

PRĀṆĀYĀMA

Prāṇa: The Vital Force

When you breathe, in addition to the oxygen, you also take in a lot of Prāṇa. The oxygen gets diffused in the lungs and then gets into the bloodstream, but the Prāṇa goes throughout the body. It enters into every area—physical, vital, and mental. Every cell of your body vibrates with new life.

Prāṇa is our very life. It is the vital force that pervades the entire cosmos. You get Prāṇa from food, from the sun, and from the air you breathe. You can live for many weeks without food, days without water, minutes without air, but not even for a fraction of a second without Prāṇa.

In Sanskrit, if you deify the Prāṇa you can call it Parashakti, the Cosmic Power. Wherever you see power, you see the action of Prāṇa. Even the movements in an atom are due to the Prāṇa within it. The light and heat in a flame are Prāṇa. Electricity is Prāṇa. Your motorcar moves with Prāṇa—gasoline is a liquid form of Prāṇa. To raise your hand you need Prāṇa. Your breathing is Prāṇa. Your digestion is Prāṇa. Even to think you need Prāṇa, because it is the subtle Prāṇa that moves the mind.

All movement everywhere is caused by Prāṇa, the cosmic energy. The entire nature is moving constantly. That is the nature of the nature—constant movement and transformation. And it is the Prāṇa that causes all the movement. So why should we want to control it?

Prāṇāyāma: Controlling the Cosmic Power

In Prāṇāyāma we are trying to handle and control the cosmic Shakti. Prāṇāyāma is composed of two words: “Prāṇa” and “ayama.” “Ayama” means regulation, control, or mastery. We begin by regulating the Prāṇa that moves our own bodies and minds. When we gain mastery over the Prāṇa, we have mastery over the inner nature, too, because it is the Prāṇa that creates all the movements in an individual—physical and mental. We try to control the inner nature, because it is the nature’s movement that causes a lot of disturbance in the system and makes it impossible for the Light within to shine in its true, original way.

When we can control the Prāṇa inside, we can control the Prāṇa outside, too. They are one and the same force on different levels. The body is a microcosm, and the universe outside is a macrocosm. So by the regular practice of Prāṇāyāma, we are able not only to control and direct the Prāṇa that functions within us, but the universal Prāṇa as well.

Yogic Breathing

With proper Prāṇāyāma you begin to use the entire lungs. You take in much more than your normal quota of oxygen and Prāṇa. It can be measured in laboratory tests. In a normal breath, you inhale five hundred cubic centimeters of air, and then breathe out the same. After your exhalation, the lungs are almost empty. Still there is residual air in the lungs. After you breathe out your normal five hundred cubic centimeters, if you pull your tummy in slightly, you can exhale some more air, which has been measured as sixteen hundred cubic centimeters.

Now you begin to inhale. You first inhale the air that you squeezed out—sixteen hundred cubic centimeters. Then you inhale your normal five hundred. And then afterwards, you can inhale some additional air. If you inhale more deeply, you can take in another sixteen hundred cubic centimeters. So after a complete squeezing out on the exhalation, you can inhale thirty-seven hundred cubic centimeters. So instead of your usual five hundred cubic centimeters, you can take in thirty-seven hundred cubic centimeters—more than seven times as much as

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in a normal breath. In every breath you can take in seven times more air, more oxygen, and more Prāṇa if you do the Prāṇāyāma regularly.

Imagine the advantage. The quality of the blood improves, and the richness of the blood is the basis of the entire body's health. Your blood gets more oxygenated. Oxygen is life. It is a great panacea, a fine medicine for all kinds of poisons. When you have that much vitality, no virus can even think of coming near you. As soon as it comes near, you burn it out. That is the beauty of Prāṇāyāma.

Benefits of Prāṇāyāma

Prāṇāyāma helps to purify the system and to calm and regulate the mind. It purifies the nervous system and eliminates toxins from the body and blood. It helps in the curing of asthma, consumption, and other respiratory disorders. With proper breathing you can eliminate the excess mucous which causes most hay fever and sinus discomfort. You can exhilarate the blood circulation and stimulate the entire body quickly. Prāṇāyāma produces lightness of body, alertness of mind, good appetite, proper digestion, and sound sleep.

Prāṇāyāma helps you to attain radiant health, but that is only a secondary benefit, a by-product, of the practice of Prāṇāyāma. The main aim is to control the mind through the Prāṇa. If you can control the mind, you are the master. The Prāṇa—here as the movement of the breath—and the movement of the mind go together. If you regulate the Prāṇa, you have regulated, through the movement of the breath, that same pranic movement in the mind. Should you ever feel upset, tense, or worried, do some slow deep breathing with full attention on the breath, and you will easily bring the mind to a calm state.

