

A grayscale photograph of a woman in a meditative pose, with her eyes closed and her right hand resting on her forehead. She is wearing a dark-colored t-shirt with the word "JUICE" printed on it. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a courtyard or a walkway with a railing.

# PRANAYAMA

**4<sup>th</sup> Limb of Yoga**

Philosophy Lesson with Nina

# The 4<sup>th</sup> Limb of Yoga: PRANAYAMA

Pranayama is the movement of life energy through regulated breathing technique. So when you begin your practice using the Five Principles, asana is an expression of your breathing, and as such is moving pranayama.

Having rested in savasana after your moving pranayama, you might want to spend some time in sitting pranayama, which is a further refinement of life energy. Broken into its root words, pranaA-yama can mean NOT having control of prana ('a' is a Sanskrit prefix which negates what it precedes).

Your practice is meant to create the circumstances for your life energy to move freely. It's freedom, and yours, is the gift, the siddhi, of practice. Yoga is releasing the body from the mind's confinement of it, not restricting it with more patterning.

The paradox of yoga technology is that through deliberate engagement of breath and body, in Krishna's words to Prince Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, "the sacrifice of the exhale to the inhale," all polarities in your own embodiment merge; the result is their mutual empowerment. Like practicing scales prepares a musician to improvise freely, your yoga practice prepares you to live freely. Technique exists for it to be transcended.

# Pre-requisites for Pranayama

## **1. Reasonable mastery of asana practice:**

This does not mean that the practitioner needs to become a super-flexi asana guru! It simply means that whatever asana is being done in the practice should be done as per the definition of 'mastery of asana.'

## **2. Mastery of the breath in asana:**

Because pranayama is focused on the breath, then it is essential to become comfortable and in control of the breath during asana. The breath does not have to be amazingly long, with huge retentions after, just smooth, deep and in control. The ability to sit comfortably with a straight back: because the spine is so involved with breathing it is necessary to maintain correct spinal posture. However, the actual sitting posture should be one where you will be the most comfortable and not likely to be distracted. There is no hierarchy of methods of sitting, whether in lotus pose or on a chair, the goal is a straight spine. See opposite for some options for sitting.

# Qualities of Pranayama

## **1. Attention is focused on the breath:**

Naturally when we begin, the mind often wanders off somewhere else. Simply bring it back to focusing on the breath. Remember—focused attention in one direction. This also serves to keep us very aware of how our breath is doing in the pranayama practice we have chosen to do.

## **2. Incorporating dirga and sukshma:**

This is similar to sthira and sukha in asana. Dirga means the breath is long and steady; sukshma means the breath is fine and subtle. Ideally, both are equally present. Each one can affect the other, for example, trying too hard to make the breath very long and steady might also make it loud and heavy which then compromises the sukshma.

## **3. Three stages of practice:**

As with asana, we begin pranayama gradually with shorter breaths, building up to the peak of longer breaths with retention, then gently reduce the breaths back to where we began.

## **4. Suits the individual:**

As with all of our practice, the pranayama also needs to be relevant to the person doing it. For example, asking an atheist to focus on a Hindu mantra during breath retention might not be appropriate. Likewise, the practitioner whose goal is to maximise relaxation will be better served with suspension after the exhalation rather than retention after the inhalation.

# Qualities of Pranayama

A person is shown in a meditative posture, performing pranayama. They have their eyes closed and are using a hand mudra (likely the Chin Mudra) with their fingers touching. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a white railing.

## **5. Pre-determined breath/count ratio:**

This helps to keep our focus on what we are doing rather than making it up as we go along! There are many different methods of pranayama and some can get quite tricky so it is good to establish exactly what is going to happen prior to beginning.

## **6. Asana practice prepares and supports pranayama:**

Asana physically prepares us by warming up and stretching the body, so when we get to sit in pranayama we are not distracted by the body. It also physically builds up the strength of our breath, and we are already establishing the habit of being attentive to what we are doing. Furthermore, we can incorporate some of the aspects of our pranayama into the asana for further preparation e.g.; if our pranayama involves the use of breath retention after inhale, we would choose some postures in the practice to be done with retention after inhale.

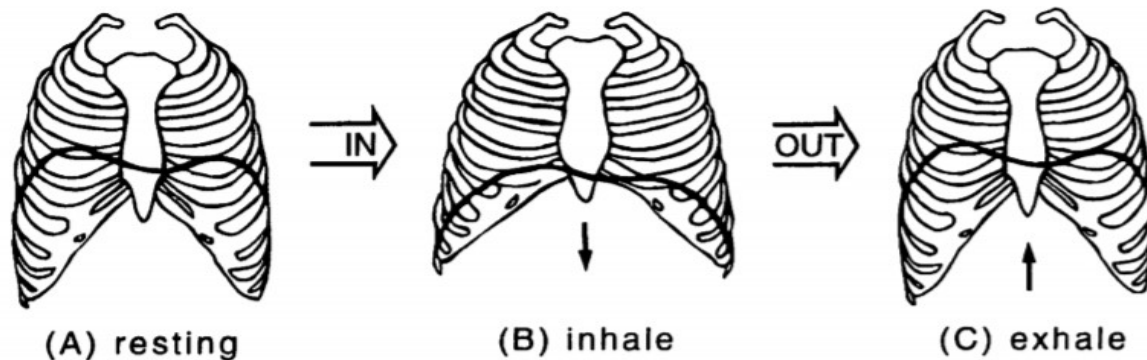
## **7. Result should be positive:**

For this to happen we must be very attentive to the whole asana and pranayama practice. If there is any disturbance of breath, something needs to be adjusted. Incorrect use of these techniques can be dangerous and reinforce blockages or impurities rather than releasing them. That is why guidance of a good teacher is important. In addition, the practitioner should feel good during and after the practice. Certainly after continued daily practice there will be a noticeable increase in mental clarity.

# Developing The Breath

Basic general rules for integrating the breath into all asana:

- On inhale, limbs move away from the body, expanding,
- On exhale, limbs move towards the body, contracting.
- Backbends are on an inhale.
- Forward bends on an exhale.
- Twists on an exhale, ease twist on the inhale.
- Lateral stretch usually on exhale.
- Exceptions: it is possible to come into an arch on an exhale, but not the other way around (contracting on an inhale) as you will be unable to breathe properly



*Figure 5:  
Movement of the  
diaphragm and rib cage  
through a breath cycle.*

# Various Pranayamas

- Chest to abdomen breath – asana breath
- Bhastrika – bellows breath
- Ujjayi – victorious breath, often used in Vinyasa classes
- Sama Vritti – equal ratio breath, box breath
- Visama Vritti – unequal ratio
- Kumbhaka – breath retention
- Nadi Shodana – alternate nostril breathing
- Belly Breath – passive rising and falling of belly (restorative)
- Brahmari – Humming bee breath
- Villoma – step breath
- Simhasana – Lion’s breath
- Kapalabhati – Skull shining breath (passive on the inhale, active on the exhale)

# Teaching Pranayama

A woman is shown in a yoga studio, performing a pranayama technique. She is seated on a mat, with her eyes closed and her hand covering her eyes. The background shows a yoga studio with mats and a wooden floor.

## **Asana**

- Seated, neutral spine, knees lower than hips
- Find stillness and comfort

“relax your shoulders”

“feel grounded”

## **Pranayama**

- Explain the technique and benefits
- Start with more calming aspect of the breath (exhale)
- 10 breaths, then rest. See if students are comfortable to do more
- Give permission to stop if not comfortable
- Take a few normal breaths when finished.