

Pranayama: Creating A Safe and Gentle Practice

working draft -

Did you know... that the classical teachings on hatha yoga contain numerous dire warnings about the risks of pranyama? That great yogis, saints and sages have strongly urged caution, and respect for these practices? And that, thankfully, many of these same teachers offer instruction as to how to make this important practice safe, and wonderfully beneficial? They teach us how to practice and teach pranayama with discernment, with ahimsa as the foundation principle.

Cautions to be judicious and respectful of breathing exercises abound in the literature of hatha yoga.... Even the beginning exercises in this book should be treated with respect.

*Apart from psychological concerns, the special physiological hazards of breathing exercises is that **they can cause problems without giving us traditional signals warning us** against doing something harmful. In athletics, the practice of asana, experiments with diet, or just tinkering with any object in the physical world, we depend on our senses to tell us that we are exceeding our capacity or doing something inadvisable. But **breathing exercises are different**. In that realm we are dealing with phenomena that our senses, or at least our untutored senses, are often unable to pick up, even though they can still effect the body. And because of this, advanced exercises should be undertaken only by those who are adequately prepared.*

Anatomy of Hatha Yoga: A Manual for Students, Teachers and Practitioners, by H. David Coulter. pp 131-132 (Bold is mine)

Letting the great works and teachers speak for themselves, as they do emphatically on this subject, here are excerpts from a sampling of respected sources and classical texts warning about the dangers, and describing some of the special considerations, relating to the practice of pranayama.

1.

As lions, elephants and tigers are tamed very slowly and cautiously, so should prana be brought under control very slowly and in gradation measured according to one's capacity and physical limitations. Otherwise, it will kill the practitioner.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika, chapter II, verse 16.

2.

Pranayama is a highly developed and complex science, and the advanced techniques require expert guidance. They should not be attempted purely on the basis of instructions found in books. Unless one has the prerequisites for such advanced techniques, more harm than good will result....

Science of Breath: A Practical Guide, by Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine, M.D., Alan Hymes, M.D., p. 93

3.

*The basic form of nadi shodhanam **without retention**... and a few other types of pranayama may be practiced safely, based on the instructions given here. But to repeat: retention of the breath does require the sanction and guidance of a teacher well-versed in pranayama. (Ibid, p. 93) (bold is mine)*

4.

All aspirants are strictly advised not to practice the exercises of kumbhaka (retention of breath) without applying the bandhas. (Ibid, p. 97)

5.

In general, pranayama should not be done during menstruation or pregnancy or by anyone with fever, bronchitis, pleurisy with effusion, pneumonia or a recent history of heart attack. Also, a person with highly metastasized cancer should not perform pranayama, nor should they while undergoing chemo- or radiation therapy. Nor should a person suffering from severe psychological conditions such as grief, sadness, anger, or suicidal depression engage in pranayama. There should be a gap of at least one hour before or after bathing, eating or sexual activity before doing pranayama.

“Pranayama for Self-Healing,” The Ayurvedic Institute and Vasant Lad, BAM&S, MASc

6.

Not every practice is suited for everyone.... We must be very careful when explaining matters pertaining to sadhana to others. Take pranayama (breath control), for example. Those with heart problems should not do too much pranayama; they should also not exert too much strength when inhaling or exhaling. Those with abnormal blood pressure should also be careful; they should only do a little bit of pranayama. They should not tire themselves too much.

In the olden days, when one approached a Guru for instructions on pranayama, the Guru would place the tip of a grass blade under the person’s nose. He or She would then instruct the candidate to first exhale gently, and then with great force. Only after observing the movements of the grass blade during the exhalations would the Guru advise the sadhak on how many cycles of pranayama he or she should do, how it should be done and other related issues.

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (“Amma”) amma.org

<http://archives.amritapuri.org/matruvani/vol-02/oct02/02mv10message.php>

7.

By improper practice of pranayama the pupil introduces several disorders into his system like hiccough, wind, asthma, cough, catarrh, pains in the head, eyes, and ears and nervous irritation. It takes a long time to learn slow deep steady and proper inhalations and exhalation. Master this before attempting kumbhaka (breath retention).

