

Pranayama Level 1

The literally translation of Prana is: that which is constantly present everywhere. So we can say Prana is universal energy. It is the total sum of all energies in the universe. In yoga Prana means what electricity means for our modern civilization: the power that keeps us alive. The most important source for this energy is the atmosphere. A human being absorbs Prana through:

- nerves in the nose (sense of smell)
- alveoli in the lungs (breathing)
- tongue (food))
- skin (sun, warmth, light)

Ayama means to stretch, to extend or to draw. Through the practice of Pranayama we deliver more Prana into the body and learn how to control it. The breathing exercises produce often the physical sensation of heat, or the inner fire of purification. The blood circulations gets intensified as well as the exchange of gases in the tissue. Blockages can be solved and the Prana is able to move freely through the body.

Prana is transported through the body in energy channels, named Nadis. There are supposed to be 76,000. Two very important are *ida* (left) and *pingala* (right) starting in the nostrils and running along the spine.

Ida starts in the left nostril and is cooling, while *pingala* starts right and heats the body.

Breathing from only one side stimulates different nervous receptors located in the upper nose. As we have 2 nervous centers or “buds” in the upper nose, separate nostril inhalations and exhalations stimulates one side of the brain and not the other, with different effects according to each side. When *ida* and *pingala* are balanced, there is balance in all aspects of the body. In the way of Asthanga Yoga we learn first Asanas (= body positions), the body positions, to get the body fit for Pranayama and later on for meditation. So says Patanjali in the Yoga Sutra:

II.49:

By the practice of Asanas where the breath is brought under control, the difficulties of breathing are reduced and it gets conscious. This is Pranayama.

Beside many healthy aspects the breathing techniques have the purpose to calm and steady the mind. It's difficult to get control over our mind. It is like a monkey jumping from tree to tree. We need to tame it. This is possible with the tool of breath control. The breath rate is related to the heart rate 1:4. With the control over my breath I can gain control over my heart rate and with practice also over my mind.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika says in its second chapter:

HYP II.2.

When the breath is disturbed, the mind is disturbed.

When the breath is steady, the mind is steady.

Approximately we take 15-20 breaths in a minute. When you breathe slowly with full awareness you can slow down your breath rate. A slow heart rate gives the heart more time to rest and it will work better and longer. That's why it's said Pranayama would prolong your life. A yogi measures life time not in years but in breaths. So the slower I breath the longer I will live, simple because slow breathing allows the heart to relax more and it can work longer.

Advices:

It's strongly advised to learn Pranayama with a teacher. It can be a very powerful tool and it's necessary to built up the exercises slowly according to the abilities and needs of the student. If you are practicing alone and experience any kind of discomfort, pain, shortness of breath, narrow feeling in the chest, nausea or dizziness stop the exercise immediately and rest in Savasana. Do not practice any further on this day. If the problems continue or occur again consult a yoga teacher or a doctor.

In the practice it is important to keep an alert mind since you'd be observing subtle processes. In Pranayama we learn first concentration, so the Pranayama prepares perfectly for meditation as the Asanas do for Pranayama. With a fit body I'm able to sit still long time with my back straight which is necessary for meditation.

The best practice is done early in the morning, once a day. If you do an intensive Asanas practice like the Primary Series, then do this in the morning and Pranayama in the evening. Never practices Pranayama after Asanas, wait at least 2 hours, better 3-6 hours. Pranayama should be practice 2 hours after eating. Another possible daily schedule is: 20 minutes Asanas, 20 minutes Pranayama and 20 minutes meditation.

Breathing exercises should not be practiced when one is emotionally upset or tired. The breath should never be forced or strained. If you feel strained from the exercises, resume to normal breathing and rest in Corpse Pose (= Savasana, see last page of this manual).

Sitting position

Conduct Pranayama in comfortable seated position like

- Vajrasana: Diamond position, folded feet form a seat for buttocks
- Siddhasana: Easy Pose, crossed legs
- Padmasana: Lotusposition

It is very important to keep the spine long and straight and the shoulders relaxed. Hands can rest on thighs or knees. You can also sit on a cushion because when your knees are lower than

your hips it is easier to keep the spine upright. If you find it hard to keep the spine upright, rest the back against a wall. Important is only to keep the back straight. If you find it difficult to sit on the floor, you can also sit in a chair, having both feet standing on the floor.

Jala Neti - Nose Cleaning

Take saltwater (1 teaspoon for 1½ l water) and fill a little bowl full. Close one nostril and suck the water with a half breath through the other one. Make sure the nostril is completely in the water, so you don't suck any air in. Lift the head and spit the water out through the mouth. Do it 2-3 times on both sides in the morning or before Pranayama.

This cleaning technique clears the nostrils and makes sure to be able to use both nostrils equally. It helps avoiding colds and problems with equalisation.

Mudras¹: hand positions

Special hand positions are used for many Pranayamas.

