

BASIC PRACTICE OF SOME PRANAYAMAS

By

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Pranayama, the science of controlled, conscious expansion of Prana (the life force) is the fourth limb of Classical Yoga. The art and science of Pranayama has immense therapeutic potential in a wide range of psychosomatic disorders such as diabetes, hypertension and asthma. It can be used either as a monotherapy or in combination with Asanas and other aspects of Yoga.

Pranayama is of vital importance to any sincere Yoga practitioner trying to achieve the state of Yoga. Unless the mind is controlled, the higher aspects of Yoga are not possible and the best and only way to really control the mind is by regular, dedicated and determined practice of Pranayama with awareness, consciousness and purity of thought, word and deed.

Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri, one of the greatest Yoga Masters of the past century taught more than 120 Pranayamas in the RISHICULTURE ASHTANGA YOGA system that is taught at that world famous International Centre for Yoga Education and Research (ICYER) at Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry in South India.

SITTING POSTURES FOR PRANAYAMA

It is important to sit in a comfortable position to perform Pranayama. The spinal column must be held erect for maximum expansion of the chest. We shall describe three of the commonly used sitting positions for Pranayama.

1. **VAJRA Asana:** This is the best posture for Pranayama as the erect spine allows for maximum lung expansion. Sit on the floor with both legs stretched out in front of yourself. Now bend the knees and come into a kneeling posture. Sit down on your heels so as to put your entire weight on the heels and ankles. Try to keep the ankles and heels of both feet as close together as possible. Sit straight, place the palms on the thighs and perform nine rounds of deep and controlled breathing
2. **SUKHA Asana:** Sit on the floor with both legs stretched out in front. Bend your knees and sit with your legs crossed at the ankles. Clasp your hands together to form the Yoga Mudra with fingers of the right hand dominant. Sit straight and perform deep and controlled breathing.
3. **PADMA Asana:** Sit on the floor with both legs stretched out in front. Bend your right knee and place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. You may also do the reverse by placing left foot on right thigh followed by right foot on left thigh. Don't do this if you have any severe problems with the knee joints. Perform the Dhyana Mudra with your thumb and index finger together and other fingers straight and place it on the knees. Sit straight and perform deep and controlled breathing

VIBHAGHA PRANAYAMA (SECTIONAL BREATHING)

Vibhagha Pranayama is sectional or lobular breathing. This Pranayama is the "A, B, C" of Pranayama and is the beginning of good breath control. Without positive physical control of the three major sections of each lung, real control of Prana does not exist.

The lungs are divided into three major sections: Adhama, the Inferior or Lower Abdominal Area, Madhyama, the Mid or Intercostal Area and Adhyama, the Superior, High or Clavicular Area.

1. **ADHAM PRANAYAMA:** To control the lower or inferior lobes of the lungs place the palms of the hands onto the chest in the region of the diaphragm. Start to breathe deeply by first inhaling into the front section of the lower lungs, then the side section and finally followed by the back section. Breathe out first from the back section, then the side and finally the front section of the lower lung area. Perform this at least 9 times moving the hands from front to side and then to the back to enable you to concentrate and focus your mind on those areas properly.
2. **MADHYAM PRANAYAMA:** To control the breath into the middle lobes or mid-lobular area of the lungs, place the hands onto the chest over the breast region. Start to breathe deeply by first inhaling into the front of the mid lung area, then the side and the back section. Breathe out first from the back, then the side and finally the front section of the mid lung area. Perform this at least 9 times moving the hands from front to side and then to the back to enable you to concentrate and focus your mind on those areas properly.
3. **ADHYAM PRANAYAMA:** To control the high superior lobes of the lungs, place the hands onto the upper chest just below the collar bone, the clavicle. Similarly move the hands to the side of the hips so the armpits are free from the body. Concentrate into the side upper lobes so that your breathing inflates the upper lobes situated under the armpits. Then raise your arms over the shoulders and place the palms of the hands onto the back upper lung area to help you concentrate your mind into the high back lobes. Breathe deeply in and out, so that the hands are raised by the heaving of the breath. Avoid being "muscular," and let the breath do the heaving.
4. **MAHAT YOGA PRANAYAMA:** In this "Complete Yogic Breath" the air is consciously directed sequentially to the three parts of the lungs. Place the right hand onto the diaphragmic region and the left hand at the mid chest. Start a long, slow, deep breath regulating the first two counts to the low lung area. Continue the breath into the mid chest for another two counts and then fill the high clavicular area of the chest for the next two counts. Then let the breath out in the same order, first deflating the low, then the mid, and then finally the upper lung areas sequentially. Take a short rest at this point and then repeat the entire cycle for a total of three to six rounds.

