

*Krishnamacharya demonstrating
nāḍī śodhana prāṇāyāma (top),
śītalī prāṇāyāma (middle),
and śaṅmukhi mudrā.*

6

Prāṇāyāma



Yoga recommends two possible ways for achieving the qualities of sukha, comfort and lightness, and sthira, steady alertness. The first is to locate knots and resistances in the body and release them. This happens only gradually (krama) as we employ the concept of viṅyāsa krama—giving due consideration to correct preparation and appropriate counterposes as we practice. The means we use to release blocks and resistances must not adversely affect the body. We must proceed carefully. If we force the body we will experience pain or other unpleasant feelings and the problems will, in the long run, get worse instead of better. The body can only gradually accept an āsana. It is by proceeding gently that we will feel light and be able to breathe easily in the position and therefore really benefit from it.

The second possible means for realizing the concept of sthirasukha consists of visualizing the perfect posture. For this we use the image of the cobra Ananta, the king of the serpents, carrying the whole universe on his head while providing a bed for the Lord Viṣṇu on his coiled body. Ananta must be completely relaxed in order to make a soft bed for the lord. This is the idea of sukha. Yet the snake cannot be feeble and weak; it must be strong and steady in order to support the universe. That is the idea of sthira. Together these qualities give us the image and the feeling of a perfect āsana.

There is a common misconception that āsanās are only positions for meditation. If we look at Vyasa's commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra* though, we see that most of the āsanās he lists there are so complicated that with the best will in the world we could not attain a state of dhyāna in them. We can work with these postures and experience what they feel like, but we cannot remain in them for long. It is clear that not all of the āsanās given there are intended for meditation. Many of the āsanās that we work with and those that are described in the various books on yoga are of quite a different sort. They are valuable because

they enable us to sit upright and stand for long periods of time and to meet with greater ease the many demands made on us by our daily lives.

In the *Yoga Sūtra* there is another very interesting claim made about the effects of āsanas. It says that when we master āsanas we are able to handle opposites. To be able to handle opposites does not mean going around half-naked in cold weather or dressing in warm woolen clothing when it is hot. Rather, it means becoming more sensitive and learning to adapt because we know the body better; we can listen to it and know how it reacts in different situations.

Practically speaking, we should be able to stand for a few minutes with ease; we should be able to sit for a while easily as well. One advantage of āsana practice is that it helps us get used to different situations and be able to cope with different demands. If we want to practice prāṇāyāma, for example, we have to be able to sit comfortably erect for a period of time. Āsanas help us focus on the breath rather than the body during prāṇāyāma practice, for if we can sit comfortably and effortlessly erect there is nothing to distract us from our concentration on the breath.

Prāṇāyāma: The Breathing Exercises of Yoga

The word *prāṇāyāma* consists of two parts: *prāṇa* and *āyāma*. *Āyāma* means “stretch” or “extend,” and describes the action of prāṇāyāma. *Prāṇa* refers to “that which is infinitely everywhere.” With reference to us humans prāṇa can be described as something that flows continuously from somewhere inside us, filling us and keeping us alive: it is vitality. In this image, the prāṇa streams out from the center through the whole body.

Ancient texts such as the *Yoga Yājñavalkya* (see appendix 1) tell us that someone who is troubled, restless, or confused has more prāṇa outside the body than within. The amount of prāṇa outside the body is greater when we feel unwell; at those times the quality of prāṇa and its density within the body is reduced. Too little prāṇa in the body can be expressed as a feeling of being stuck or restricted. It can also show as a lack of drive or motivation to do anything; we are listless or even depressed. We may suffer from physical ailments when prāṇa is lacking in the body. And finally the *Yoga Sūtra* mentions disturbances in the breath, which can take very different forms.¹ On the other hand, the more peaceful and well-balanced we are, the less our prāṇa is dispersed outside the body. And if all the prāṇa is within the body, we are free of these symptoms.

If prāṇa does not find sufficient room in the body there can be only one reason: it is being forced out by something that really does not belong there—let’s call it rubbish. What we are trying to do when we practice prāṇāyāma is nothing more than reduce this rubbish and so concentrate more and more prāṇa within the body.

Our state of mind is closely linked to the quality of prāṇa within. Because we can influence the flow of prāṇa through the flow of our breath, the quality of

¹ In the *Yoga Sūtra* 1.31, Patañjali calls these symptoms of a disturbed mind *duḥkha* (the experience of suffering), *daurmanasya* (negative attitude), *aṅgamejayatva* (physical ailments), and *śvāsapraśvāsa* (breathing disturbances).

