

PRANAYAMA

"The yogi learns to use the mind to govern his senses,
and he uses his breath to govern the mind."
-B.K.S. Iyengar

Pranayama, the practice of intentional breathing, is a transformational step along the 8-fold path. The breath is the link between body and mind that shifts yoga from a purely physical activity to a life-changing practice.

Prana is vital energy -- life energy -- physically manifested as breath. *Ayama* means "extension" or "enhanced control." The literal meaning of *pranayama* is thus "lengthening of the life energy." Some practitioners believe that we enter the world with a limited number of breaths, therefore the practice of slowing and extending the breath extends our lives.

Bringing attention to the breath has immediate positive effects on numerous processes in the body. Heart rate slows, as do metabolic and parasympathetic nervous system activities, and there is a decrease in cardio-pulmonary stress, blood sugar and lactate levels, and muscle tension. As the body's involuntary activity slows, we are able to slow down some of the chatter in the mind as well.

The emotional component of the breath is most obvious in the feelings we express outwardly by laughing or crying. The breath is completely unregulated during these times of excitement or turmoil, and we often turn to it to calm ourselves down. We take a deep breath, right? With regular *pranayama* practice, in *asana* and in meditation, we can start to feel an overall sense of calm and well-being as we go through life.

So how does it work? Turning our attention inward to the breath prevents us from using the senses externally. Eyes relax and ears tune in to the sound of the breath, the *prana* of the mind. This focus on the breath brings us into a meditative state during *asana* practice, and it is the platform for embarking on a formal meditation practice. By directing our attention to the breath, the energy of life, we are connecting to what is constant, what is eternal. B.K.S. Iyengar describes it as "restoring the conduit" to cosmic consciousness and intelligence.

Whole books are written on this process that simultaneously draws us into our selves and connects us with the rest of the universe. The science, philosophy, and techniques can take a lifetime to study and perfect. There are many ways to practice or observe *pranayama*, but we always begin by simply noticing the breath as it is naturally. As you'll often hear during a sitting practice, don't change it, just notice.

The yoga *sutras* outline the components and functions of *pranayama*, identifying 3 activities in breathing:

1. Exhalation or *recaka* -- relaxing
2. Inhalation or *puraka* -- stimulating
3. Retention or *kumbhaka* -- at the top of the inhale or bottom of the exhale

The practice of these activities can be done in 3 ways:

1. With focus on a certain area of the body
2. For a particular duration
3. A certain number of times

There are many combinations of these actions and ways to practice. Because the breath is a direct link to the nervous system, there is great potential for calming effects, but also a small risk of things going a bit haywire. It is always best to learn specific *pranayama* methods from skilled teachers (psst -- I know where you can find some!), but there are many simple practices that can be practiced safely on your own.

Find a supported seat: sit bones elevated above the knees so that the spine is erect and the chest is open. If you find yourself getting dizzy or lightheaded during any of these exercises, stop and breathe normally.

Ocean Breath: *Ujjayi Pranayama*

A gentle restriction of the throat makes the breath audible in *ujjayi pranayama*. On an exhale, make the sound "hnhhaaa." On your next inhale, close your mouth but retain the constriction in the throat. Exhale through the nose. The breath should make a sound in your throat (not your nose). Continue inhaling and exhaling through the nose, lengthening the breaths as you go.

Ujjayi breathing expands and tones the lungs. It has a calming effect on the nervous system. It is often performed during *asana* practice.

Bee Breath: *Bhamari Pranayama*

Bhamari breath mimics the sounds of a bee on the exhale. Begin with an inhale through the nose, as in *ujjayi* breathing. On the exhale, make a humming sound until you are ready to inhale again. Repeat for several cycles. For added effect, gently cover your eyes and ears with your hands.

The extended exhale in this breathwork has an especially calming effect on the parasympathetic nervous system. It can help silence the brain-chatter present in anxiety, depression, and insomnia. It is also great preparation for meditation.

Alternate Nostril Breathing: *Nadi Shodhana*

Georg Feuerstein identifies *nadi shodhana* as the "single most important Hatha-Yoga technique of purification." It physically balances the airflow from right to left, and balances the network of subtle channels in the body, opening the gateway for further breath control and deep focus.

This technique is frequently taught in yoga classes as a lead-in to practice or meditation. Check out a *hatha* or *vinyasa* class and learn all about it.

During *asana* practice, *pranayama* is the act of regulating the breath for smooth inhales and exhales. In a sitting practice, *pranayama* is the act of cutting off inhales and exhales to bring stillness to the breath. In this second practice, we encounter the next step on the 8-fold path, inward focus or *pratyahara*, as a side-effect.

This is just a summary of enormous and powerful concepts. For more in-depth study, read Nicolai Bachman's *The Yoga Sutras*, Georg Feuerstein's *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Rolf Gates's *Meditations from the Mat*, B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Life*.