Light on Yoga by BKS Iyengar. p. 44

About Safe Practices

With the explosion of yoga popularity in the West, some eminent classical yoga teachers became concerned that these strong cautions had had the result of scaring a number of teachers and students away from the breathing practices altogether, for fear that they were dangerous. Efforts were made to clarify and encourage practitioners - and also to write down the oral tradition in more detail as to how to build a safe pranayama practice, realizing that most of the millions practicing yoga did not have a relationship with a guru. Sri T. Krishnamacharya (especially in later life) was one who inspired and encouraged some of his students, most notably perhaps his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, and also A.G. Mohan and Srivatsa Ramaswami among others, to make this information clearer and available to all seekers. Swami Rama and other adepts also have worked to write down much (but not all: an actual teacher or guru is still essential) of the needed explanations of the Sutras and other terse instructions that were intended to be “unpacked,” elaborated on, customized, and perhaps experienced with a teacher or guru to allow for full and true understanding.

Safe practices are not “baby” or minimally effective practices (and, I would also argue that unsafe practices are not yoga). Breath awareness is very powerful (remember, the most subtle can be the most powerful). Here’s what Swami Rama has to say:

Breath awareness strengthens the mind and makes it easier for it to become inward. When the mind starts following the breath, one becomes aware of the reality that all the creatures of the world are breathing the same breath. There is a direct communication between the student and the center of the cosmos which supplies breath to all living creatures.

Science of Breath, p 111

*In the traditional texts, there are innumerable rules and regulations pertaining to pranayama. **The main points are to exercise moderation, balance and common sense with regard to inner and outer thinking and living.** However, for those who seriously wish to take up the advanced practices of pranayama, the guidance of an*

experienced guru is essential.

Ibid. (Bold is mine)

*An appropriate asana practice will encourage development of pranayama. **Pranayama 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.....***

*Whichever technique we choose, **the most important part of pranayama is the exhalation.** If the quality of the exhalation is not good, the quality of the whole pranayama is adversely affected. When someone is not able to breath out slowly and quietly, it means that he or she is not ready for pranayama, 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.*

The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice, by TKV Desikachar, p 59 (Bold is mine)

*...it is important to rest for several minutes after we finish our asana practice and before we begin pranayama... **We must always rest between asana and pranayama practice.***

Ibid. p. 62, 63

"[the breathing practices seem to] accentuate whatever is in the mind, whether it be benevolence or malevolence, harmony or disharmony, virtue or vice. On the negative side, experienced teachers report that quirkiness of any sort gets accentuated in students who go too far. It might be an abusive streak, laughing inappropriately, speaking rudely, flightiness, twitchiness or nervous tics. Right to left physical imbalances also become exaggerated. Unfortunately, novices often close their eyes to these warnings: having become addicted to their practice.... Competent teachers of hatha yoga will be watchful of these ... matters" Anatomy of Hatha Yoga P. 131

Despite the many stern admonitions, and despite most yoga teachers' genuine reverence for the great classical teachers and yoga philosophy and tradition, if you walk into an otherwise excellent yoga class in the U.S. today, you may find pranayama taught as if these warnings and instructions do not exist. Advanced practices with breath retention are taught casually to anyone who happens to walk in the door for a class, or taught intensely to newer students without regard to their readiness. On the other extreme, there may be little or no breath awareness incorporated into the class at all.

Why is this? One possibility is that in our "Western" paradigm of physiology and medicine, there is no rational possibility for these seemingly easy-to-do breathing patterns to have such a

powerful effect, for good or for ill. In an “Eastern” paradigm, the concept that the more subtle action can be the more powerful is an established principle. We can look to practices such as acupuncture, homeopathy, Reiki, and mantra jappa for illustrations of this.

Another reason may be that we are not trained or attuned to pick up on the unique symptoms of the ill effects that may result from an improper pranayama practice, and thereby miss the feedback that we may be doing harm.

