

# Pranayama

## A GUIDE TO CONSCIOUS BREATHING

Brought to you by [www.bhaktinova.com](http://www.bhaktinova.com) & Nubia Teixeira with Lisa Maria  
Exercises ©2004 Nubia Teixeira

Bhakti Nova

The word “pranayama” is derived from 2 Sanskrit terms: “prana,” which means vital energy, and “ayama,” which means control and expansion. The intention of this practice is to breathe in a conscious way.

*“Pranayama is the conscious, deliberate regulation of breath replacing unconscious patterns of breathing.”  
(Yoga Sutra)*

The volume of prana that circulates inside of our bodies determines the level of our vitality.

We can extract this vital energy from many different sources: from the light and the heat of the sun; from the elements that we eat in our food; from the water that we drink; and mainly from the air that we breathe.

In our normal mechanical way of breathing, we superficially incorporate vital energy into our system. When we bring our attention to the assimilation of prana through our breathing, the level of this energy becomes stronger in our bodies.

*“Pranayama involves the regulation of the exhalation, the inhalation, and the suspension of the breath. The regulation of these 3 processes is achieved by modulating their length and maintaining this modulation for a period of time, as well as directing the mind into the process. These components of breathing must be both long and uniform.” (Yoga Sutra)*

Like the arteries that carry blood throughout our physical body, our energetic (subtle) body has the nadis (meridians) that are like rivers carrying prana throughout the body.

By directing the energy flow into our subtle body, pranayama helps to awaken the nadis. This energizes the seven chakras that are the centers of purification, storage and distribution of prana in the physical body.

If our breathing is blocked, our sensibility, intuition and connection with the inner and outer world becomes difficult.

Frequently we search to develop wisdom by external means. What we have forgotten is that the whole universe can unfold to us through inner exploration. Pranayama is a powerful way to reach that knowledge.

The movements of the mind are related to our breath. If our breath is smooth and calm, the waves of our mind will follow the same pace and vice-versa. Then when the breath transcends the level of the controlling consciousness, our mind also transcends the regular way of observation. This prepares us to dive into ourselves in a different way, with fewer obstacles and barriers to encounter in the real nature of our souls.

*“The regular practice of pranayama reduces the obstacles that inhibit clear perception.”  
(Yoga Sutra)*

*“Like the wind carries the smoke and the impurities of the atmosphere, prana takes those impurities out of our bodies and minds.” (Patanjali)*

By inhaling and exhaling properly and deeply, through the nostrils, we can improve our health and vitality.

Normally our breath is superficial and short, and we don’t complete a full exhalation. As a result, we always keep a small quantity of air in our lungs. This can produce toxins in our inner organs and block the passage of energy into the nadis.

If you pay attention to a person with a high level of stress or emotional imbalance, you will notice a short and arrhythmic breath. By comparison, a calm and balanced person has a longer, rhythmic breath.

To breathe properly and deeply means to fully relate to the world around you without fears, restrictions or reservations. You invite and allow the Universal Energy to penetrate and nurture your being. By holding or tightening your breath, you hold emotions inside that can negatively affect the healthy functioning of your whole physical body. This breath holding also increases the challenging aspects of your emotional patterns.

Your inhalation is related to how you allow yourself to receive from the Source and from others...your exhalation is related to how you give from yourself, and how you express yourself to the world and people around you.

Although breathing is a vegetative-automatic-unconscious function of your body, by intentionally modulating the breath with pranayama, you can bring opening and spaciousness to your mind, tranquility to your emotions, and healing to your physical body.

Pranayama has the power to bring your attention to your inner space, where you can dive into the realms of your mind and your emotions and know more about your true self. Just like meditation practice, pranayama leads you towards your inner sanctuary where you can get in touch with both your wounds and your inner light.

Only after recognizing the need inside of you to open and bring more light to your being and personality will you be able to change and heal whatever is revealed. By awakening dormant feelings and emotions you can start the purification of your samskaras (past habitual actions) and move forward towards the daily process of growing as a human being.

Contemplation of yourself and self-knowledge is the first step in this journey...

## TOOLS FOR YOUR PRACTICE

According to Yoga practice, the way of breathing is divided into 4 phases:

1. Puraka -inhalation phase
2. Rechaka -exhalation phase
3. Kumbhaka or Antara Kumbhaka -retention with air  
\*retention with air should be avoided by people with heart disease or high blood pressure
4. Shunyata or Bahya Kumbhaka -retention without air

During kumbhaka, the body has time to assimilate more prana. After your inhalation, when you have brought more air and prana into your body, you can channel that energy all over your nadi system. In shunyata, the body becomes more receptive, empty, and clear before receiving again.