MUDRAS FOR PRANAYAMA

Mudras are neuromuscular gestures that are used to intensify the effects of different Pranayamas. Some of the important Mudras will be described in this section.

1. **CHIN MUDRA:** This Mudra helps gain control of the lower parts of the lungs in Adham Pranayama. Join the tips of the thumb and index finger in as perfect a circle as possible. The other three fingers should be kept parallel to one another. Place the Mudra on the thighs and breathe deeply.

2. CHINMAYA MUDRA: This Mudra helps us to breathe better into the middle sections of the lungs in Madhyam Pranayama. Join the tips of the index finger and thumb as in Chin Mudra and then curl the other three fingers into the palm. Place the Mudra on the thighs and breathe deeply.
3. ADHI MUDRA: The upper regions of the lungs are especially utilized when we breathe in the Adhyam Pranayama with the Adhi Mudra. Close all the four fingers in a fist over the thumb. Place the Mudra on the thighs and breathe deeply.
4. BRAHMA MUDRA: This Mudra is used in the performance of complete yogic breathing in which we consciously breathe in different lung sections. Make both hands into a fist with the thumb inside the fist. Now hold both hands with the opposing knuckles touching each other in front of the navel and breathe deeply.
5. NASARGA MUDRA: This Mudra manipulates the nostrils to control the breath through a single nostril at a time. Turn the index and middle fingers down in against the bridge of the nose with the thumb against the right nostril. The ring and little finger are placed against the left nostril. This is also known as the Nasika Mudra and is used in the alternate nostril breathings practices such as Aloma Viloma, Nadi Shuddhi as well as the single nostril Pranayamas such as Surya and Chandra Pranayamas. It is also used in the ritualistic Gayatri Japa.
6. VISHNU MUDRA: Vishnu Mudra is a hand position with the tip of the middle finger on the point between the eyebrows at the root of the nose. This point is known as the Bhrumadhya Bindu and is related to the Pituitary gland and the Hypothalamus of the Neuro-endocrine system. The index finger closes the right nostril while the ring finger closes the left nostril. The thumb and little finger are spread into a wide "V" shape resembling the tradition "V" mark of the Vaishnava community. This is an excellent Mudra for the practice of the alternate nostril and single nostril Pranayamas as it has the added advantage of focusing the mind on the Bhrumadhya.
7. KAKACHANDRA MUDRA: This Mudra is performed by rolling the tongue into a tube or curve which is then extended about three-quarters of an inch out through the puckered up, protruding lips. This gesture is used to sip the air in to the throat in the Sheetali Pranayama, one of the cooling Pranayamas.
8. JIHVA MUDRA: Relax the lower jaw, and slightly open the mouth, so that the tongue may be rolled into a trough-like "V". This is called the Jihva Mudra, or Tongue Gesture. Fold the tongue backwards and press the tip of the tongue by the hard palate, leaving narrow openings on either side of the tongue. This is used in Sitkari Pranayama.

ACTIVATING PRANAYAMAS:

Patients of depression and hypo-metabolic conditions as well as those suffering general lethargy, dullness and tiredness can benefit a lot from the practice of activating Pranayamas. Two of the important activating Pranayamas are

1. SURYA PRANAYAMA: Sit in Vajra Asana and perform Nasarga Mudra with your right hand. Close the left nostril with the little and ring fingers. Inhale slowly through the right nostril for a count of four. Now exhale through the right nostril for a count of eight. Keep the left nostril closed all the time during the practice. Repeat the same for a total of nine rounds. Patients of depression and narcolepsy can benefit

by practising this Pranayama 27 rounds before breakfast, lunch, dinner and before going to bed at night sleep.

