

Breathe! Basic Pranayama Practices for Health & Well-Being (w/ Eva Leobold)

Note: While pranayama is not a cure all (and this is not meant to diagnose or treat any medical condition), it can be great help in maintaining health as well as aiding/supporting recovery (while under medical care) from illness in many cases.

A Yogic Perspective

- ॐ Disciplined breathing helps with concentration by promoting focus and clearing the mind; and helps the practitioner maintain health.
- ॐ Energetically – pranayama helps clear the nadis (energy channels), balance the hemispheres of the brain and activates the chakras – changing the energetic and mental attitude of the practitioner.
- ॐ Physically, breathing exercises helps to tone and strengthen the primary muscles of respiration (the diaphragm, the external intercostals and a portion of the internal intercostals – between the ribs), in turn allowing the accessory muscles of respiration (neck – sternocleidomastoid, scalenes, , facial, chest – pectoralis – and abdominal muscles) to relax
 - As the diaphragm (the main muscle of respiration) strengthens, it not only decreases the amount of effort used to breathe, it helps to pump lymph through the body – allowing it to reach the lymph nodes to be cleansed – promoting general good health.
- ॐ Pranayama may help expand the lungs and aid circulation. Healthy lungs more efficiently exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide which helps keep ketones and hydrocarbons from building up. (It is thought that exhalation slightly longer than inhalation helps facilitate this.
- ॐ Pranayama stimulates the vagus nerve – increasing vagal nerve tone.... This stimulates (or activates) “rest and digest” reaction and relaxes the entire system. The vagus nerve is a long nerve that connects the brain and GI tract while serving the heart, lungs, upper digestive tract and the other organs of the chest and abdomen.
 - In times of stress/anxiety, increasing vagal tone may help us move beyond fear, anxiety, stress and panic to reach a state of calm awareness and clear thinking.

Observing “Baseline” awareness for your breath

- ॐ The ability to hold one’s breath is dependent upon many conditions – physical fitness level, natural lung capacity, age, weight, diet, and underlying conditions like COPD, asthma, spinal cord injuries, to name a few. What *is* important about knowing a baseline is that it allows you to be aware of change.
- ॐ While “holding the breath” for a given length of time isn’t a “test” for any condition/illness, it can help make you more aware of your own breathing habits and patterns.
 - Note: Many things can change your ability to suspend your breathing on any given day – stress, activity level, not being rested, atmospheric humidity level, body position, hydration - so don’t stress out if you can hold longer one day than another – you want to notice patterns. You may begin to notice increased comfort and ease in breathing and then more acutely determine discomfort (perhaps allowing you to seek medical help sooner.)

Finding your “baseline” :

- ॐ When you are in a **relaxed state** (many people find this to be soon after waking, but it doesn’t have to be – you may actually have more nasal congestion upon waking than perhaps an hour later)
- ॐ **take a few comfortable breaths**, and then fill your lungs **comfortably** to capacity, **time yourself** while holding the breath in as long as you can **without straining**. This length of time would be considered your baseline. **Theoretically**, as you practice breathing exercises, this number will

increase. (Please note that this is not offering any ability to diagnose an illness/condition – the only way to determine that conclusively is to have pulmonary testing done.)

Preparation for Breathing Practices

Practice one or all of these before pranayama to calm the body/mind and help you center and focus

1. **Awareness of Breath:** Find a comfortable seated position with the spine long. Focus on your natural breathing without trying to change it in any way.
 - a. After a few breaths, rest the hands, with palms down, on the knees or thighs. Become aware of the belly rising and falling – breath this way for anywhere from 30 seconds to 3 minutes
 - b. Then turn the palms upward, resting the backs of the hands on the knees or thighs. Become aware of the rib cage/chest expanding and contracting – breathe this way for anywhere from 30 seconds to 3 minutes
2. **Awareness of Energy Centers:** Focus on your natural breathing for 3-5 breaths
 - a. Move focus to the space between the eyebrows (you may touch the point lightly with your fingertip to create focus) and imagine/feel the breath moving in and out of that space. **(1 to 2 minutes)**
 - b. Move focus to the tailbone/sitting bones (you may sit on your hand for a moment to draw focus there) and imagine/feel the breath moving in and out of that space **(30 seconds to 1 minute)**
 - c. Move your awareness to the center of the chest (you may gently rest a hand on the heart) and imagine/feel the breath moving in and out of your heart center **(1 minute or longer – until you begin to feel calm)**