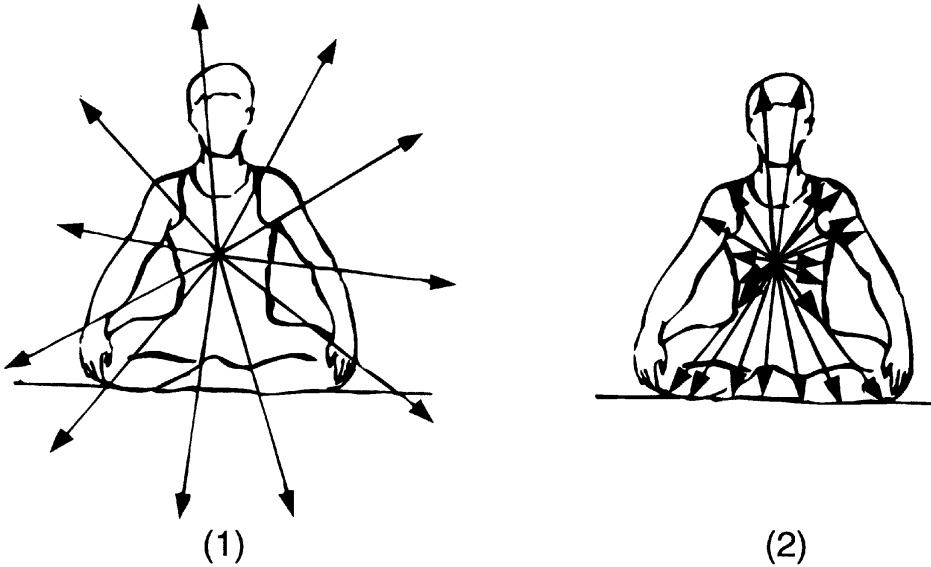


Figure 25: A sick or restless person disperses prāṇa beyond the body (1) because there are blocks hindering the flow of prāṇa within. A peaceful, healthy person keeps more prāṇa within the body (2).

our breath influences our state of mind and vice versa. In yoga we are trying to make use of these connections so that prāṇa concentrates and can freely flow within us.

Various sources call prāṇa the friend of the puruṣa (consciousness) and see in the flow of prāṇa nothing but the working of the puruṣa. If we remember how the degree of clarity created by the power of the puruṣa within us is directly linked to our state of mind, then a close connection between our mind and prāṇa is obvious.

Prāṇa can be understood as the expression of puruṣa, but it is to be found both inside and outside the body. See figure 25. The more content a person is and the better he or she feels, the more prāṇa is inside. The more disturbed a person is, the more prāṇa is dissipated and lost. One definition of the word *yogi* is “one whose prāṇa is all within his body.” In prāṇāyāma we want to reduce the amount of prāṇa outside the body until there is none leaking out.

Whatever happens in the mind influences the breath; the breath becomes quicker when we are excited and deeper and quieter when we relax. In order to influence our prāṇa we must be able to influence the mind. Our actions often disturb the mind, causing prāṇa to exude from the body. Through daily prāṇāyāma practice we reverse this process, as a change in the breathing pattern influences the mind.

The idea of prāṇa existing within or beyond the body can be understood as a symbol for our state of mind. When the mind is as clear as transparent glass there is nothing that could disturb the body; there is no rubbish lying about. On the other hand, if we notice hesitancy, discontent, fear of doing something because it might be inappropriate, and so forth, we can assume that there are blockages in the system. These blockages do not just occur in the physical body; they exist even more in the mind, in consciousness. Every kind of rubbish

we find in ourselves was originally produced by *avidyā*, that is, incorrect knowledge. The idea that yogis are people who carry all their *prāṇa* within their body therefore means that they are their own masters.

The link between mind and breath is most significant. The *Yoga Sūtra* says that when we practice *prāṇāyāma* the veil is gradually drawn away from the mind and there is growing clarity. The mind becomes ready for deep meditation.² Following the *Yoga Sūtra*, we can say that *prāṇāyāma* is first and foremost awareness of the breath: I am more aware that I breathe; I am conscious of my inhalation and my exhalation and perhaps of the pauses that naturally occur between breaths. The next step is then to answer this question: How do I remain conscious of my breath?

In *prāṇāyāma* we focus our attention on the breath. In the practice of *prāṇāyāma* it is therefore very important to keep an alert mind, for the processes that are being observed are very subtle. There is no visible movement of the body as in *āsana* practice; we must acutely sense and feel the movement of the breath within. The only dynamic process is breathing. Patañjali makes a few practical suggestions for keeping our attention on the breath. For example, we can focus on a place in the body where we can feel or hear the breath. Or we can try to follow the movement of the breath in the body, feeling the inhalation from the center of the collarbone, down through the rib cage to the diaphragm, and following the exhale upward from the abdomen. Another means for paying attention to the breath is to feel where it enters and leaves the body at the nostrils. It is also possible to listen to the breath, especially if you make a slight noise by gently contracting the vocal chords, a *prāṇāyāma* technique known as *ujjāyī*.

Suggestions like these help us keep our attention on the breath and prevent our practice from becoming merely mechanical. The goal of *prāṇāyāma* is not to bring the inhalation and exhalation into a certain relationship with each other, or to establish a particular length of breath. If exercises such as these help us concentrate on our *prāṇāyāma*, that is wonderful. But the true aim of the various techniques and breath ratios of breathing in *prāṇāyāma* is first and foremost to give us many different possibilities for following the breath. When we follow the breath, the mind will be drawn into the activities of the breath. In this way *prāṇāyāma* prepares us for the stillness of meditation.