The most common is **Vishnu Mudra** (also called Mrgi Mudra; Mrgi = femal deer)



1. Perform it always with the right hand
2. Index and middle finger are bent and touch the palm to deactivate the intellect and the common soul. Thus body (little finger), mind (ring finger) and super soul (thumb) are incorporated.
3. With the thumb you close the right nostril, with ring and the small finger the left one.
4. In advanced state close one nostril fully and the other one partially. This allows you a fine tuning of the breath

Chin Mudra is used for relaxed breathing or the hand, which does nothing (see left hand of sketch for Vishnu Mudra)

1. Thumb and index finger form a ring, the tips touch gently. The other three fingers are straight. Let the hands rest on the thighs or put them on the knee.
2. When the fingers facing the sky, you gain energy to the universe. When they face down, you are connected to the earth.
3. The elbows coming close to the body, focused to the third eye.

Warm ups for neck and shoulders

To breathe correctly we must have a soft and elastic diaphragm and ribcage. The following exercises can be done as warm ups before Pranayama. They improve the elasticity of the ribcage, release tension from the shoulder area and increase lung capacity. Sit in a comfortable sitting position.

- Bring your upper arms horizontal in shoulder height, elbows bend, so your low arms are vertical and the arms show a 90° angle. Exhale and bring the arms in front of you, inhale and open up as far as possible, bringing the shoulder blades together. Make sure the elbows stay in shoulder height.
- Lean to one side, bringing one hand on the floor and stretch the other with an exhalation over the head, making your body as long as possible, so you stretch the side of your body. Inhale, come up and exhale while bending to the other side. This can also be done in standing position, having the legs in triangle position.
- Bring the right hand to the left knee, exhale and twist your body to the left, looking back as far as you can. Hold position for a few breaths. Inhale, turn forward, put now the left hand on the right knee, exhale and twist the right side.
- “Paint” an 8 with your nose in the air, 3-5 x in each direction. This relaxes the neck.
- Put your hands behind your back and interlock the fingers, palms outward. Inhale deeply and bend forward while exhaling. Raise at the same time the arms until they are stretched out. Do not bend the elbows, they should remain straight throughout. Keep your head down, trying to swing your arms a bit higher. Remain a moment in this position, holding your breath; then inhale and come up. Repeat the movement 3-5 times without unlocking your fingers.

Awareness of breath:

The natural belly breathing moves the abdomen a little bit out while the chest is hardly or not moving at all. The best way to get a good feeling for the right breathing is to imagine that the lower part of the trunk is moving outward to all sides like a balloon when blown up. So not only the belly moves outside but also the ribcage and the back.

- Concentration: sit comfortable and keep the spine straight. Close your eyes and focus on the breathing. Feel, where the movement is happening. Just observe, don't analyze or judge. Keeping the mind focused on the breath only.
- Lie down and put one hand on the chest and one on the belly above the navel. Breathe five times so that the hand on the chest moves, and five times that the hand on the belly moves. Feel the difference.
- Put the hand on your sides over your lower ribs and breathe so that they move outside, given the lungs more space to expand.
- Lie on the belly and put a thick book on the lower back. Breathe so that the book moves up and down.

Breathing exercises

To get control over the breath focus first on the exhalation. Usually the exercises calm the mind and reduce anxiety. Keep in mind: Working on the inhalation, activates the body and is recommended as morning exercises. Working on the exhalation, relaxes the body and calms the mind and is therefore recommended more in the evening.

¹ Mudra means “seal”.

1. Rećaka:

Rećaka means to empty, to expel. In the following exercise we work on prolonging the exhalation. The inhalation will come automatically and get deeper the longer the exhalation takes. Do this exercise first in laying position and later in sitting position. It can also be helpful when you have troubles to fall asleep.

1. *Inhale free*
Exhale and count how long it takes

Do this for 5 breaths. Everybody breathes different. So some people will come to 2 or 3, others to 5 or 6. It doesn't matter, just take the number and work from there.

2. *Inhale free*
Exhale and add plus 1 to the number you have got before

When your exhalation first was 3 counts long than now exhale to 4. Do this for 8 breaths.

3. *Inhale free*
Exhale and add plus 1 to the number you have got before

Do it again for 8 breaths.

You can go on adding 1 number as long as you feel you can easy breathe out that long.

2. Anuloma Krama

Anuloma Krama works on the inhalation. It's useful when more attention is needed, it helps focusing the mind and activates it. The inhalation gets intensified; it improves lungs capacity and expands the chest.

Exhale normal

Inhale, count 2

Hold, count 2

Continue inhale, count 2

Hold, count 2

Continue inhale, count 2

(go on until the lungs are full)

Exhale free

2	2	2	2	2	2	free
IN	H	IN	H	IN	H	EX

Repeat retention on the inhalation for 5-20 breaths. Then rest. You can continue this exercises up to 10 minutes. The morning is the best time to do it, avoid it before going to sleep. Then do Viloma Krama.

3. Viloma Krama

Viloma Krama is working on the exhalation. Its focus lays on the abdominal breathing. It usually relaxes and calms mind and body.

Inhale free
Exhale, count 2

Hold, count 2
Continue exhale, count 2
Hold, count 2
Continue exhale, count 2
(go on until the lungs are empty)
Inhale free ...