Movement:

Helps gently stretch the muscles between the ribs, lengthen the spine and release tension from the neck, shoulders and upper back

3. **Sun Breath:** Start with the arms alongside the body,
 - a. **inhale** to raise them out to the side then up overhead, clasping hands, **exhale** as you arch to the right
 - b. **Inhale** up to center, **exhale** as you arch to the left
 - c. **Inhale** up to center, **exhale** as lift the rib cage and draw the arms and shoulders back
 - d. **Inhale** up to center, **exhale** hands to prayer at the heart and then down to the sides.
 - e. **Repeat a through d at least 3 times**

Breathing Practices:

As a general guideline, if you feel a little lightheaded, discontinue pranayama and return to a comfortable breath. You will find that the more often you practice, the longer your sessions can become.

4. **3 Part Breathing** (Dirgha Pranayama or full yogic breath) – promotes focus/concentration, stimulates the vagus nerve to promote “rest and digest” and relieve “fight or flight”
 - a. Place one hand on the solar plexus and the other on the upper chest.
 - b. Inhale slowly and deeply to feel the belly push into the lower hand, then allow the breath to continue in the lower ribs, then allow the way up into the chest under the hand
 - c. Exhale, slowly releasing the breath from the upper chest, lower ribs, then abdomen
 - d. **Repeat for up to 5 minutes**, feeling the lungs filling and emptying
 - e. To bring a deeper sense of calm, make sure the exhalation is slightly longer than the inhaled.

5. **Kapalabhati** – forceful exhalation through the nose – diaphragmatic movement, energizes without nervousness, strengthens the primary muscles of respiration, pumps lymph, clears out the sinuses and nasal passages, clears air from the base of the lungs
 - a. The exhalation is forceful, using the diaphragm to push air out, the inhalations are passive. You allow them to occur between exhales. Practice 3 rounds. As you become comfortable with the practice you may add up to 5 breaths per round.
 - b. **Round 1 – take a deep breath in, 15 forceful exhales** –then, inhale, tuck the chin to the chest, hold the breath in as long as is comfortable, release the breath gently, lift the chin, inhale prepare for round 2
 - c. **Round 2 – same as round 1, with 20 exhales**
 - d. **Round 3 – increase exhales to 25**
 - e. Come to comfortable, natural breathing for a few moments before the next practice.

6. **Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhanam)** - balances hemispheres of the brain, energy in the nadis (energy channels), has a calming effect, promotes focus and concentration
 - a. Using the thumb and ring finger of the right hand (called Vishnu Mudra), alternately close nostrils
 - b. Take a few comfortable breaths through both nostrils to prepare
 - c. Inhale both nostrils, close off right nostril with right thumb
 - d. Exhale out the left, inhale through the left
 - e. Close off left nostril with the right ring finger
 - f. Exhale out the right, inhale through the right
 - g. Close off the right nostril with the right thumb
 - h. Repeat d-g for as long as your feel comfortable – **(up to 5 minutes)**

Note: you could keep the inhales/exhales equal in length or shift to a more calming breath making the exhale about twice as long as the inhale

7. **Viloma Pranayama stage 1** – could be practiced to relax before sleep. This breath may help to expand the lungs and increase lung capacity.
 - a. Separate your inhales in t equal thirds (you could go 4 or 5 parts if you prefer smaller inhales) As you hold the breath in between inhales, be sure not to relax the diaphragm. If you feel any strain while breathing, decrease the amount of breath you are taking in or separate the breath into 4 or 5 parts.
 - b. Inhale (1/3 of the way), hold for 2-4 seconds
 - c. Inhale (another 1/3 of the way), hold for 2 – 4 seconds
 - d. Inhale to comfortable capacity, hold for 2-4 seconds (or longer without strain)
 - e. Exhale slowly, smoothly and completely with no interruption
 - f. Practice from 2-4 minutes. Expand the practice by lengthening the hold times

You may practice all the exercises; or choose the pieces that work for you. Always start with 1 to 2 minutes of comfortable breathing and the awareness of the energy centers (#2)