The breath relates directly to the mind and to our *prāṇa*, but we should not therefore imagine that as we inhale, *prāṇa* simply flows into us. This is not the case. *Prāṇa* enters the body in the moment when there is a positive change in the mind. Of course, our state of mind does not alter with every in-breath or out-breath; change occurs over a long period of time. If we are practicing *prāṇāyāma* and notice a change of mind, then *prāṇa* has long before entered the body. Changes of mind can be observed primarily in our relationships with other people. Relationships are the real test of whether we actually understand ourselves better.

² *Yoga Sūtra* 2.52.

Without prāṇa there is no life. We can imagine that prāṇa flows into us as we inhale, but prāṇa is also the power behind breathing out. As well, prāṇa is transformed in the body into various powers, and is involved in processes that ensure that we rid ourselves of what we no longer need. This does not just relate to physical elimination processes—it is the power of prāṇa that can free the mind from blocks and thereby lead us to greater clarity. The out-breath fulfills this function: it releases what is superfluous and removes what would otherwise become blocks to the free flow of prāṇa within.

The Forms of Prāṇa

There are five forms of prāṇa, all having different names according to the bodily functions with which they correspond. These forms of prāṇa are:

- *udāna-vāyu*, corresponding to the throat region and the function of speech
- *prāṇa-vāyu*, corresponding to the chest region
- *samāna-vāyu*, corresponding to the central region of the body and the function of digestion
- *apāna-vāyu*, corresponding to the region of the lower abdomen and the function of elimination
- *vyāna-vāyu*, corresponding to the distribution of energy into all areas of the body

We will concern ourselves with two forms: prāṇa-vāyu and apāna-vāyu.

That which enters the body is called prāṇa and that which leaves it is called apāna. The term *apāna* also refers to the region of the lower abdomen and all the activities that take place there. Apāna describes that part of prāṇa that has the function of elimination and provides the energy for it, and it also refers to the lower belly and the rubbish that collects there when the power of prāṇa is not in a state of equilibrium. When a person is slow and heavy we sometimes say that he has too much apāna. Apāna as prāṇic energy is something we need, but apāna as refuse left from activating this energy actually prevents prāṇa from developing within. All forms of prāṇa are necessary, but to be effective they must be in a state of balance with each other. If someone has a lot of rubbish in the region of the lower abdomen then he or she consumes too much energy there, and this imbalance should be addressed. The goal is to reduce apāna to an efficient minimum.

Apāna as waste matter accumulates because of many factors, some of which lie within our control. The practice of yoga aims to reduce these impurities. People who are short of breath, cannot hold their breath, or cannot exhale slowly are seen as having more apāna, whereas those who have good breath control are considered to have less apāna. An overabundance of apāna leads to problems in all areas of the body. We have to reduce the apāna so that we can bring more prāṇa into the body.

When we inhale, *prāṇa* from outside the body is brought within. During inhalation, *prāṇa* meets *apāna*. During exhalation, the *apāna* within the body moves toward the *prāṇa*. *Prāṇāyāma* is the movement of the *prāṇa* toward the *apāna* and the movement of the *apāna* toward the *prāṇa*. Similarly, holding the breath after inhalation moves the *prāṇa* toward the *apāna* and holds it there. Holding the breath after exhalation moves the *apāna* toward the *prāṇa*.

Agni, the Fire of Life

What happens within this movement of *prāṇa* and *apāna*? According to yoga we have a fire, *agni*, in the body, situated in the vicinity of the navel, between the *prāṇa-vāyu* and the *apāna-vāyu*. The flame itself is constantly changing direction: on inhalation the breath moves toward the belly, causing a draft that directs the flame downward, just like in a fireplace; during exhalation the draft moves the flame in the opposite direction, bringing with it the just-burned waste matter. It is not enough to burn the rubbish; we must also rid the body of it. A breathing pattern where the exhalation is twice as long as the inhalation is aimed at providing more time during exhalation for freeing the body of its blockages. Everything we do to reduce the rubbish in the body is a step in the direction of releasing our blockages. With the next inhalation we bring the flame back to the *apāna*. If all the previously burned waste has not left the body, the flame will lose some of its power.

Certain physical positions are beneficial for the meeting of fire and rubbish. In all inverted postures, the *agni* is directed toward the *apāna*. This is the reason yoga attributes so much significance to the cleansing effects of inverted postures. Cleansing is intensified when we combine inverted postures with *prāṇāyāma* techniques.

All aspects of *prāṇāyāma* work together to rid the body of *apāna* so that *prāṇa* can find more room within. In the moment when waste is released, *prāṇa* fills the space in the body where it really belongs. *Prāṇa* has its own movement; it cannot be controlled. What we can do is create the conditions in which *prāṇa* may enter the body and permeate it.

The *Yoga Sūtra* describes the flow of *prāṇa* with this lovely image: If a farmer wants to water his terraced fields, he does not have to carry the water in buckets to the various parts of his fields; he has only to open the retaining wall at the top. If he has laid out his terraces well and nothing blocks the flow of the water, it will be able to reach the last field and the furthest blade of grass without help from the farmer.³ In *prāṇāyāma* we work with the breath to remove blockages in the body. The *prāṇa*, following the breath, flows by itself into the cleared spaces. In this way we use the breath to make possible the flow of *prāṇa*.

