your breath for three seconds, and exhale for three seconds. After each exhalation, there should be at least a one second gap before you inhale, once more.

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## **WARNING!**

*Some advanced forms of pranayama require you to try to expel air while keeping your nose and throat blocked. This is what people do to relieve the pressure on their ears when descending from a great height. Doctors call this the Valsalva maneuver, which comes with serious medical risks, so it must be avoided.*

*When you do nadi sodhana with the jalandhara bandha variation, your aim is to simply hold your breath. DO NOT try to expel the air while keeping your nasal and throat passages blocked.*

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Another variation is to hold your breath after completing a cycle. This means that after you exhale through your left nostril, you plug it, hold your breath for the same count, then unplug your left nostril and inhale to begin a new cycle.

This is especially recommended for stomach and menstrual cramps.

In ayurveda, if you find yourself consistently breathing through only one nostril even after blowing your nose, then you're probably on your way to a full-blown cold or fever. This pranayama can mitigate that, but ayurveda also recommends slowing down and eating right, as well as taking lots of liquid.

## **Chapter 6: Surya and Chandra Bedhana Pranayama (Sun and Moon Piercing Breath)**

Right or left nostril breathing is a variation of nadhi sodhana. In hatha yoga and ayurveda, the right nostril is associated with the sun (surya), and is therefore believed to stimulate heat. The left nostril, on the other hand, is associated with the moon (chandra), and is believed to stimulate coolness.

### **SURYA BEDHANA PRANAYAMA**

Plug your left nostril in the same way you would with nadhi sodhana. Breathe in then out only through your right nostril, again to a count of three. A variation is to breathe in, hold your breath, then breathe out — again with only the right nostril.

Since this will increase the body's temperature, this pranayama is used to fight colds, lethargy, sluggishness, and before any taxing physical activity. Those who've undergone abdominal, heart, or brain surgery are advised to consult with their GPs before doing this. Those with high blood pressure should avoid this altogether.

### **CHANDRA BEDHANA PRANAYAMA**

This is the exact opposite of surya bedhana pranayama, wherein you breathe only through the left nostril. There are no known contraindications regarding this practice, which is used to combat high fever, agitation, hypertension, and even premature ejaculation. Chandra bedhana pranayama is also recommended for those who are temperamental, as well as for those who are stressing out over something.

**Note:**

Right nostril and left nostril breathing fall under the aegis of folk remedies throughout India, Nepal, Assam, and Bhutan as they are prescribed by ayurvedic doctors. They are therefore seen only as remedies, not as overall cures.

A regular daily practice of nadhi sodhana, together with a healthy diet, regular exercise, and adequate rest is believed to offset most ailments. Should you find yourself having to use surya bedhana or chandra bedhana regularly, it means (to the ayurvedic mind) that you have an imbalance in your body and are advised to see a doctor.

## **Chapter 7: Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious or Conquering Breath)**

This one's a bit tricky without someone to show you, so let's take this one slowly. To do this, you need to constrict your throat a little so that your in-breath and out-breath can be heard. A good way to start is to drop your chin a little. Doing this provides a slight blockage to the air passage just above your collarbone. It should feel a little tight.

Another way to produce this effect is to take your thumb and place it gently in the hollow of your throat just above your collarbone. If you start to choke, you're pressing too hard, so back off a little. Now breathe. If you're doing it right, your in-breath and out-breath should produce a slight wheezing sound, as if you have mucus in your throat.

You can also try to say "aah," while sucking your breath in. Most of us are used to only making sounds as we exhale, but not as we inhale. Making a sound while inhaling will make you conscious of what goes on in your throat, especially with your glottis.

The glottis is that part of the throat we constrict to make the H, K, G (as in "Grover," not "George"), and Ng sounds. You want to constrict your throat enough so you continuously make the H sound as you breathe in and out, but with your lips closed.

You are not attempting a growl, nor a Darth Vader type sound. If constricting your throat makes it itch, makes you cough, or makes your breath heard by someone across the room, you've tightened it too much. If you're doing it right, only you (and someone sitting next to you) should be able to hear the "ocean sound" (as yogis call it) your breathing makes.