Examples of Safe Practices

As yoga teachers and yoga therapists, it is important that we meet the student where they are. What is our intention of giving them this practice? What are the physical and psychological conditions that need to be taken into account? How will I know if the practice is having the desired effect, or needs to be modified?

“For a student with illness, breath awareness practice, and abdominal breathing in shavasana may be performed.”

Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Yoga Publications Trust. p. 369

Like all of yoga, pranayama is to be practiced mindfully, with awareness, and with awareness of the breath. **Under no circumstances should anything be forced.** As we see in many of the texts, the foundation for the more advanced practices, includes **a healthy yoga lifestyle**, including a growing mastery of the yamas and niyamas.

The following is a list, drawn from the same sources that have been cited throughout, of great safe practices. Though generally safe, they are not “automatic,” and are to be approached with respect and care.

List of 10 Safe Pranayama Practices

All to be done without retention or suspension of the breath.

(see attached for important details)

1. Simple breath awareness (see below for Sample Practice)
2. Diaphragmatic breathing
3. Sandbag breathing (just a few medical contraindications for this one, but great for strengthening the diaphragm, and diaphragmatic breathing. Fine to start with a lighter, say, 5 lb. bag of rice, and build up)
4. Yogic Breathing (3 part breath)
5. Linking simple movement to breath
6. So Hum mantra (“So” on the inhale, “Hum” on the exhale: universal mantra, said to represent the sound of the breath)
7. Mudras that support the exhale, inhale, or respiration in general.
8. Count each *exhale*, beginning at the number 27 and counting backwards towards 1. If you loose count, or *think* you might have lost count, or you get to one, just begin again at 27, counting each exhale, backwards to 1.
9. **After the exhale is well established, smooth and full and even and without tension** over some period of time, then explore:
Lengthening the exhale, up to twice the length of the inhale. Monitor the qualities of the breath and any tension in the forehead, jaw, lips hands, shoulders, etc., to know if the student is working at the appropriate level. Allow the student to take any little “catch up breaths” - and also if you notice this happening, lower the ratio.

10. Nadi Shodhanam, without retention.

One technique (There are several schools of thought!):

Sit tall - “it has been said that doing Nadi Shodhanam with the back rounded is like working on the spine with a jackhammer” (Yoga: Mastering the Basics)

Breath is silent. (Ibid) Never ujai with the nostril closed. (Heart of Yoga, p. 61)

No retention or suspension of the breath. Suspension here is for advanced yogis with minds full of ease and positive thoughts, good relationships, purified bodies, etc.

Do not practice if: You have a cold or if your nasal passages are blocked. Also, close the nostrils gently -- Don’t push the nose over.

Pick a classic pattern and stay with it for some time. (Perhaps: inhale L, exhale R, inhale R, exhale L. Repeat for 2 or 3 minutes to start, then breath in and out through both nostrils several times.

Having mastered this practice, and practiced it for some time, the next step would be to practice extending the exhale longer than the inhale, again without retention.

A Sample Practice

Here is an example of a safe, satisfying simple pranayama practice, great for someone new to the breath and also appropriate for a more experienced practitioner on an occasional basis. In the case of illness, depending on the nature of the illness and your training, you may decide to skip or highly customize the asana portion, and go right to brief relaxation or yoga nidra, and then to the breath awareness pranayama.

Preparation for the overall practice:

Empty stomach.

Quiet comfortable setting, away from jarring noises, bugs, attention seeking children or pets, direct sun.

Have available any chair or props you may need, including a blanket or shawl perhaps to keep the body comfortably warm in relaxation.

Preparation for pranayama (optional):

1) **Asana, if time allows, and if appropriate** given the health/structural issues of the student. For an asana program you can do gentle yoga stretching, postures, and movement, **especially exploring linking breath to simple movements**, and done without tension or strain. The breath flows naturally and easily, without pause or holding, without panting or gasping.

For an asana program you can do gentle yoga stretching, postures, and movement, especially exploring **linking breath to simple movements**.

