

# Pranayama

## What Is Pranayama?

An important branch of yoga, pranayama is the practice of becoming aware of the breath and using it to enhance our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The word *pranayama* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *prana* (vital life force) and *ayama* (to expand, draw out, control). In pranayama, we use the breath to expand the life-force energy and improve communication among all parts of the body-mind.

## What Are Pranayama's Benefits?

By controlling the breath, we can train ourselves to breathe in a way that positively influences our health. Our thoughts affect our breathing. Our breathing, then, influences our thoughts and physiology. For instance, when the mind has fearful thoughts, our sympathetic nervous system triggers the fight/flight response. Conversely, when the mind is calm, our breathing is deep and rhythmic, and the body engages its natural self-repair, self-healing mechanisms. In this state, the parasympathetic nervous system, or "rest and digest" system, is dominant.

There is a growing body of scientific research documenting the benefits of practicing pranayama on a regular basis, including:

- Reduced anxiety and depression
- Lower/stabilized blood pressure
- Increased energy levels
- Muscle relaxation
- Decreased feelings of stress and being overwhelmed

The following studies offer additional information on pranayama's benefits:

- "Sudarshan Kriya yogic breathing in the treatment of stress, anxiety, and depression: part 1-neurophysiologic model." RP Brown, et al.
- "Stress Management: Approaches for preventing and reducing stress." Harvard Medical School.
- "Yoga breathing, meditation, and longevity." RP Brown, et al.
- "Breathing-based meditation decreases posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in US military veterans: a randomized controlled longitudinal study." EM Seppala, et al.

## Simple Pranayama Techniques

### ***Coherence Breathing***

In the practice of coherence breathing, we slow the breath rate to between five-to-seven breaths a minute, and the length of the inhalations and exhalations follow a set ratio that brings the heart rate, heart rate variability, blood pressure, and brainwave activity into the same coherence frequency. For example, we may inhale for four seconds, then exhale for six seconds (six breaths per minute).

Coherence breathing offers many healing benefits, including decreased anxiety and depression, improved sleep, strengthened immune function, reduced inflammation, and increased resilience. The practice is good for all doshas.

To practice coherence breathing:

- Sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor. You can also lie on your back. The eyes may be open or closed.
- Place the hands on the belly if that feels comfortable. This will allow you to feel the belly move out on the inhale and in on the exhale. Relax the belly to let the breathing be effortless.
- At your own pace, inhale for a count of four, then exhale for a count of five.
- Inhale, letting the belly expand into the hands for a count of four; then exhale, letting the belly gently draw in to a count of five. Repeat this pattern.
- Continue in this way for another three or four breaths.
- *[Wait a few moments.]*
- Put the hands on the knees, relax, and sit quietly for a few moments. Let the breath fall into its natural pattern.

Once you practice coherence breathing on a regular basis, you will find that simply taking a few coherence breaths will help you immediately calm your nervous system whenever you find yourself feeling stressed or anxious.

### ***Nadi Shodhana***

Known as “relaxing breath,” *nadi* (channel of circulation) *shodhana* (cleansing) helps remove emotional blockages in the body and calm the mind, reducing feelings of anxiety and improving stress management and sleep. It also clears emotional blockages and toxins, infuses the body-

mind with energy and oxygen, and harmonizes the brain's left and right hemispheres. While nadi shodhana benefits all doshas, it is particularly good for the Vata and Kapha doshas, due to its ability to reduce anxiety and remove blockages, respectively.

To practice nadi shodhana:

- Sit comfortably with a straight spine, shoulders relaxed, left hand comfortably in the lap.
- With the right hand, rest the tip of the index finger and middle finger in between the eyebrows. You may choose to relax the fingers towards the palm, gently tucking them in, or allow them to hang gently.
- Close off the right nostril with the thumb. Inhale slowly through the left nostril to the top of the breath. Then use the ring and pinky fingers to close off the left nostril.
- Release the thumb and slowly exhale through the right nostril to the bottom of the breath. Then inhale through the right nostril to the top of the breath.
- Next, place the thumb back over the right nostril, and release the ring and pinky fingers to exhale through the left nostril to the bottom of the breath.
- Repeat this pattern for a few rounds.
- To receive the full benefits of nadi shodhana, practice for five to ten full rounds each day, consciously and mindfully, before each meditation—and whenever you want to cultivate a sense of calm and balance.

## ***Ujjayi***

*Ujjayi* (pronounced *oo-jai*) means “to be victorious” or “to gain mastery.” This gentle, rhythmic breath produces a pleasant, soothing sound—similar to the sound of ocean waves. Ujjayi can energize, calm, and cool the body-mind; release feelings of irritation or frustration; and create a stabilizing influence on the cardiorespiratory system. All doshas can benefit from ujjayi breathing, but because of its cooling effect, it is especially beneficial for the Pitta dosha.

To practice ujjayi:

- Sit comfortably with a straight spine, shoulders relaxed, hands comfortably in the lap.
- With the mouth gently closed, take an inhalation through the nose that is slightly deeper than normal.
- Next, gently constrict the muscles at the back of the throat and exhale through the nose. This should produce a sound similar to the waves of the ocean.

- Keeping the throat muscles constricted, inhale again through the nose and exhale through the nose. Repeat this pattern several times.
- Another way to master this type of breath is to exhale the sound “haaaaaa” with the mouth open, as if trying to fog up a mirror. Now, make this same sound with the mouth closed, which will give the desired constriction of the throat muscles.
- To receive the full benefits of ujjayi, practice for five to ten full rounds each day, consciously and mindfully.

### ***Sitali***

When the body or mind feels overheated, you can use the cooling pranayama practice known as *sitali* (sit-a'-lee). *Sitali* lowers the body's temperature as it calms the nervous system and settles the mind. It is especially balancing for the Pitta dosha.

To practice *sitali*:

- Sit comfortably with a straight spine.
- Roll your tongue, curling the sides in towards the center to form a tube and extend out of the mouth. (If you don't have the “tongue-curling” gene, you can receive the same cooling benefit by practicing a variation called *sitkari*—“sipping” or “hissing”—described below.)
- Inhale through the tongue as though drinking through a straw.
- Bring the tongue into the mouth and close the mouth, exhaling through the nostrils.

To practice *sitkari*:

- Sit comfortably with a straight spine.
- Press the lower and upper teeth together and separate the lips.
- Inhale slowly through the spaces between the teeth and focus, making a hissing sound.
- Close the mouth and exhale through the nose.