2. **KAPALABHATI:** Kapalabhati is the brain cleansing Pranayama that is also one of the six cleansing actions known as the Shat Karmas. Sit in Vajrasana and forcefully expel all of the air from the lungs while pushing the abdominal diaphragm upwards. The expulsion is active but the inhalation is passive. Rapidly breathe out actively and inhale passively through both nostrils. On the in breath visualize warm, golden Pranic energy flowing from the front of the brain to the back. On the explosive out breath, visualize cool, silvery Apanic energy rising from the base of the spine, passing over the top of the brain and then circulating through the brain. Do ten rounds slowly for a beginning and then do another round at a faster rate and finally round off with a round of breathing as fast as possible. You can increase a few rounds each day as long as there is no dizziness or fainting from hyperventilation. One hundred and twenty rounds at a sitting is the maximum. There is no point in going beyond this number of rounds. Enjoy the Kevala Kumbhaka or spontaneous cessation of respiration that occurs for a few minutes at the end of this practice. This occurs due to the greater carbon dioxide washout that occurs when we do the Kapalabhati for a prolonged duration of time, Kapalabhati is highly recommended for students who have to do a great deal of study and need a clean, clear mind, and for spiritual aspirants before practising concentration and meditation.

COOLING PRANAYAMAS

These "Hot Weather Pranayamas" are "temperature coolers", and are useful in countering the chemical heating of the body in respiratory acidosis, or a highly acidic blood stream. They are very useful in summer when the going gets too hot for comfort.

1. **SHEETALI PRANAYAMA:** This 'Icing Breath' or 'Ice Maker Breath' brings about almost instantaneous cooling of the body, and the body's overall cooling processes are enhanced. Sheetalī Pranayama has very good effect upon Vata and Kapha disorders of the "wind" and "mucous". It helps overcome a constant craving for liquids and may be of value in the treatment of diabetes. Sit in a comfortable and straight-backed Vajra Asana. Roll the tongue into a tube by folding up the sides of the partially protruded tongue so as to form a long narrow tube resembling the beak of a bird. Pressing the lips round the tongue further narrows the passage. This gesture is called Kakachandra Mudra or the Crow's Beak gesture. The tongue should protrude one-half to three-quarters of an inch beyond the lips. Inhale in short gulps of air, along the rolled up tongue, until the lungs are completely inflated. Perceive the cooling effect of the air as it passes through the tongue. Allow the breath to be stopped effortlessly. Exhale slowly through both nostrils. Then allow the breath to be held comfortably before the next inhalation. Repeat the cycle at least nine times.
2. **SITKARI PRANAYAMA:** Sitkari Pranayama has both a psychical as well as physical effect. Ventilation of the mouth and nasal passages as well as airways resistance is improved. The blood stream is cooled and higher Nadis of the subtle body are brought under control. Sit in the Vajra Asana. Exhale through both nostrils. Relax the lower jaw, and slightly open the mouth, so that the tongue may be rolled into a trough-like "V". This is called the Jihva Mudra, or Tongue Gesture. Fold the tongue backwards and press the tip of the tongue to the hard palate, leaving narrow openings on either side of the tongue. Inhale

through these side-openings with a sipping sound of "sit-sit-sit." When the lungs are completely filled, allow the breath to be stopped with ease. Then push the air out rapidly through both nostrils in a modified Bhastrika or Bellows Breath. Repeat at least nine times.

PRANAYAMAS FOR CONTEMPLATION AND MEDITATION:

Breath awareness is the key to higher practices of Yoga including contemplation and meditation. Following the breath as it flows from the external to the internal helps us interiorize our thought process. One of the important Pranayamas to ready the mind for higher states is the Pranava Pranayama.

PRANAVA PRANAYAMA: 'Tasya vachakah pranavaha', the sacred sound of the Divine is the Pranava says Maharishi Patanjali. This practice develops the abdominal, thoracic and clavicular regions of the lungs to their maximum capacity. Pranava Pranayama has unlimited healing potential and is useful in virtually all disorders. It brings about harmony of body, emotions and mind and is an important part of Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga tradition as taught by Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj. Let us perform Adham Pranayama, the abdominal or lower chest breathing. Put the fingers into the Chin Mudra with the index and thumb fingers touching each other at the tips. Keep the other three fingers straight and united. Take a deep breath into the lower chest and abdominal regions...1...2...3...4. Now let out the breath with the sound AAA.....

To perform thoracic or mid-chest breathing, the Madhyam Pranayama, curl your fingers inward to form Chinmaya Mudra. Take a deep breath into the mid chest and thoracic regions 1...2...3...4. Now breathe out with the sound OOO.....

Adhyam Pranayama is the clavicular or upper chest breathing and utilizes Adhi Mudra. Clench your fists with your thumb in the centre. Keep the Adhi Mudra on your thighs and breathe deeply into the upper chest and clavicular regions 1...2...3...4... Now, exhale with the sound MMM.....

