



Pranayama *Explained*

Learning pranayama helps you get more in touch with a major part of your practice: your breath

By Nora Isaacs

How many times have you told yourself—or been told—to just take a deep breath before a big speech, when the subway stops suddenly, before a major confrontation, or when your fuse is about to blow? These situations call for staying calm, cool, and collected. And it's no accident that the breath is invoked.

A deep breath helps send a signal to your nervous system to relax. The breath also happens to be the centerpiece of your yoga practice. Seen as the

link between the body and the mind, the breath is what allows us to sink more deeply into a pose and what helps our bodies to relax and release.

During a yoga class, the basic breath involves inhaling and exhaling smoothly and deeply through the nose. The quality of your breath gives many clues about how you are practicing. For example, you might notice that you are holding your breath during a pose. In this case, you can ask yourself what kind of tension are you holding in your body, and give yourself permission to release it. Or you might realize that your breath is ragged instead of smooth. In this case, you might be using too much effort and need to ease up on the pose. Your breath provides a map to follow and explore your practice—and ultimately your life.

In addition to systematic smooth, deep breaths during yoga poses, an entire branch of yoga, called pranayama, is dedicated to the science of the breath. Breathing is the one physical function that is both involuntary and voluntary. For instance, we can't tell our heart to stop beating or our stomach to stop digesting. But we *can* control our breath, and this is at the heart of the pranayama practice.

Pranayama isn't a secondary practice to other aspects of yoga such as asana and meditation. In fact, in his book *Light on Pranayama*, B.K.S. Iyengar calls pranayama "the connecting link between the body and the soul...and the hub of the wheel of Yoga." The practice of pranayama includes different variations of inhalations, exhalations, and retentions. The goal of pranayama? To control the breath in order to harmonize the body. Some pranayama practices can be incorporated into your physical poses, others are done alone, and still others before or after poses.

At the root of the word pranayama is *prana*, a word for breath, energy, or life force. "In yoga, prana is the very essence of the energizing principle of the animate and inanimate world," says Iyengar. "It pervades the whole universe. And pranayama means the

Continued on page 85

Meditative Spaces

Continued from page 15



where you will grow emotionally and spiritually, where you will feel safe. Try to tweak your attitude about the space and see if it tweaks your response to it.

Allow yourself a few extra

**Sometimes,
making the energy
of a room feel good
is about going
back to gratitude**

breathes to listen to this sacred space. Be present in the space and think, "I am going to make this the perfect environment to.... create a child... do my homework... prepare delicious meals... entertain my friends... spend time on myself." And hear what it tells you.

Ultimately, a conscious home is the perfect harmony between inhabitants and the space. It is a perfect balance and reflection of the soul, the highest Self, the God in each of us and the God of our family, and the space itself. 🙏

Yoga 101

Continued from page 18

full control of that energizing principle in one's own being."

So here's how to get started. As Iyengar puts it: "Words can... make a reader think that he understands a spiritual experience. Reading, however, only makes him more learned, while practice in what he has read brings him nearer to truth and clarity."

Types of Pranayama

For the following practices, sit in a comfortable cross-legged position with your shoulders back and down and your face relaxed. Start slowly, for about 30 seconds, and work your way up. If you feel dizzy or short of breath, stop. And don't do any breath retentions without the guidance of a teacher.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

This is often considered the most important aspect of breath control. Most people recruit their chest and neck muscles instead of the diaphragm when they breathe; this results in shallow breath, fatigue, anxiety, and headaches. Here's how to breathe more deeply.

Try it: As you inhale, your rib cage expands and your abdomen rises; as you exhale, your rib cage lowers and your abdomen pulls in. Imagine filling your lungs to their very top on your inhalation and then getting rid of all the air completely on the exhalation. Once you have this down, try keeping your breath as slow and smooth as possible.

Modification: Do this lying down, with a book or a sandbag on your abdomen.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

The Sanskrit name for this breath is Nadi Shodhana

Pranayama, which means "channel purification." This breath, which involves closing off one nostril and then the other, reduces stress and anxiety.

Try it: Bring your right hand up to your nose, and fold over your index and middle fingers so your right thumb is poised to close your right nostril and your ring finger is next to your left nostril. Close your right nostril with your thumb, and slowly exhale completely through your left nostril. Inhale completely through your left nostril. At the end of the inhalation, close your left nostril with your ring finger, open your right nostril, and exhale slowly and completely, then inhale. Repeat this pattern for two minutes: exhale, inhale, switch.

Shining Skull Breath

Also known as Kapalabhati, this rapid expulsion of breath cleans the sinuses and energizes the body.

Try it: Take a deep inhalation; your abdomen rises. To exhale, push the air out of your abdomen so that it pulls in. (You can put a hand on your abdomen to check that it's pulling in.) After the expulsion of air, you will automatically inhale. Repeat this pattern 10 times in quick succession, and then increase as you become more familiar with this breath.

Try each of these pranayama practices, and figure out which one resonates most deeply with you. Whether you choose to incorporate one or all of them into your life, allow it to help you connect more deeply with your breath, body, mind, and heart. 🙏

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