Understanding *prāṇa* as an expression of *puruṣa*, we have as little possibility for working directly on *prāṇa* as we have of influencing our *puruṣa* directly. The way to influence *prāṇa* is via the breath and mind. By working with these

³ *Yoga Sūtra* 4.3.

through prāṇāyāma, we create optimal conditions for the prāṇa to flow freely within.

Practical Aspects of Prāṇāyāma

Just as the activities of the mind influence the breath, so does the breath influence our state of mind. Our intention as we work with the breath is to regulate it so as to calm and focus the mind for meditation. Often people ask if prāṇāyāma is dangerous—I assure you that we can practice prāṇāyāma as safely as we practice āsanas or anything else. Prāṇāyāma is conscious breathing. As long as we pay close attention to the reaction of the body during prāṇāyāma, we have nothing to fear.

Problems can arise when we alter the breath and do not recognize or attend to a negative bodily reaction. If someone is laboring to breathe deeply and evenly, it will immediately become apparent; he or she will feel the need to take a quick breath in between the long, slow breaths. One important precept of Āyurvedic medicine is never to suppress the body's natural urges. Even during prāṇāyāma practice we should let ourselves take a short breath if we feel the need to do that. Prāṇāyāma should only be practiced by people who can really regulate the breath. Those who suffer from chronic shortness of breath or other breathing disorders should not attempt prāṇāyāma until they are ready for it. Āsanas that increase the volume of the lungs and free the muscles of the ribs, back, and diaphragm can help prepare one for prāṇāyāma. For example, a back bend and a forward bend counterpose are helpful in preparing for prāṇāyāma. An appropriate āsana practice will encourage development of prāṇāyāma. Prāṇāyāma can and should be practiced in the early days of a person's discovery of yoga, and should absolutely be undertaken only with the guidance of a good teacher.

The object of prāṇāyāma practice is to emphasize the inhalation, the exhalation, or retention of the breath. Emphasis on the inhalation is called *pūraka prāṇāyāma*. *Recaka prāṇāyāma* refers to a form of prāṇāyāma in which the exhalation is lengthened while the inhalation remains free. *Kumbhaka prāṇāyāma* focuses on breath retention. In kumbhaka prāṇāyāma we hold the breath after inhalation, after exhalation, or after both.

Whichever technique we choose, the most important part of prāṇāyāma is the exhalation. If the quality of the exhalation is not good, the quality of the whole prāṇāyāma practice is adversely affected. When someone is not able to breathe out slowly and quietly it means that he or she is not ready for prāṇāyāma, either mentally or otherwise. Indeed, some texts give this warning: if the inhalation is rough we do not have to worry, but if the exhalation is uneven it is a sign of illness, either present or impending.

Why this emphasis on exhalation? Yoga's essential aim is to eliminate impurities and reduce avidyā. Through this elimination alone, positive results come about. When the blockage is cleared from a sewer pipe, the water *has* to

flow. If something in us is preventing a change from occurring, then we need only to remove the obstacle and the change can take place. The exhalation is vitally important because it transports impurities from the body, making more room for *prāṇa* to enter.

Often when *prāṇāyāma* is discussed it is the holding of the breath that is emphasized. Yet the ancient texts talk about the total breath, not simply *kumbhaka*, breath retention. The *Yoga Sūtra* discusses the breath in this order of importance: *bāhya vṛtti* or exhalation as the most important, then *abhyantara vṛtti* or inhalation as secondary, and finally *stambha vṛtti* or breath retention.⁴ All three of these are aspects of *prāṇāyāma*. Do not become interested only in holding the breath; many people think they can progress quickly along the yoga path by practicing breath-retention techniques, but in fact problems often arise with this emphasis.

The most important tenet of *prāṇāyāma* is this: Only when we have emptied ourselves can we take in a new breath, and only when we can draw the breath into us can we hold it. If we cannot breathe out and in fully, how are we going to hold our breath? Breath-retention exercises must be done in such a way that they never disturb the in- and out-breaths. When we reach the stage where we have improved our ability to breathe in and out and to hold the breath, then breath-retention may become important because as it is held the breath is at rest, and with it so hopefully is the mind.

Prāṇāyāma Techniques

Ujjāyī

In one *prāṇāyāma* practice called *ujjāyī*, or throat breathing, we deliberately contracting the larynx slightly, narrowing the air passage. This produces a slight noise in the throat as we breathe. *Ujjāyī* translates as “what clears the throat and masters the chest area.” You should ask for the help of a teacher in deciding whether this breathing technique is suitable for you, and if not, which one would be better.

Ujjāyī breathing has many variations. For example, we can breathe in through the throat, then completely close one nostril and breathe out through the other nostril, which is only partly closed. This technique is called *anuloma ujjāyī*.⁵ In a *prāṇāyāma* technique called *viloma ujjāyī*, we breathe in through the nostril and breathe out through the throat. This technique is used to lengthen the inhalation. In *ujjāyī prāṇāyāma* it is important to follow this rule: when we regulate the breath through the nostril, we *never* breathe through the throat at the same time.