Matra - means portion, it is the counting unit that establishes the rhythm.

The breath registers and reflects all variations of emotional and mental fluctuations. When we interfere with the unconscious rhythm of the breath, we can change our emotional and mental behavior patterns.

The most common rhythms are:

(1) for inhalation (2) for exhalation; and (1) for inhalation (1) for retention with air (2) for exhalation and (1) for retention without air.

**Bandha** - energy lock or seal that helps to activate various energetic points in the body. By contracting specific muscles, nerves, organs and glands, plus directing our attention to those areas, we channel energy to specific areas and throughout the body.

**Jalandhara Bandha** - You find this lock by touching your chin to the center of your collarbones, without tensing your shoulders. This bandha prevents the energy of Sahasrara (crown chakra) from moving down and burning itself in the fire of digestion. Jalandhara Bandha also opens the end of your cervical spine, allowing the energy to move freely from the base of your spine to the crown of your head.

**Uddiyana Bandha** - Upward and inward contraction of your abdominal muscles, in the area between your belly button and the pelvis. This promotes a massage in the inner organs, and awakens the energy in your Manipura chakra (navel area, the sun in your body).

**Mula Bandha** - Contracting and lifting the muscles of your perineum (the area between genitals and anus). This stimulates the central nerve system and Muladhara (root) chakra, and brings stability and connection to the earth.

When the 3 of these bandhas are done together, it receives the name of **Bandha Traya**.

The Jalandhara Bandha moves the prana from your heart down towards your abdomen and Mula Bandha with Uddiyana Bandha moves the apana (bodily waste) up from the root chakra. When the encounter of these “two birds” or two forces (prana and apana) happens in the abdomen they fly up together to Sahasrara.

**Jiva Bandha or Kechari Mudra** - Pressure with the tip of your tongue on the soft part of the roof of your mouth. This promotes a massage in the Pituitary gland.

All these elements will be combined in different ways for different types of breathing, and can also be used during your asana practice.

**Drishti** - Means gaze, turning your attention to a specific area of your body by turning your eye and awareness to that point (ekragata). This technique facilitates meditation.

**Nasagra Drishti** - Gaze on the tip of the nose.

**Bhrumadhya Drishti** - Gaze on the space between your eyebrows, or ajna chakra, the center that opens intuition and concentration.

*“There is no asana as siddhasana, there is no strength like kumbhaka brings, there is no mudra as kechari mudra, and there is no dissolution as nada (primordial sound)” Shiva Samhita*

## PRACTICE

### 1. Adhama - Abdominal Breathing

Lie down on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor hip distance apart. Relax your shoulders and bring your palms to your abdomen, resting your elbows on the floor. INHALE through your nostrils, relaxing the muscles of your abdomen and expanding your abdomen towards your rib cage, and EXHALE through your nostrils, contracting your abdomen and moving your navel towards your spine. Concentrate all of your attention on the abdominal area, massaging your inner organs with this movement. Find the same rhythm for the in and out breath and relax your mind in that rhythm. Repeat a minimum of 12 cycles of this breathing and opening for your lower back.

### 2. Madhyama - Diaphragmatic Breathing

In the same body position, shift your hand to your rib cage so that your fingertips are touching with elbows down. Keep your chest open and shoulders relaxed. While you INHALE, open your rib cage outwards and upwards, filling your diaphragm with air, noticing that your fingertips move away from each other. On your EXHALATION, contract your diaphragm, moving your rib cage inwards and bringing fingertips towards each other again. This breathing helps your digestion and stimulates your solar plexus (area around your navel). Again, the in and out breath are the same length. Repeat this breathing for a minimum of 12 cycles.

### 3. Uttama - Thoracic Breathing

Resting in the same position with your hands next to your hips, INHALE and expand your thorax upwards towards the sky and the sides of the chest outwards. EXHALE, contracting your lungs and moving all of your upper body towards your sternum, concentrating on this point. This exercise can be done with one block right behind your heart center (in the space between your shoulder blades) and another block supporting the back of the head. Deep and soft inhalations and exhalations of the same length, repeating for a minimum of 8 cycles.