Practice and find the right degree of tension that allows you to produce this sound without any discomfort, whatsoever, and to maintain it comfortably for several minutes. Once you've found the right amount of pressure, you're ready to begin.

Keep your posture straight with your jaw parallel to the floor so you're staring straight ahead (though you can also close your eyes). Now tighten your glottis so you produce the "ocean sound." During ujjayi, you only inhale and exhale, but *never* hold the breath. Care must also be taken to ensure that the volume of your "ocean sound" is consistent, and that your in-breath and out-breath are of the same length. One inhalation and one exhalation counts as a single cycle.

Ujjayi is the first step to deep meditation. It is useful in increasing body heat, ensuring better oxygenation of the blood, regulating blood pressure, and clearing toxins from the body. It is also recommended for those suffering from insomnia, as well as menstrual cramps.

## Chapter 8: Kapalbhata and Bhastrika Pranayama (Shining Skull and Bellows Breath)

A number of teachers use these terms interchangeably, which is grossly incorrect. These two pranayamas should not be done by pregnant women, as well as by those who suffer from high blood pressure, hypertension, heart disease, hernia, and ulcers.

### KAPALBHATI PRANAYAMA

*Kapal* refers not just to the skull, but to everything attached to it — including the brain and organs inside, as well as the face outside. It is believed to cure cranial sinuses and anemia, as well as to purify the respiratory system and facilitate weight loss. *Bhati* refers to the way it firms the skin and makes it glow, the result of increased oxygen to the blood. Kapalbhata supposedly preserves beauty and restores youth.

This pranayama is recommended for smokers, as it is believed to detoxify the lungs. Since it also helps to tone the abs, those with poor digestion and irregular bowel movements are advised to perform this regularly. Many studies confirm that it is also good for asthma and bronchitis, but it's best to consult your GP before trying this out.

In kapalbhata, you breathe as you would in ujjayi, but the focus here is on exhalation. Instead of a gentle out-breath, however, pull your abdomen quickly and sharply in toward your spine to produce a series of loud exhalations through your nose (NOT your mouth). Inhalations should be passive, the result of a recoil action after you forcefully expel your breath (again with your nose ONLY).

One exhalation and recoil inhalation per second is a decent pace, two exhalations

per second is considered best, while going slower is considered useless. That said, choose the pace that feels best for you. Start off with a continuous flow for one minute, then take a break before repeating the process. You can lengthen your time as you get better and stronger.

## **BHASTRIKA PRANAYAMA**

Think of the way an ironsmith pumps a bellows rhythmically and quickly to maintain a high temperature in his forge, which explains why it's also called agni pranayama (fire breath). Only do this when you're comfortable with kapalbhati.

In this variation, there is an equal emphasis given to the exhalation, which should also be done in ujjayi. The length and volume of your in-breath should be equal to your out-breath. Between each inhalation and exhalation, there should be a quick pause. One inhalation-pause and one exhalation-pause constitutes an entire cycle. A decent cycle should last about 1 second, while two cycles a second is considered good.



## Chapter 9: Bhramari Pranayama (Humming Bee Breath)

This one is recommended for strengthening the nervous system, boosting energy levels, improving the transport of nutrients to the cells, curing headaches and mitigating migraines, as well as reducing blood pressure. Those who suffer from short-term memory and lack of focus are also advised to do this pranayama.

Recent studies suggest that this pranayama may also treat some forms of obsessive compulsive disorder. Still others have found that it can help to regulate the endocrinal system, making it useful for pregnant women. If you spend lots of time in front of a monitor, you might also find this helpful.

Bhramari makes use of the shanmukhi mudra, a hand gesture you apply to your face, so let's deal with this first. This mask is also known as the *closing of the seven gates*: the two ears, two eyes, two nostrils, and the mouth.

Take your thumbs and press them against your tragi. The tragus is the hard part of your ear that's connected to your cheek. It lies above your ear lobe and sort of sticks out over your ear hole. Pressing your thumbs against your tragi will not block out sound, but you should press down on them firmly but gently enough to muffle noise.

