



The Breath of Life... Pranayama (yogic breathing)

by Lila Conway

From the first cry of a new born baby to the last gasp of a dying man, life is but a series of breaths. In yoga, breathing is one of the most important practices as it is the most vital means of absorbing prana (life force/vital energy) into the body. Ancient Yogis would count lifespan not by the number of years but by the number of breaths. Prana, the life force, permeates the whole body, not only parts of the body which are perceptible, but every atom and cell, including the astral energy bodies. Without prana life ceases to exist. The yoga shastras (scriptures) detail how prana gives consciousness to all life forms from mineral to man. The breath is referred to as the vehicle of cosmic consciousness.

Pranayama involves techniques to redirect, store and control prana. When prana is lacking in the body or blocked, this will cause an imbalance and may arise as feeling stuck or restricted in life. It can even manifest as depression or as a lack of drive or determination to do anything. A person with abundant prana is well-balanced, peaceful and contented, with a positive outlook on life.

In order to control prana we must also control the mind. The mind and prana are interdependent, each unable to act independently of the other. We can see this in our daily experiences of life. If you take a few minutes to listen to a faint sound in the distance, for example a ticking clock, notice what happens to the breath. For most, the breath will have suspended completely or at the very least slowed down. As we think, so we breathe... when the mind is afflicted through anger or fear the breath becomes rapid and shallow. When we are peaceful and relaxed the breathing process becomes slow and deep.

Hatha Yoga prescribes various pranayama or breathing exercises which regulate the breath and, as a result, control the prana and the mind. See below for an example of one of these. Practicing regularly with conscious awareness brings an abundance of vital energy; the mind becomes calm and lucid with complete and perfect clarity. An inner smile of contentment dawns and a positive outlook on life prevails.

"When the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady, but when the breath is still, so is the mind still" Hatha Yoga Pradipika

pranayama: Anuloma Viloma (Alternate Nostril Breathing)

This ancient breathing technique, practiced regularly brings an abundance of energy, vitality and clarity of mind. Stillness blossoms from within, setting a perfect stage for meditation.

Sit in a comfortable cross legged position, preferably on a mat or cushion. Keep the spine straight, head and neck in line. Close your eyes and relax. Take a few conscious deep breaths.

Vishnu Mudra

In alternate nostril breathing, the right hand is used to close your nostrils and fingers are placed in Vishnu Mudra. Tuck your index and middle fingers into your palm and keep the other two fingers and thumb straight. This is Vishnu Mudra.



The 3rd finger will close your left nostril and your thumb the right. Keep your left hand on the knee, palm facing up with the tip of both index finger and thumb touching.

Anuloma Viloma

Place your thumb by your right nostril and your 3rd finger by your left.

1. Close the right nostril with your thumb and slowly inhale through the left nostril. Count mentally, "Om 1; Om 2; Om 3; Om 4." This is the basic count for inhalation.

2. Close the left nostril with 3rd finger, release the thumb on the right nostril and breathe out through the right, simultaneously counting "Om 1; Om 2; Om 3; Om 4; Om 5; Om 6; Om 7; Om 8." The count for exhalation is twice as long as inhalation.

3. Next, inhale through the right nostril, again using the same count for inhalation. At the end of inhalation close the right nostril, open the left and exhale through the left nostril, counting up to 8 as before.

This is one round. Practice 10 rounds.

The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga by Swami Vishnudevendanda comes highly recommended for deeper study. For details on Lila's yoga classes and retreats, go to www.yogaprema.org