Nāḍī Śodhana

In the technique for lengthening both the exhalation and the inhalation, we breathe alternately through the nostrils and do not use the throat at all. We

4. *Yoga Sūtra* 2.50.

5. *Anuloma* refers to something that follows the normal way. For example, the Vedas describe a ritual carried out in a prescribed sequence as *anuloma*.

Because *ujjāyī* is described in the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* as the technique of making the sound in the throat only on the inhalation and then exhaling through the nose, this way of breathing is called *anuloma ujjāyī*.

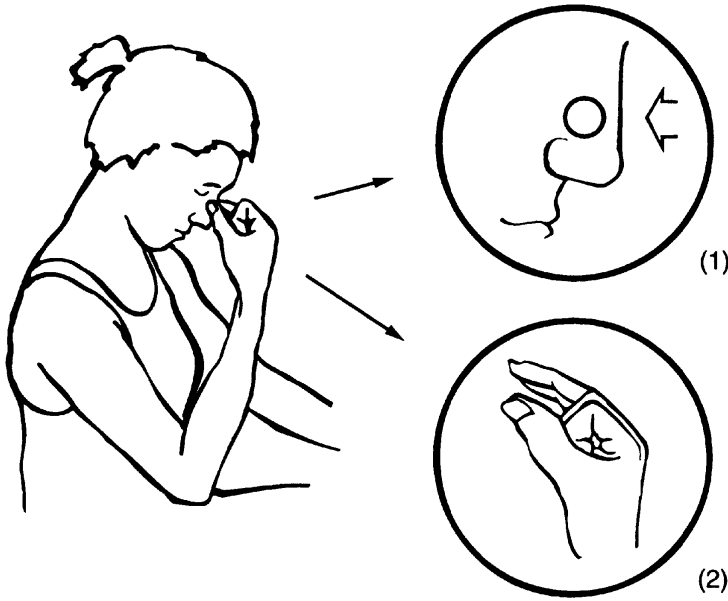


Figure 26: The hand position for *nāḍī śodhana*. The place where the cartilage begins (1) is the narrowest part of the nasal passage. We place the thumb and ring finger there in the position called *mṛgī mudrā* (deer mudrā) (2) to regulate the breathing by gentle pressure. Seen from the side, the shadow in this hand position looks like the head of a deer. Many hand mudrās are traditionally described with animal names.

breathe in through the partially closed left nostril, breathe out through the partially closed right nostril, breathe in again through the partially closed right nostril, and then breathe out through the partially closed left nostril, and so forth. We control the opening of the nostril by means of a hand mudrā. The name of this breathing technique is *nāḍī śodhana*—*nāḍī* is the passage or vein through which the breath and energy flow; *śodhana* means “cleansing.” Figure 26 shows the hand position for *nāḍī śodhana*. Normally we work with *ujjāyī* for a long while before we introduce *nāḍī śodhana* to our practice.

Alternate nostril breathing should not be practiced if you have a cold or if your nasal passages are blocked in any way. Forced breathing through the nose may lead to complications. In *prāṇāyāma* it is important to follow this rule: under no circumstances should anything be forced. If you use the nostrils for breath control they must be unobstructed. If they are not, you must practice throat breathing.

Śītalī

Another very useful breathing technique includes using the tongue. During inhalation we curl up both edges of the tongue so that it forms a kind of tube, then we breathe in through this tube. During inhalation the air passes over the moist tongue, cooling down and refreshing the throat. In order to be sure that the tongue remains moist, we roll it back as far as possible against the palate during the entire exhalation so that the next breath is just as refreshing as the first. We can breathe out either through the throat or alternately through the nostrils. This technique is called *śītalī prāṇāyāma*. *Śīta* means “cool.”

Those people who find it impossible to roll the tongue in this way can achieve the same cooling effect by means of another technique in which they open the

lips and teeth a little as they breathe in and place the tongue carefully in the space between the upper and lower teeth, a position in which the air can still flow over the tongue. They again breathe out through the throat or through alternate nostrils. This type of breathing is called *śītkarī prāṇāyāma*.

The techniques of *ujjāyī*, *nāḍī śodhana*, and *śītalī* help us to direct our attention to where the breath is in the body. This focus helps us collect the mind, an essential contribution to the physical effects of whichever *prāṇāyāma* technique we are practicing.

Kapālabhātī

Kapālabhātī is a breathing technique used specifically for cleansing. If we have a lot of mucus in the air passages or feel tension and blockages in the chest it is often helpful to breathe quickly. In this practice we deliberately breathe faster, and at the same time use only abdominal (that is, diaphragmatic) breathing, not chest breathing. In *kapālabhātī* the breath is short, rapid, and strong. We use the lungs as a pump, creating so much pressure as they expel the air that all the rubbish is cleared from the air passages, from the lungs up through the nostrils. *Kapāla* means “skull,” and *bhātī* means “that which brings lightness.” *Kapālabhātī* is a good thing to do when we feel heavy or foggy in the head. If we have problems with the sinuses or feel numb around the eyes, *kapālabhātī* can help to clear this area as well.