### 4. Prana Kriya - Whole Breathing

By breathing with our total capacity, we promote deep oxygenation and purification of our cells and unblock our emotions, bringing the sensation of washing the inside of the body and the soul. In this technique we will combine the last 3 breathing exercises. Sitting on a folded blanket, legs crossed in a comfortable position, with your spine straight and heart center moving forward. Start EXHALING completely through your nostrils, and INHALE, bringing air and prana simultaneously first to your abdomen, then diaphragm and lungs, and EXHALE, first emptying your lungs, then your diaphragm, and then your abdomen last. INHALE bringing the air from down to up. EXHALE moving the air from up to down.

First do some cycles with the breath the same length, and then try the rhythm (1) for inhalation and (2) for exhalation. You can also breathe with small pauses after the in and out breaths. You can combine this breathing exercise with some asanas, such as being on all fours, doing cat's breath by moving head and hips up during the inhalation, creating a soft back bend in your spine, and moving chin down and tailbone in during the exhalation, rounding your spine.

## 5. Ujjayi Breathing

Ujjayi means "victory" or "expansion." Breathing in the whole breath, contract your throat softly, making a hissing sound while the air passes behind it. This sound is like a whisper with your mouth closed. By listening to this sound you can follow each inhalation and exhalation, increasing your concentration on the breath. This type of breathing also increases the element of fire inside of your body, bringing greater purification and expanding vitality. This breathing can be applied to static meditation and/or the practice of asanas. You can use this technique during your sun salutation sequence.

## 6. Nadi Shodhana Pranayama - Alternated Breathing

Sitting on a folded blanket in comfortable cross-legged position, where you can keep your spine straight and heart center open, put your hands in jnana mudra and rest them on your knees. Start by EXHALING completely. Then with your right middle finger close your RIGHT nostril, then INHALE through your LEFT nostril, deeply and slowly. At the top of your inhalation, hold the air in while you change sides, With your right middle finger, close your LEFT nostril, then EXHALE completely through your RIGHT nostril. At the end of your exhalation, INHALE deeply through your RIGHT nostril. At the top of your inhalation, hold the air in as you change sides again. Then closing the RIGHT nostril, EXHALE completely through your LEFT nostril...

Continue this dancing prana flow, changing sides only when your lungs are full of air, and inhaling from the same nostril that you just did your complete exhalation from. Repeat this breathing pattern for at least 10 cycles, bringing your attention to the balance between the 2 main currents of energy in the body, right and left, sun and moon, day and night, masculine and feminine, action and intuition.

After practicing Alternate Nostril Breathing for awhile, you can start adding rhythm to this technique:

### Rhythm (1 - 1 - 2):

INHALE, counting 5 matras,  
KUMBHAKA, retention of air for 5 matras,  
EXHALE, counting 10 matras.

### Rhythm (1 - 2 - 2):

INHALE, counting 5 matras,  
KUMBHAKA, retention of air for 10 matras,  
EXHALE, counting 10 matras.

While holding Kumbhaka, turn your inner gaze to that spot in between your eyebrows, ajna chakra, concentrating and sending light and energy to that area. You can experiment with Manasika Nadi Shodhana Pranayama (an advanced variation) using your mind and concentration without using your finger to close the nostril, actively changing the nostrils by turning your full attention to one and then the other nostril. This is a powerful technique to develop concentration.

Additional Note: If after breathing from both nostrils for awhile, you feel that one side is still more obstructed than the other, you can spend some time breathing only through the blocked one, to open it to receive the energy.

## 7. Bhastrika - Accelerated Breathing

This pranayama oxygenates the whole body, bringing a larger amount of energy to the cells and awakening the mind. In a sitting position, bring your attention and the breath to the abdominal area, ADHAMA Pranayama. EXHALE, contracting your abdomen, INHALE, expanding your abdomen, Coordinate the breath and the movement of your belly. After developing equal rhythm between the in and out breath, start slowly accelerating your breath, bringing a large quantity of air in during the inhalation and completely exhaling that quantity very fast. This is going to produce a vigorous sound. Continue for 30 seconds and then relax, watching the natural rhythm of your breath before starting

another round. While breathing in Bhastrika, imagine that you are pumping air, oxygen and prana to the crown of your head. During the observation time, spread the light generated by the breathing exercise throughout your body, especially in your heart center and navel area. You should practice Bhastrika for 3 rounds, with space in between. This exercise cleans the lungs and nostrils and increases blood circulation, revitalizing the body. This exercise shouldn't be done at night time, especially before bed.

