

## Pranayama – Breathing Techniques

<b><i>Dirgha</i></b>	(1-3 minutes)	Complete Breath
<b><i>Nadi Shodhana</i></b>	(1-3 minutes)	Channel Clearing Breath

Breath is the essence of life. You inhale for the first time shortly after arriving in the world, even before your umbilical cord is cut. From that moment on you take approximately seventeen thousand breaths each day, which over a lifetime totals about 500 million. In your final moments on this planet you exhale for the last time, which defines the end of your life. Your breathing supports every experience you have from the time of your first inhalation to that of your last exhalation. Breath is life.

In yoga, the breath is intimately associated with Prana, which translates from Sanskrit into English as “primordial impulse.” Prana is the primordial life force that governs all your mental and physical functions. It is the vital energy that animates inert molecules into self-healing, evolving biological beings. It is the primary creative power of the cosmos. Learning to regulate your Prana to calm, balance, cleanse, and invigorate your body/mind is a powerful technology of yoga. Your breath integrates many layers of your life – your environment, your respiratory tract, your nervous system, your mind, and every cell in your body. Regulating your breath enhances your physical, emotional and spiritual well being. It is the key to a healthy, vibrant life.

For most people, breathing is the only autonomic nervous system function that they can influence. Modern physiology divides the nervous system in two main components – the voluntary nervous system and the autonomic nervous system. The voluntary nervous system is active when you clap your hands, wave your arms, or use your legs to walk. It is responsible for activating the muscles that form the hundreds of facial expressions you make in a day, as well as those that control your speech. Although many of these functions occur with only minimal conscious intention, you have the ability to initiate and stop the use of these muscle groups at will.

The autonomic nervous system governs basic bodily functions over which you usually have no conscious ability to influence. These include core physiological functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, regulation of your temperature,

hormone levels in your body, perspiration and the movement of food through your digestive tract. Your autonomic nervous system also plays an important role in the regulation of your immune system. Modern neurological science suggests that most people are incapable of directly affecting these core physiological processes. The processes function on their own whether or not you are paying attention to them or attempt to alter them. Most people do not know how to influence their blood pressure, change the flow of their blood, reduce their sweating, or affect their digestive function.

Studies of yoga practitioners, however, have found that with practice, people can learn to consciously decrease their blood pressure, slow their heart rate, reduce their oxygen consumption, alter their circulation and lower their stress hormone levels. Learning to influence these functions, which are usually automatic, requires a different set of skills than those necessary to ride a bicycle or kick a soccer ball. Moreover, these skills can be mastered with a little practice. Learning to regulate your breath is the first step in discovering how to influence other essential involuntary bodily functions.

Left on its own, breathing does not require your conscious attention to consume oxygen or eliminate carbon dioxide. This is a good thing. Day and night, respiratory centers deep in your brainstem monitor the level of gases in your body and automatically adjust your breathing rate and depth. As anyone with asthma can testify, having to pay attention to breathing in order to get enough life sustaining oxygen into your body is not desirable.

Every human being is capable of temporarily overriding autonomic control over breathing by speeding up, slowing down, or holding the breath. Conscious alteration of the usually automatic breathing process has powerful effects on your mind and body, and provides a window into your ability to influence other autonomic functions. When your attention is focused on your breath, you can modify it. However, as soon as you relinquish conscious control, your involuntary nervous system resumes its authority.

Through the yogic practice of breathing exercises, known as Pranayama, you can use your breath to influence your physical and mental states. A variety of techniques to relax or invigorate your body/mind are described in yoga. They are easily mastered and have prompt and powerful effects.

## **Pranayama Breathing Exercises**

You can learn a lot about life by paying attention to your breathing. Right now, take a deep breath in and hold it. Feel the increasing discomfort that builds as you resist the natural impulse to let go. When it becomes too uncomfortable, release your breath and notice the immediate relief that you feel. Holding on to anything when it is time to let go, creates distress in your body and mind. Now, take a breath in and when you exhale, fully empty your lungs holding the breath out. Become aware of the increasing discomfort that develops when you resist something from entering your life that you are meant to accept. Notice the relief that you feel as you once again inhale.

Ingesting, absorbing, releasing, and eliminating – these are the key components to a healthy life, and of natural, balanced breathing. When these basic functions are working well, you are able to absorb what you need and eliminate what you do not, resulting in life sustaining nourishment and detoxification. When you take a bite of an apple, for example, you ingest potential nourishment, but the energy and information contained within the food does not become available to you until you have absorbed the basic nutrients through your small intestines. In every substance you ingest there are components that do not serve you, so a healthy digestion system releases the non-nourishing remains of the food into your colon. Finally, it is necessary to eliminate the residues of digestion on a regular basis for you to remain healthy.