Bhastrika

The word *bhastrika* means “bellows.” In *bhastrika* breathing the abdomen moves like a pair of bellows. If one nostril is blocked, then we draw the air in quickly through the open nostril and breath out strongly through the blocked one.

The *kapālabhātī* and *bhastrika* breathing techniques share the same general principle, namely that we clear the nasal passages with the force of the breath. Certainly we must be very careful with these techniques because there is a danger of creating tension in the breath. We may also become dizzy when we breathe rapidly; for this reason we always conclude the practice of *kapālabhātī* with some slow breaths. It is important not to breathe rapidly too many times, but after a few rapid breaths take several slow ones in which we emphasize the long exhalation.

The Gradual Process of Prāṇāyāma

When we take up the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, we should proceed gradually, step by step. Because we are starting something new, directing our attention toward the breath—not the body—it is important to rest for several minutes after we finish our *āsana* practice and before we begin *prāṇāyāma*. The time between *āsana* practice and *prāṇāyāma* practice is not just to rest the body; it also helps the mind to make the transition from one practice to the other.

Without a rest between the two we might easily develop tensions, because the body cannot make an immediate transition. We must always rest between āsana and prāṇāyāma practice.

In practicing prāṇāyāma it is important to find a sitting position in which we can remain for a lengthy period and then get up without feeling stiff. The important aspect of our prāṇāyāma posture is that the spine remains upright. Many people find kneeling comfortable; others can easily sit cross-legged in the lotus pose; it is even acceptable to sit on a chair. (People recovering from such problems as heart disease can lie back in an armchair for their breathing exercises.) Because in prāṇāyāma we are dealing primarily with the breath, in sitting for prāṇāyāma the body must not disturb the breath. In āsana practice we are concerned first and foremost with the body. While we use the breath in our practice of āsanās, we must for prāṇāyāma adopt a posture in which we can pay as little attention as possible to the body. The only demand on the body during prāṇāyāma is that we feel comfortable and keep our spine erect.

Figure 27 shows some possible positions for prāṇāyāma practice. Padmāsana or the lotus pose (1) is a good position in which to practice prāṇāyāma and bandha, provided we can maintain it comfortably. The other cross-legged poses, siddhāsana (2) and sukhāsana (3), are a little less strenuous and just as effective. A few people can sit for long periods in vīrāsana (4), but most of us

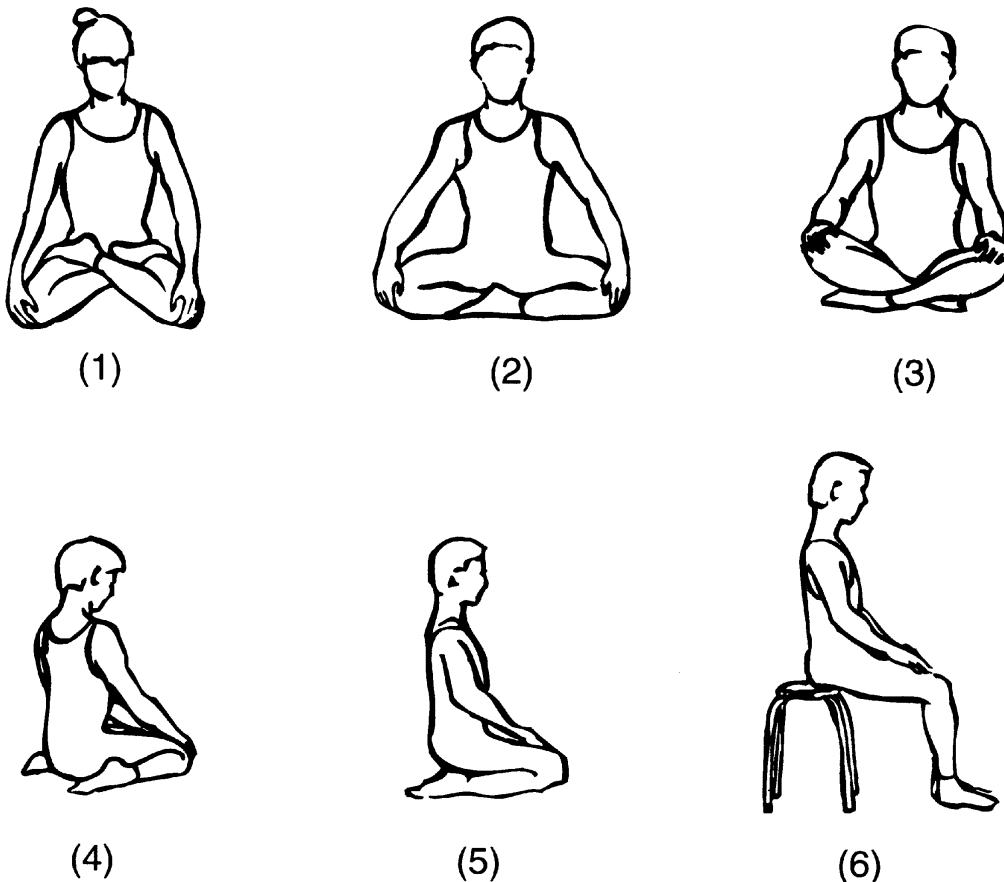


Figure 27:
Positions for prāṇāyāma.

tend to round the lower back in this position. In vajrāsana (5) there is a tendency to hollow the back. Another good position for prāṇāyāma is sitting upright on a stool (6).

