

# The Purpose of Pranayama

**At first there are many benefits to be achieved on a more mundane level:**

The practice of pranayama:

Cleanses and balances the body and mind  
 Develops mental & emotional stability (as energies are balanced).  
 Relaxes body and mind (as mind releases tension so does the body).  
 Gives us the ability to control the nervous system so we are more in charge of the relaxation response i.e. the activation of the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system.  
 Increases general energy levels.  
 Creates greater sensitivity and acuity of senses.  
 Develops capacity for concentration.  
 Creates inner clarity.  
 Healing potentially occurs with increased prana available  
 Promotes feelings of well-being.

**Later the practice of pranayama:**

Leads us to meditative states  
 Activates suhumna nadi when ida and pingala nadis are balanced and the mind becomes still, and with the application of the mudras & bandhas it awakens kundalini transforming consciousness  
 Releases fear of death  
 Leads us to Samadhi

So there are exoteric (everyday) and esoteric (hidden, subtle) purposes for pranayama with the ultimate aim of pranayama being a practice to lead us to the state of Union or Yoga. Indeed we could say it re-integrates the human being and then with fervent practice it re-integrates the human being with All That Is.

## Starting Pranayama

All of the yogic texts warn against the premature or inappropriate practice of pranayama.

Initially students should become well versed in the full yogic breath and the preparatory stages of ujjayi breathing. This means that there is a natural efficient use of the lungs and the use of sound enhances rhythm and concentration.

All pranayama techniques should create a feeling of lightness and well-being. If dizziness, disorientation, nausea, ear or eye discomfort are experienced then this indicates that the practice has either been incorrect or contra-indicated.

As for asana practice, commonsense should always prevail; the breathing must never be forced in any way.

## General Advice for Pranayama

For all pranayama we must:

- Practice on an empty stomach waiting at least three to four hours after a meal nor should we eat immediately afterwards.

- Generally practice after asana and before meditation, although it is possible to intelligently practice techniques at other times once we are aware of their effects
- Find a comfortable position where the spine is effortlessly erect and the diaphragm is able to freely move
- Find a well-ventilated, clean and unpolluted place to practice
- Ensure there is no strain within the breath at any time
- Seek expert guidance for intensive pranayama practice since diet and lifestyle must be supportive, this is also true of the practices of pranayama where we are really lengthening the duration of the kumbhaka (breath retention)

### **Positions for pranayama**

Since the diaphragm is the most important muscle for good breathing practices we must adopt an upright and open posture where the diaphragm can contract and relax to aid inhalation (puraka) and exhalation (rechaka). A cross-legged position is the most stable but if it is difficult to lower the knees to the floor then the spine cannot fully extend and the abdominal muscles lose tone and cannot assist the back muscles in keeping the body upright. So if this is the case blocks can be placed under the buttocks to help to tilt the pelvis forwards so freeing the spine and abdominals. Ideally there is a natural lumbar curve, with neither a flattened back or an excessive lordosis.

If the hand is being placed at the bridge of the nose then the arm can become very heavy and the body may become increasingly uncomfortable. Here the other hand can support the elbow or we can place the elbow of the raised arm on the knee, 'the thinkers statue'.

Alternative positions can include Vajrasana, the kneeling position where a block or cushion can be placed between the buttocks and thighs to release pressure on the kneecaps and ankles. We can also use the Friendship Pose where we sit on a chair but keep the back away from the back of the chair, if the back is against the chair then this may reduce the free movement of the diaphragm.

Essentially the pose assumed must be comfortable for a period of time, enable the spine to remain upright and allow the free movement of the diaphragm.

### **The correct use of the abdominal muscles in pranayama**

There has been much controversy regarding how we can best utilize the abdominal muscles when performing pranayama especially because we can find two opposite ways of working. Some students allow the abdomen to expand fully on an inhalation such as we work with when performing the complete yogic breath and some students breathe like a gymnast where they hold the abdomen rigid and only work with thoracic and clavicular breathing yet neither of these creates the right internal response for pranayama. It is best to work between these two extremes where the diaphragm still descends fully but there is also some resistance within the abdominal muscles so abdominal organs are massaged and the venous return to the heart is assisted.

So as we perform pranayama we must retain active abdominal control where as we inhale the area beneath the navel remains contracted, but not rigid and the area above the navel slightly yields. Then as we exhale the abdominal muscles contract more completely.

### **The need to anchor the mind when practicing pranayama**

It is always important that we find a focal point for the mind when working with pranayama because once we have become familiar with each technique it then becomes too easy to allow the mind to wander. The focal point can be any element of the practice such as being aware of the quality of the inhalation and exhalation, the counting of the breath, the sound we are creating and so on. There is no one anchor for the mind for any technique but you must be aware of giving an anchor for the mind as you teach a technique.