Close your eyes and gently rest your index fingers against your closed lids, such that the fingers rest over your eyeballs while the tips rest against the space between the corners of your eyes and the upper bridge of your nose. If you see spots or colors, you're pressing too hard.

The tips of your middle fingers should rest on either side of your nose, midway between where the tips of your index fingers rest, and your nostrils. The tips of your ring fingers should rest on either side of your nostrils, but do not block

them off as you would in nadhi sodhana.

Finally, your pinky fingers should rest either over your closed lips, or beneath your lower lip to “seal the gate of the mouth.” To make sure it stays sealed, eliminate the gap between your upper and lower teeth by biting down gently. Ayurveda has its own version of the meridian points used in acupuncture and acupressure, which is why you have to get this right (though variations do exist).

Once your mudra is in place, breathe in quietly and normally through the nose (no ujjayi) taking the air directly into your abdomen. Then exhale, but make a humming noise like a bee. There will be no holding of the breath here, so one quiet inhalation and one humming exhalation counts as one cycle. As with all other forms of pranayama, the duration of each in-breath and out-breath must be the same.

## **Chapter 10: Sitali and Sitkari Pranayama (Cooling and Sipping or Hissing Breath)**

In a country as generally hot and poor as India, these two are very popular, even among non-yoga practitioners. Both are guaranteed to cool the body, while five to ten counts can assuage hunger and thirst, making them a favorite among weight watchers.

Traditionally, sitali and sitkari have also been recommended cures for laziness, reducing bile and mucus, as well as for relieving the pain of arthritis. As of this writing, however, no definitive studies have been made regarding these claims, though research on their ability to reduce hot flashes is promising.

Both pranayamas are unusual in that they require you to breathe in through your mouth.

### **SITALI PRANAYAMA**

To perform this, you first have to make a tube out of your tongue by curling the sides up and pressing them together. Stick your tongue out of your mouth, then suck in air through the tube you've made directly into your abdomen. There should be a slight hissing noise as you do this. Take care to regulate the sound so that it's not too loud, rough, shaky, or irregular. What you want is a smooth and consistent hiss.

Once your abdomen is full, stick your tongue back in, close your lips, and grit your teeth lightly as you hold your breath. Then exhale through your nose. Your in-breath, held-breath, and out-breath should be of the same duration. Together, they qualify as one count.

## **SITKARI PRANAYAMA**

For those of you who can't curl your tongues into perfect tubes, relax. The ability to do so is genetic, apparently, which sitkari addresses. In this variation, you open your mouth and expose your teeth, gently resting your upper teeth atop your lower ones. Place the tip of your tongue against the back of your upper teeth in the same way you do when you pronounce D, L, N, and T.

Breathe in through your teeth, taking the air down to your abdomen. If you've placed your tongue correctly, there should be a slight hissing sound as you draw the air in. Once your abdomen is full, close your mouth, let your upper teeth drop into a gentle and comfortable bite, then hold your breath. Finally, exhale through your nose.

As with sitali, your in-breath, held-breath, and out-breath should be of the same duration, which makes up one count.

## Conclusion

Pranayama is an ancient science that can be practiced without any belief in religion or the supernatural. You don't even have to take up yoga. It makes a number of astonishing health claims, and while some of these are able to stand up to scientific scrutiny, others have yet to do so.

The growing popularity of this discipline is a testament to the fact that it's not just a fad. Like those who've practiced it in the past, more and more are beginning to discover the benefits of this system. This is a good thing because it forces more in the scientific establishment to look deeper into it, and who knows what other health claims might eventually be proven true?

Breath is life, after all, but as with anything, one must approach pranayama with a degree of caution. That which can benefit can also destroy, and as the ancient writers and modern doctors are proving — what can heal can also harm.

Adham pranayama is the safest practice available. We all start doing this naturally as infants and toddlers, after all. Then puberty comes along and we forget. Start with adham pranayama and see how you feel. Based on your results, as well as your GP's advice, you can then move on to the rest.

Finally, I'd like to thank you for downloading this ebook! If you enjoyed it or found it helpful, I'd greatly appreciate it if you'd take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. Thank you!

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