The seated position we choose should be determined by the intended duration of our prāṇāyāma practice. Let's say we want to take twelve breaths, each one five seconds in and five seconds out. That would only take about three minutes. There are a number of positions in which we could sit comfortably for three minutes. But let's say we plan our practice to include inhalations and exhalations longer than five seconds, that we plan to practice breath retention, and that we want to do twenty-four breaths. The seated position that was comfortable for three minutes may not be suitable for this longer practice. We must then choose an easier position. The longer the prāṇāyāma practice, the easier seated position we need.

Breath Ratios

In addition to the various breathing techniques, the ratio of the different phases of the breath to each other in prāṇāyāma is very significant. I have already described how the different phases of breath can be emphasized in various ways. It is also possible in prāṇāyāma to fix the ratio between the inhalation, the retention afterward, the exhalation, and the retention after that. The many possibilities for these ratios can be divided roughly into two categories:

1. The inhalation, the exhalation, and the breath retention are all the same length—we call this *samavṛtti prāṇāyāma* (*sama* means “the same” and *vṛtti* means “to move”). This type of prāṇāyāma practice is good for people who use a mantra in their breathing exercises; they can make the inhalation, the exhalation, and the retention of each breath last for the same number of mantra repetitions.
2. The different phases of the breath are of different lengths—we call this *viśamavṛtti prāṇāyāma*. The general rule in this practice is to let the exhalation be twice as long as the inhalation.

In prāṇāyāma practice a very important issue is how to find an appropriate breath ratio for our individual needs. We cannot always breathe in the same breath ratio—it may be that we need a new ratio in order to maintain our attention on the practice, or because we have to take into account another immediate need. If the breath ratio is too easy, our prāṇāyāma practice will become mechanical. If it is too complicated, there can be resistance which will itself cause problems.

The choice of a suitable breath ratio must take into account two factors: what is possible and what our goals are. What is presently possible depends on how well we can inhale, hold the breath, exhale, and again hold the breath. We can easily discover this by observing our breathing during āsana practice. We can get a good idea of the limits of our breath by seeing if the breath wavers as the body makes demands on it in certain postures.

Here is an example of how we observe our breath in different āsanas in order to find out which breath ratio is suitable for our needs. Let's choose three different postures: a forward bend such as paścimatānāsana, a backward bend such as bhujāṅgāsana, and sarvāṅgāsana or the shoulderstand, a posture in which the throat area is restricted and the abdominal organs press on the diaphragm. In these āsanas, let's make the inhalation and the exhalation the same length, say, six seconds each. Now imagine the result is this: the breath is comfortable and free in the forward bend; in the backward bend both the inhalation and the exhalation are shorter; and in the shoulderstand the exhalation is fine but the inhalation is too short. From this experiment we can see that we have difficulties lengthening the inhalation.

I shall explain further. We can likely make the exhalation as long as desired in the forward bend because the contraction of the diaphragm and abdomen is not restricted, so the exhalation is easy. In the same way we are able to breathe out for as long as desired in the inverted posture. Normally it is harder to breathe out slowly in this position precisely because the weight of the abdominal organs on the diaphragm pushes out the air easily and so speeds up the exhalation. If someone can control the exhalation despite this, then it will be easy for them to lengthen the breath in prāṇāyāma. The short inhalation in bhujāṅgāsana, a posture that encourages the inhale as the natural breath rhythm, and the short inhalation in the shoulderstand show that the inhalation phase of our breath cycle is somewhat restricted. Āsanas can tell us a lot not just about the body; if we set a breath ratio in which the inhalation and exhalation are the same length and observe the breath over a certain period in various āsanas, we can also learn a lot about the breath.

From this example we can design a prāṇāyāma practice in which the exhalation is longer than the inhalation. We might choose to breathe in a 1:2 ratio, that is, making the exhalation twice as long as the inhalation. In doing this we encourage the complete emptying of the lungs, which in turn encourages a more voluminous inhale. To strengthen the inhale we must work with the exhale.

Before we pose questions like this in our own practice we should always first consider the more obvious things. If we are beginners in yoga who have just done a few exercises and now want to practice prāṇāyāma, we should not set ourselves on ambitious goals such as being able to hold the breath following inhalation after one month's practice, and following exhalation after two months. Our goals in the beginning should focus much more on finding out what we need in order to develop a deeper interest in our practice. We should increase the length of the breath retention after inhalation and exhalation only gradually. At every stage it is important that we feel well, both in body and breath, after each correctly chosen prāṇāyāma session. If we pay attention to this we can finally practice in such a way that every kind of prāṇāyāma becomes possible for us.

Our goals determine what should soon be possible; they have to do with our needs and the direction our yoga practice is taking. We must accept where we are and move in the direction we want to go. The notion of moving from the point we are currently at to the point we want to reach is always present in yoga. Indeed this is one of the definitions of yoga.