These same steps are applicable on an emotional level. When people engage in emotionally powerful relationships, they often ingest more emotional energy and information than they are capable of digesting. To maintain a healthy emotional life, we must all selectively absorb those aspects of the emotional experience that are nourishing, while releasing and eliminating those components that, if retained, could be toxic.

On both physical and emotional levels, Pranayama breathing exercises clear the channels that enable you to effortlessly exchange your personal energy with the energy of the universe. Consciously directed, your vital energy can be used for creativity and healing. Pranayama breathing exercises are tools to help you channel your vital force in evolutionary ways that bring you higher levels of physical and emotional well being.

## **Dirgha Pranayama – The Complete Breath**

Dirgha pranayama is a cleaning and balancing breathing technique that shows prompt benefits. It involves consciously filling three different areas of your lungs, starting in the lower chambers, moving up through the middle thoracic regions and finishing with the upper spaces. This breathing technique is a simple expression of the Law of Intention and Desire. Simply by shifting your intention to direct your breath, you will notice a deeply relaxing and releasing effect.

Perform Dirgha pranayama either sitting upright or lying on your back with your knees bent. Both the inhalations and exhalations are through your nostrils. For the first breath, inhale slowly and deeply directing the air into your lower lungs by consciously using your diaphragm. When performed properly, your belly should rise up. As you exhale, lower your belly just as air escapes from a balloon. Repeat this pattern several times, drawing the air into the lower chambers of your lungs, maintaining smooth and rhythmic breathing.

After you are comfortable with this first step, begin filling the middle section of your lungs with air. Start by filling your lower regions as before, and then direct your inflow to your mid lung region by opening your ribcage. You will feel your ribs expanding between your diaphragm and your breasts. Inhale and exhale several times filling both the bottom and middle areas of your lungs.

Finally, drawing air into the bottom and middle regions of your lungs, continue breathing in. Fill the upper lungs so that you are breathing into your collarbones (clavicle). Practice the complete breath so your inhalations and exhalations flow in a smooth, continuous motion. Sequentially, direct your attention from your diaphragm to your ribs to your clavicle. Envision this deep conscious breathing nourishing the organs, tissues and cells in your body, enabling them to perform their vital functions effortlessly and in accordance with their dharma.

## **Nadi Shodhana – Channel Clearing Breath**

Nadi Shodhana means, “clearing the channels of circulation,” and is sometimes known descriptively as alternate nostril breathing. This pranayama technique has a quieting effect and is very helpful in reducing mental turbulence associated with anxiety and insomnia.

In Nadi Shodhana you use your right hand to control the flow of breath through your nostrils. Your thumb is positioned over the right nostril, while your third and fourth fingers are over the left.

There are several different styles of Nadi Shodhana, all of which regulate the flow of air through your nasal passages, differing in accordance to how and when you alter the breathing pattern. The simplest procedure involves closing off alternate nostrils at the end of each inhalation. Inhale deeply, then close off the right nostril with your thumb, exhaling through the left. Smoothly inhale through the left nostril, and at the peak of the inflow, close off your left nostril with the third and fourth fingers of your right hand. Release the thumb, exhaling through the right nostril. After full exhalation, inhale through the right nostril, again closing it off with your thumb at the peak of inhalation. Release the third and fourth fingers exhaling out the left nostril. Your breathing should be effortless, as your mind simply witnesses the process. Continue performing Nadi Shodhana for the next few breaths, following the pattern: Inhaling through the left nostril. Exhaling through the right nostril. Inhaling through the right nostril. Exhaling through the left.

Nadi Shodhana has a relaxing effect on your mind and body. It can be useful to quiet your mind prior to engaging in mantra meditation or when you are wanting to fall asleep. By softening the breath through Nadi Shodhana you invoke a state of calm, inner awareness.

### **Breath work in Action**

Become aware of your breathing throughout the day. If you find yourself in a tense or stressful situation, consciously take some deep slow abdominal breaths through your nose and notice how your entire body relaxes. Use the Dirgha breath when you are feeling pressure and are straining to circulate the life force throughout your body. Be conscious of your breath and your awareness will stay centered in the midst of turbulence. According to yoga, this is the true value of pranayama.