



## THE IMPORTANCE OF *Breath*

The breath is a vital component of yoga. The word 'yoga' translates from Sanskrit to mean 'union'. When a smooth steady flow of breath is established and maintained whilst performing a series of yoga postures, it is possible to experience the beginnings of this sense of union.

By breathing in this manner the true essence of yoga can be experienced. It also separates yoga from many other physical activities. In yoga the pace and tempo of the movements performed are governed by the speed of the breath. During many other physical activities the breath follows the movement, which is usually influenced by the level of exertion.

The breath will help to relax both body and mind. A slow, steady breathing technique stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system which is responsible for relaxation, the heart rate and blood pressure naturally lower and stress levels are reduced. Whereas breathing quickly stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and the 'fight or flight' response, which often raises stress levels in the body.

As awareness develops in the practice of yoga the breath assists alignment and carries practitioners safely into the postures. A slow smooth steady flow of breath is crucial. Here is an example: it is usual that whilst performing seated postures the spine lengthens on an inhalation and the torso rotates or folds on an exhalation or when performing a held seated posture the spine lengthens on the inhalation and the shoulders naturally relax and soften on the exhalation.

As we age the lungs lose some of their elasticity, so a sound breathing technique will help the lungs remain agile and flexible so that plenty of oxygen is received. As oxygen is our main source of fuel, the more oxygen we receive through an efficient breathing technique the better the body functions.

Through history the breath in yoga has always been referred to as prana. Breathing exercises are called pranayamas. Prana is regarded as so much more than just breath, it is our vital life force, the universal energy that is present in everything. Prana is the essence of all life. It helps to balance body and mind and its potential is endless. The literal translation for the word 'pranayama' is 'restraint' or 'control of vital life force'.

As we move further into our yoga practices, the importance of the breath becomes greater and even more apparent. As we practice we are required to control the breath and become aware of how the breath influences the body and mind. Start slowly with a smooth steady flow of breath through the nose and the rest will fall into place. Never worry about whether you should be breathing in or out just keep the breath flowing with awareness.

### NADI SHODHANA (ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING)

- This breathing technique (pranayama) helps to balance body and mind and brings a calming sensation.
- Begin sitting comfortably with a straight spine and your hands lightly resting on your knees or thighs.
- Start to breathe slowly in and out through your nose, take your time and work to regulate the breath so that it is slow and steady with both inhalation and exhalation lasting for the same duration. When you are ready lift your right hand and roll your first two fingers down towards your palm, block your right nostril with your thumb and inhale through your left nostril, now use your third finger to block the left nostril, as you do so release the thumb and exhale through your right nostril, now inhale through the right nostril, block your right nostril with your thumb and release your third finger from the left nostril, exhale through the left and then inhale through the left.
- Continue like this breathing through alternate nostrils with a slow steady breath for 30 complete breaths.
- Experienced practitioners usually include a breath retention, but for now just let your breath flow and acknowledge the natural pause after the inhalation and exhalation.

"When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still, and the yogi achieves long life."  
Svatmarama, Hatha Yoga Pradipika

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