Focus in Prāṇāyāma

There are certain techniques that will help us maintain concentration in prāṇāyāma. In concentrating on the breath, we can focus on the flow of the breath, the sound of the breath, or the place where the most work is occurring. The latter will be determined by the phase of breathing we are in. For example, during exhalation and in holding the breath following exhalation, our concentration is directed toward the abdomen. Conversely, it is directed toward the chest region when inhaling and holding the breath following inhalation.

Even though it seems like such an easy thing, it is actually very difficult simply to follow the movement of the breath. In the moment when we concentrate on the breath it has a tendency to change; we are inclined to control the natural breathing ratio, to disturb it. When we follow the breath we tend to go in one of two directions—either we occupy ourselves with the feel of the breath or we simply observe it. If we just observe it we do not have to do anything with the activity of the breath itself. It is like watching the flow of a river. When we are able to do this we find ourselves almost in a state of meditation. This is the reason why we are sometimes advised simply to observe the breath: as we do this our mind quiets down. It is not easy, but it is marvelous.

There are other techniques that help us maintain concentration in prāṇāyāma. One of these is called internal gazing, a practice in which we hold the eyes in a steady position, eyelids closed. We use our eyes so much that it is not easy to keep them still. Whether we are looking or listening, smelling or tasting, our eyes are always involved somehow or other; consequently they are often strained. Closing the eyes is a very important moment in prāṇāyāma. In internal gazing we direct the eyes as if we were looking at the belly, the navel, the tip of the nose, or the point between the eyebrows. Or we hold an image before our eyes, such as the full moon, the rising sun, or the sign of a mantra.

Gazing is an exercise. When we first begin practicing this kind of gazing we run the risk of getting headaches if we do it during inhalation and exhalation. It is advisable to begin gazing in your chosen manner only while holding the breath. That is easier as everything is still while the breath is held.

Internal gazing is not natural. Normally the eyes are moving constantly, even when they are closed. In this technique of internal gazing we try to keep our eyes on a fixed point. In a certain way it is like ignoring the other senses. The effect is to rest the senses.

Another technique for helping us maintain our concentration during prāṇāyāma uses the hands and fingers. We often see hand positions like this

in pictures and statues of the Buddha. Hand positions are called *hasta mudrā*. The word *hasta* means “hand”; *mudrā* has many meanings, but here we can understand it simply as a symbol.

Many different hand positions are possible. The position of one hand resting in the other is called *dhyāna mudrā*, the *mudrā* of contemplation. In the *cin mudrā*, the thumb and index finger of the left hand are formed into a circle. (The right hand is used to regulate the breath at the nostrils.) When our mind wanders during *prāṇāyāma* the fingers move apart, and we can notice that we have become inattentive. In this way the *mudrā* can also be a way of making sure we concentrate on the breath.

In order to use these focusing techniques to full advantage, it is best to stay with one technique through the course of one days’ practice. It is much simpler to discover something when you focus your attention on one technique than if you spread your awareness over many experiences. If you go from one focus to another during the course of twelve breaths you might easily lose your concentration altogether.

Finally, a word on counting. It is said we should take at least twelve breaths in any one session of *prāṇāyāma*. The number twelve relates to an old Indian ritual in which we count on the fingers by placing the thumb in the various positions on the hand each time we breathe in, starting at the base of the index finger. Figure 28 shows the order in which the breaths are counted.

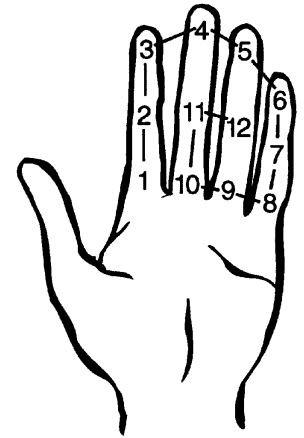


Figure 28: The traditional method for counting breaths in *prāṇāyāma*.

Further Thoughts on Prāṇāyāma

Q: I find it difficult to count while I am holding my breath.

A: That is interesting. Holding the breath actually gives us a moment in which nothing happens, a moment in which it should therefore be possible to do something like count. It is even said that the best moment for introducing a mantra is not the inhalation or the exhalation, but while you are holding the breath. Some mantras are very long. And we can even recite these exactly as we hold the breath because we do not have to concentrate on breathing. It is said that a moment of breath retention is a moment of meditation, a moment of *dhyāna*.

So your observation surprises me. Perhaps you should use the finger counting method: Simply place the thumb on a finger joint as you breathe in, then move the thumb rhythmically on the joint, one beat per second, in order to count the length of the retention. That can sometimes help. The ultimate goal is not to have to use any techniques.

Q: Should we really be able to practice *prāṇāyāma* without counting the breaths or the ratios between the phases of the breath?

A: Yes. What else is *prāṇāyāma* than being with the breath? But that is very difficult and it’s why we have so many techniques. Normally our body has its own rhythm and we are not conscious of our breath. As we count we are occupied with our breath. Lots of people say that *prāṇāyāma* is boring; they say that just sitting there and doing breathing exercises is quite ridiculous. There seems to be more challenge in *āsanas*—they produce a visible result.