According to the *Yoga Sūtras*, the Light within is covered by a veil of mental darkness. The benefit of Prāṇāyāma is that it removes this veil, and the mind becomes clear and fit for concentration. So Prāṇāyāma is a beautiful preparation for meditation. Before meditation, do three rounds of Bhastrikā, the bellows breath. It will exhilarate the entire body, drive off drowsiness, remove tension, and bring harmonious movement in all the cells. After this, do some alternate nostril breathing, or some slow deep breathing through both nostrils at the same time. Follow the breath with the mind. Feel how it comes in, how far it goes, and how it returns. Calm, slow, and steady breathing will also keep the mind very calm.

To derive the maximum benefit, go slowly in developing your practice. Be patient. Prāṇāyāma should never be done in a hurry, nor should you try to advance too quickly, because you are dealing with vital energy. The Yoga scriptures personify Prāṇa as a deadly cobra. So remember, you are playing with a cobra. If you play well and make the cobra dance, you will accrue many benefits, as did the snake charmers in India. They used their snakes for their livelihood. But if they didn't play properly, they would be killed. In the same way, with Prāṇa, you should be very careful. Do everything gently, avoid even the slightest strain, and never hurry.

Only a strong person can realize God. If you want to build up your body and mind, save your Prāṇa—the vital energy. Learn how to regulate and store vitality and be careful not to waste it in your life. And to get extra Prāṇa, practice Prāṇāyāma regularly.

PRĀṆĀYĀMA—DEEPENING YOUR PRACTICE

The following chart is meant to be used as a guide to develop one's own practice, and to assist the developing practice of students. Advanced practices are not meant to be taught in a beginner class.

BEGINNING PRACTICE	ADVANCED PRACTICE
<p>Dīrgha Śvāsam – Deep Breathing or 3 Part Breath</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Become comfortable with full 3 part breathing 2. Make inhalation and exhalation equal length 	<p>Advanced Dīrgha Śvāsam is incorporated in Nāḍi Śuddhi and Sukha Pūrvaka below</p>
<p>Kapālabhāti – Skull Shining Breath</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forceful exhalation; natural inhalation. 2. 3 rounds – 15 to 30 expulsions 3. Gradually increase number of breaths per round to one hundred or more 4. Work up to 5 rounds of 100 or more expulsions per round 	<p>Bhastrikā – Bellows Breath</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forceful exhalation; slight effort on inhalation 2. Retention after last inhalation* 3. Add Jaalandara Bandha – chin lock during retention 4. Work up to 5 rounds <p>* Retention is safe when comfortable at a 10:20 ratio during Nāḍi Śuddhi, and can also be incorporated in Kapālabhāti – see below.</p>
<p>Nāḍi Śuddhi – Nerve Purification or Alternate Nostril Breathing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Become comfortable with the pattern: exhale, inhale, change 2. Incorporate 3 part breathing 3. Make exhalation equal to inhalation 4. Begin with 3 minutes at a sitting 5. Gradually increase length of exhalation to 1:2 ratio; a comfortable 1:2 ratio should be extended to 10 rounds before increasing 6. Slowly work up to 10:20 ratio – inhale 10 seconds/exhale 20 seconds 	<p>Sukha Pūrvaka – Easy, Comfortable Breath</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When comfortable with 10:20 ratio for at least 10 rounds begin the practice of retention after each inhalation 2. Begin with 5-second retention 3. Be comfortable with 10 rounds with 5-second retention before increasing retention time 4. Increase by 5-second increments up to final 40-second retention 5. Increase number of rounds at 10:40:20 to 30-50 rounds
	<p>Ujjāyi – Hissing or Victorious Breath</p> <p>Can be incorporated in Dīrgha Śvāsam, Nāḍi Śuddhi, or Sukha Pūrvaka.</p>

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BEGINNING PRACTICE	ADVANCED PRACTICE
Brahmarī – Humming Breath 3 to 5 rounds	Brahmarī with Śanmukhī Mudrā Apply Śanmukhī Mudrā
Śītalī – Cooling Breath 1. Exhale through the nose; inhale through the rolled tongue 2. 3 – 5 rounds	Add retention after inhale
Śītkarī – Hissing Breath 1. Exhale through the nose; inhale through the teeth. 2. 3 – 5 rounds	Add retention after inhale