Joining the earlier three parts of the breath in a complete Yogic breath is the fourth stage, known as Mahat Yoga Pranayama. Put the Adhi Mudra with knuckles of your right and left hands touching in front of the navel. This is now known as the Brahma Mudra. Take a deep breath into the low 1...2...mid 3...4...and upper chest 5...6...regions. Now let the breath out with the sounds of AAA...ooo...mmm....

Relax in Vajrasana and enjoy the feeling of potent healing energy flow through the entire body.

STRESS RELIEF AND RELAXATION:

Modern life is full of stress and strain and this has taken a heavy toll on the health of humankind. Certain Pranayamas are useful to reduce the anxiety and stress levels as well as prevent the exacerbation of stress related disorders such as diabetes mellitus, irritable bowel syndrome, bronchial asthma and hypertension.

1. **NASARGA MUKHA BHASTRIKA:** Nasarga Mukha Bhastrika is a forceful expulsion of the breath through the mouth that can accompany different movements to relieve our pent up stress. Shake your hands to help shake up the accumulated tensions of your daily life. Take a deep breath in through the nose and clench your fist as if catching hold of all your tensions and stress. Now "whoosh" away all the tensions and stress with a forceful blast out through the mouth, as forcibly as possible. Breathe in -----catch hold of the tension in your

fist-----and now throw it all away. Use our diaphragm muscle vigorously in this practice. Perform this practice 3, 6 or 9 times as necessary.

2. CHANDRA PRANAYAMA: Sit in Vajra asana and perform Nasarga Mudra with your right hand. Close your right nostril with the thumb. Inhale slowly through your left nostril for a count of four. Now exhale through the same left nostril for a count of eight. Keep the right nostril closed all the time during the practice. Repeat the same for a total of nine rounds. Patients of anxiety, hypertension and other stressful conditions can benefit by practising this Pranayama 27 rounds before breakfast, lunch, dinner and before going to bed at night sleep.
3. NADI SHUDDHI PRANAYAMA: This is an alternate nostril breathing technique that helps balance both hemispheres of the brain and bring about extreme calmness. Sit in Vajra Asana and perform Nasarga Mudra or Vishnu Mudra with your right hand. Close the right nostril. Inhale slowly through the left nostril for a count of six. Hold the breath for a count of three while closing both nostrils. Exhale through the right nostril for a count of six. Hold the breath out for a count of three while closing both nostrils. Now inhale slowly through the right nostril for a count of six and hold the breath for a count of three. Exhale through the left nostril for a count of six and hold the breath out for a count of three. Repeat the same for a total of nine rounds. This Pranayama helps to control and cure conditions of extreme nervous fidgeting and undue irritability. It can also reduce temper tantrums and senseless outbursts of anger and rage.
4. SAVITRI PRANAYAMA IN SHAVASANA: Shavasana is a relaxing and energizing posture in which the body, emotions and mind are united in the process of conscious relaxation. 15 minutes of Shavasana properly performed is equal to more than one hour of refreshing sleep. Lie supine on a flat surface with the head preferably to the north or east enabling us to be in alignment with the earth's magnetic field. Make sure that the head and body are in line and the hands are kept relaxed by the sides of the thighs with the palms facing upwards. Relax the feet with the heels touching lightly. Let the fore foot fall away into a 'v' shape. Start watching your breath and let your awareness settle in the abdomen. Feel the abdominal movements as the abdomen rises with the in breath and falls with the out breath. Feel the cool inspired air flowing into the nostrils and the warm expired air flowing out of the nostrils. Let your awareness settle at the tip of the nose. Now perform SAVITRI PRANAYAMA the harmonizing breath to relax and rejuvenate the body, emotions and mind. Breathe in through the nose for 6 counts and hold in for 3 counts. Breathe out through the nose for 6 counts and then hold out for 3 counts. Make sure that you are breathing in and out through both nostrils and are using the complete Yogic breathing. Repeat for 9 rounds

A LAST WORD:

I end with a quote from my Guru Father, Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj who often said, "God breathed the Breath of Life into man and he became a living soul. Now, it is our duty as evolving beings to guard and cherish that Breath of Life as our spiritual treasure. We must deepen it, lengthen it, control it, expand it and become conscious of it and its potentiality to link us with our Highest Nature. That is the real Pranayama, the ancient spiritual Science of Vital Control."