Repeat retention on the exhalation for 5-20 breaths. Then rest. You can continue this exercises up to 10 minutes. It's recommended to practice this Krama in the evening, for it calms the mind and helps to deep sleep.

Both Kramas are suitable for people with heart problems, because the breath holds are short and not exhausting.

4. Samavritti

In this exercise all active components of the breath are equal.

For example:

Inhale count 4
Little pause
Exhale count 4
Little pause

4		4		4		4	
IN	P	EX	P	IN	P	EX	P

This Pranayama regulates the length of inhalation and exhalation. If 4 counts seem too long, try 2 or 3 counts. The regulation of the breath increases the awareness of breathing and can balance irregular breath patterns.

Later on breath holds with the same length can be applied.

4	4	4	4
IN	P	EX	P

5. Viśamavritti

In this exercise all active components of the breath are unequal.

For example:

Inhale count 4
Little pause
Exhale count 8
Little pause

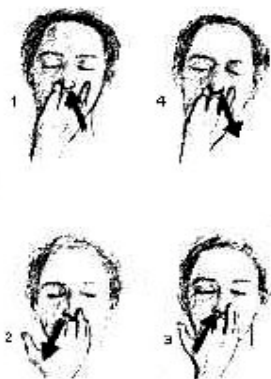
4		8		4		8	
IN	P	EX	P	IN	P	EX	P

In this example more “old” air is expelled and it improves the quality of the inhalation.

Viśamavritti can be done with all kind of ratios, depending on which part of the breathing needs improvement or training. The following Pranayama Nadi Shodhana is often taught in a ratio of: inhale 4, breath hold 16 and exhale 8. So it's a variation of Viśamavritti. For more details please look at Pranayama manual 2.

6. Alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Shodhana²)

The 72,000 Nadis (= energy channels) of the body get cleaned (= shodhana) with this Pranayama. The exercise makes sure you breathing regularly through both nostrils. A healthy person breathes usually 1h 50 min through the left nostril and then the same amount of time through the other right. This rhythm is important to keep the body in balance. Often it is disturbed by a blocked nostril or other reasons and this Pranayama brings it in balance. Take a comfortable position, back straight, right hand in Vishnu Mudra.



Prelude: exhale left, right nostril is closed with right thumb.

Inhale left

Exhale right, left nostril is closed with ring and small finger

Inhale right

Exhale left, right nostril closed thumb (one round)

Inhale left ...

Practice 5-20 rounds. It's helpful to start every Pranayama practice with about 2-3 minutes alternate nostril breathing for concentration and focusing.

6. Bhramari³

This Pranayama is done by humming like a bee. We can use *Sanmukhi mudra* for it, which closes the senses and keeps outside distraction away. This mudra is helpful to concentrate and it calms a disturbed mind.

Sanmukhi mudra:

Take the first two fingers and lay them slightly on your closed eyes. Place your ring fingers under the nostrils and the little fingers under your lips. With your thumb your seal your ears, so you can hear nothing.

Inhale as long as you like

Exhale with humming sound (makara = M-sound of the OM)

until there is no air in the lungs

Do it 10 times without removing your hands from your face. Then rest 12-15 breaths, with hands on the thighs. This makes one round and you can do up to 10 rounds.

The Pranayama helps concentration and calms the mind. Your focus lays inside and the outside world cannot distract you, special with the use of the Mudra. The sound gives a warm

² Another name often mentioned in the literature is Anuloma-Viloma.

³ Bhramari means "bees".

and positive vibration to the body. For the voice is softly trained the Pranayama is recommended for singers and people who use their voice a lot like teachers or speakers. It clears and refreshes the vocal cords. It is good to do it in the morning before speaking.

7. Ujjayi⁴

In Asthanga Yoga this technique is used while practicing Asanas. It makes the breathing longer and deeper, trains the breathing muscles and supports the body with more oxygen. Have the throat slightly closed, so the breathing is forced and produces a hissing sound. The glottises are half closed and the passing air produces heat in the body, augments the oxygen supply and avoids thyroid and parathyroid problems. Ujjayi strengthens the nervous and digestive system and gets rid of phlegm.

Practice 3-10 minutes. If you feel your throat gets sore, stop the exercise and go on the next day. Ujjayi can also be used as a meditation technique, imagine the sound you produce is the sounds of waves washing the beach.

Savasana – the final relaxation

This is possibly the most important posture, the Corpse position. Usually performed at the end of a session, the goal is conscious relaxation. Begin by lying on your back, feet slightly apart, arms at your sides with palms facing up, also apart from the body. Close your eyes and take several slow, deep breaths. Allow your body to sink into the ground. Try focusing on a specific part of the body and imagine to relax it. From your feet, move on to your calves, thighs and so on up to your face and head. Then simply breathe and relax.

Stay in the pose for at least 5 to 10 minutes. The longer you have practiced the longer should be Savasana. For example: 30 minutes practice, 5 minutes final relaxation. 60 minutes practice at least 10 minutes final relaxation.

This pose relaxes and refreshes the body and mind, relieves stress and anxiety, quiets the mind. Cover yourself maybe with a blanket to make sure the body is not cooling out. Don't fall asleep.

⁴ Ujjayi means “victorious breathing”.