



Pranayama: Gentle Deep Breathing (Level 1)

Prana: breath, respiration, life, vitality, wind, energy, or strength.

Ayama: length, expansion, stretching, or restraint.

Pranayama is the science of breath. Pranayama is a practice of directing and regulating the breath, thus directly affecting your life force energy. Pranayama practices explore inhalation (*puraka*), exhalation (*rechaka*), and retention (*kumbhaka*). As you learn to steady, relax, and extend the breath, the respiratory system is strengthened, the nervous system soothed, and the body and brain oxygenated. With rhythmic patterns of slow deep breathing, the breath becomes gentle and even, the body relaxes, the mind becomes peaceful, and we enter a state of abundant energy, peaceful aliveness, and harmonious well being.

Guidelines for Practice

Whether lying down or sitting, allow the body to be deeply relaxed. Soften facial muscles, eyes, jaw, tongue, and throat. If tension arises in the body, soften around it and let it go. Always breathe in a way that is relaxed and communicates ease, comfort, and well being. Pranayama is very gentle and subtle. If you begin to feel any discomfort, agitation, or efforting, return to a resting breath. When you are again at peace with your breath, return to the practice. Take your time, and savor each breath. Eyes remain closed with awareness deeply inward. Cultivate the ability to be still, quiet, deeply relaxed, and fully alert to each breath.

Reclined Pranayama: when you begin, practice lying down so that the body is supported and can deeply relax. Place a folded blanket under your head and neck with the chin tilted downward toward the heart, so the throat stays open and soft. To support the openness of the rib cage and freedom of the diaphragm, recline on a folded blanket or bolster beneath the length of the spine, with the hips on the floor (fold blanket narrower than the shoulders.) Sitting Pranayama: As you become more comfortable with the practices, sit on a cushion or a block with the spine vertical, and the heart area softly lifted and open. Tuck the chin slightly to keep the throat open and soft.

Observing the Breath

Resting breath is allowing your body to breathe itself naturally, without directing or regulating the breath. Observe the speed, depth, and quality of each breath. Every breath is different – be curious.

Soft Belly Breathing

Direct the breath deeper into the base of the lungs, so that as you inhale, the belly expands, and as you exhale the belly relaxes back. As you begin, you may rest one hand on your belly below the naval, and the other hand on the upper chest. Breathe so that the hand rises and falls with the breath, and the chest remains relatively still. Explore breathing into the front, back, sides, and base of the pelvis, and then practice full pelvic breaths. In time, as the body and mind relax and quiet, the breath becomes long, slow, deep, and peaceful – like in deep sleep.

Variations:

1. Invite the inhalation and exhalation to be close to the same length. Long, slow inhalation, and long, slow exhalation. Notice the gaps of silent stillness between breaths. (*Sama Vritti: 1:1 ratio*)
2. Extended exhalation (quiets the nervous system). (*move toward 1:2 ratio*)

Diaphragmatic Breath

As you inhale, gently expand the lower side ribs to receive the breath. Direct the inhalation laterally into the lower side ribs, as you broaden the diaphragm, abdomen, and navel (the belly flattens). Feel the lateral movement of your lungs and ribs. As you exhale, the ribs relax back.

As you begin, you may rest your hands on the side rib cage, and direct your breath into your hands. Feel the rib cage expand laterally, and relax back.

Ujjayi Pranayama

Reclined practice. Close your eyes, relax, and observe your breath. Exhale gently and completely.

Take a slow, deep, steady breath, breathing evenly through both nostrils. Fill the lungs completely. The passage of the incoming air is felt on the roof of the palate, and makes a soft, audible sound (“*sa*”). As you inhale, the ribs expand outwards and lift upwards, and the abdomen draws back toward the spine. This is a smooth steady three-part breath: the first third of the inhalation touches the lower side ribs, the second third touches the upper side ribs, and the final third touches the heart area (sternum broadens, expands, and lifts).

Exhale slowly, deeply, and steadily, until the lungs are completely empty. As you begin the exhalation, keep the abdomen drawn back, then relax the diaphragm gradually. While exhaling, the passage of air is felt on the roof of the palate, and makes a soft, audible sound (“*ha*”).

If new to Ujjayi, take resting breaths between each cycle. As you become more comfortable, practice a continuous Ujjayi breath.

If you slightly swell the upper back part of the throat, the glottis, the sound becomes more audible. Follow the sound of the breath from the beginning through the end of each inhale and exhale. Allow the sound to be constant from the beginning to the end of the breath. As you invite the sound of the breath to be smooth and steady, the breath becomes smooth and steady, the mind becomes more focused, and the body deeply relaxes. Savor the breath and the sensations.

Variations:

1. Even inhalation and exhalation (*Sama Vrtti*)
2. Prolonged inhalation (*puraka*)
3. Prolonged exhalation (*rechaka*)

Savasana

End each pranayama practice with a reclined relaxation. Lie on your back with a thin fold of blanket under the head and neck. The arms are apart from the body, palms facing upward, and legs rolled away from each other. If needed, place a pillow under your knees. Close your eyes. Placing an eye pillow on the eyes helps to deepen relaxation. As you move into stillness, if thoughts or distractions arise, gently label them “thinking”, and let them go. Allow your body weight to fully release, deeply relax, and allow your body to breath itself in its own natural gentle rhythms. As you lie in stillness for 5 – 10 minutes, observe the sensations of *prana* in the silent stillness.

(Inspiration from *Light on Yoga* and *Light on Pranayama*, by B.K.S. Iyengar)