All done without tension, gripping or strain. Everything is optional - student's choice, encouraged by the teacher not to push or compete, but to stay present with the breath. Practice self-study.

Teacher/therapist also maintains awareness of own breath.

Monitor the breath through out the practice, and together with the student, use it as a guide. Holding the breath, clenching the jaw or hands, gasping, panting etc, indicates it is time to let go of that practice, for the moment, at least.

2) **There should be a break between asana and pranayama.** This is the ideal time for guided relaxation or **yoga nidra** (Some I recommend: [Yoga Nidra](#), Yoga Publications Trust, and especially for the nervous system: "61 Points" practice from the Himalayan Institute). Come out slowly. If the breath awareness is to be done reclining, the student can stay where they are.

Sample Breath Awareness Pranayama

Find a comfortable position. Steady and comfortable, stable and at ease. Take the time you need to find a comfortable position where you feel you can remain quiet and still for about (5) minutes.

If reclining, make any adjustments so that the spine is elongated, supported and comfortable, and bilaterally symmetrical to the extent comfortably possible. If the chin is higher than the forehead, place a folded blanket or cushion under the head to even them out. If there is sensation in the lower back, place a rolled blanket under the knees, or place the calves on the seat of the chair. Similarly, support the neck, elbows or any other part of the body as needed. **If seated**, sit tall, and soft. Support the body as needed with props. If on a chair, have the feet comfortably flat on the floor or other support. Find a comfortable place for the hands to rest. Gently lift up through the crown of the head, lengthening the spine to the best of your ability. and relax through the shoulders, jaw and belly. Roll the shoulders a few times and release them gently back and down. Bring the head, neck and trunk in one line to the best of your ability at this time, without strain. (For suggested postures and modified postures for therapeutic situations, see Yoga Therapy by A.G. Mohan and Indra Mohan, p.127, 128).

{“The Yoga Sutras do not recommend any particular posture for pranayama. They merely stipulate that pranayama should be done “after having mastered the posture,” the posture being one that is stable and comfortable.” Yoga Therapy, by A.G. Mohan and Indra Mohan, p. 127}

Once a comfortable position is established:

Invite the awareness to the meeting points between the body and the floor. Invite the awareness to the connection between the body and the floor, and through the floor, the earth. Perhaps you can feel the weight of the body on the floor or the cushion.

Bring the awareness to the forehead, and invite the forehead to relax. Relax the eyebrows, the corners of the eyes, the hinge of the jaw, the inside of the mouth, the tongue. Invite the throat to soften, and the belly.

Relax the forehead. Can you feel the touch of breath in the nostrils? {Pause.} Perhaps the air is cool on the inhale, and warm and soft on the exhale. {Much longer pause}

Invite the awareness to the abdomen, perhaps observing the abdomen rise on the inhale and soften on the exhale. If that is not what you observe, that's fine. You may want to invite the breath deep into the lungs on the in breath, and completely release and relax on the out breath. Or you may choose to bring the awareness back to the nostrils and simply observe the breath

there.

Begin to observe any qualities of the breath. Does it feel smooth or choppy, deep or shallow, labored or easy. There is no judgment here, just observation. See if you notice any pauses or jerks in the breath, and if you do... see if it is available to begin to gently smooth them out.... If you notice any tension, just let go and watch the breath. {Long pause}

{From here, you can choose to come out, or do one or two more variations. You are actually perfectly set up for a brief meditation, which would be ideal. This can be done sitting or reclining. Perhaps 2 mins of “So Hum,” “Soooo” on the inhale, “Hummm” on the exhale. So Hum is a universal mantra, meaning it is appropriate for everyone, and it is also said to reflect the sound of the breath, and therefore works very well with breath awareness. }

To come out, invite the breath to deepen, take a few deep breaths in and out of both nostrils. Bring your awareness to the body, and begin to move the fingers and toes. Keep the gaze soft, as you blink the eyes a few times.

If reclining, bend the knees and roll over to one side, perhaps the right side, pause for a couple of breaths, and slowly come up to sitting.

Option to conclude with chanting OM

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