After some time of practice, you can add KUMBHAKA after BHASTRIKA for 10 matras, practicing your MULA BANDHA during the retention.

## 8. Kapalabhati - Shining Skull Breathing

In a comfortable sitting position, keeping your spine straight, start by EXHALING completely through your nostrils, INHALE deeply and slowly, and EXHALE like in Bhastrika, strong and fast through your nose. Repeat this 10 times, cleansing the nostrils and the sinuses. This is ideal for morning time.

You can do Kapalabhati alternating your nostrils during the exhalation; INHALE slowly from both nostrils and close the RIGHT nostril, EXHALE fast from your LEFT side. INHALE slowly from both nostrils and close your LEFT nostril, EXHALE fast from your RIGHT.

You can also hold KUMBHAKA for 10 matras at the top of your inhalation and then exhale in Kapalabhati.

In this breathing exercise we send an extra dose of oxygen to our brain and lungs, promoting more oxygenation in these organs and also more opening in the mind and overall vitality. This practice accelerates blood circulation and removes impurities from the body, also removing any residue of mucus in the sinus and lungs.

Another way to practice Kapalabhati is in a standing position with feet hip distance apart. Do one cycle of Kapalabhati, bend forward in Uttanasana and stay for 3 deep breaths, then squat down in Malasana for 3 more deep breaths and stand up for one more cycle of Kapalabhati.

## Daily Rhythms

These 8 breathing exercises can be done at different times during the day, bringing more light and energy to your life.

You can follow the suggestions below and from here, choose the ones that you can fit best into your daily life, or the ones that are more appealing to you in this beginning process.

When you WAKE UP (before leaving your cozy bed!) lay on your back without the pillow, knees bent in Swara Shavasana. You can do Exercises 1 to 3 successively, taking a small break (2 matras) in between each phase of the inhalation and then exhale taking a small break (2 matras) in between each phase of exhalation.

Like this:

- INHALE in your abdomen -hold for 2 matras
- INHALE on your diaphragm - hold for 2 matras
- INHALE on your chest - hold for 2 matras
- EXHALE on your chest -hold for 2 matras
- EXHALE on your diaphragm - hold for 2 matras
- EXHALE on your abdomen - hold for 2 matras

You should perform at least 3 cycles of this pranayama.

Then when you stand up (with an empty stomach) take a full inhalation, PRANA KRIYA, and EXHALE completely and WITHOUT AIR (SHUNYAKA), practice UDDIYANA BANDHA by bringing your navel in towards your spine and upwards, staying without air, as long as you can, INHALE and repeat this process for at least 3 EXHALATIONS, followed by SHUNYAKA and UDDIYANA BANDHA. This exercise will help your intestines work better and liberate the toxins held in that area.

DURING THE SHOWER, you can do one cycle of KAPALABHATI and one cycle of BHASTRIKA, cleansing the nostrils and sinuses and awakening the mind.

AFTER LUNCH, you can do 3 cycles of ALTERNATE PRANAYAMA to help with your digestion and prepare your mind and energy for the second part of the day.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, around sunset time, you can take 2 minutes to concentrate on your breath by doing PRANA KRIYA for 3 rounds. Then observe the natural flow of your breath, bringing the light of the sun to your inner space.

BEFORE GOING TO SLEEP, practice abdominal breathing, in silence, concentrating on your breath until you fall sleep, calming your mind and allowing your body to reach deep relaxation before you enter the dream world.

These exercises together will take a maximum of 15 minutes during your day.

Of course the best way to do pranayama is to concentrate totally on the practice itself and sit in the appropriate position. In the way described above, you can bring the practice into your daily life, if you think that you don't have enough time to dedicate yourself to a sitting meditation/pranayama practice.

On the days that you have more free time, try to put more energy into developing the benefits and effects of pranayama in your body and emotions by setting the alarm and spending at least 25 minutes performing one type of pranayama with spaces in between cycles to observe the natural flow of your breath and to give space for emotions, thoughts and feelings to arise and fall.

My suggestion is that you take at least 15 minutes in the morning, every day, to dedicate yourself to 1 or 2 types of breathing. Use pranayama as a tool for your practice of introspection and self-knowledge, to get in touch with your Inner Sacred Space, creating the opening to connect with the Universal Nurturing Source.

*NAMASTE AND PEACE*

