



INTRODUCTION TO YOGA FOR WOMEN

Week 5: Pranayam - Yogic Controlled Breathing

Pranayama

When we talk about yoga, we usually refer to the physical practice of the various poses and movements. In reality yoga is much more complex than that. The physical practice of building strength, fitness and flexibility, known as **asanas**, is only one out of the eight components of yoga.

Another component of yoga is known as **pranayama**. Prana means **energy**, and yama means **control**. Yogis believe that through our breathing we exchange energy (vital life force) with the universe, and by **controlling how we breathe** we can affect that energy and therefore how we feel in body and mind.

There are many different controlled breathing exercises in yoga, each with its **unique goal**, such as energising, calming, warming, cooling. In yoga, breath is considered to consist of **four parts** - **inhalation, breath retention (full lungs), exhalation, breath retention (empty lungs)**. Some breaths are done through the nose, others a combination of nose and mouth.

It can take time for us to get used to the idea of controlling our breath, rather than leaving it to our **autonomic nervous system** which takes care of it for us, and even longer to become comfortable with the different types of breathing in yoga. So, be gentle and patient with yourself as you explore.

Below are some of the controlled breathing techniques you'll find used in yoga classes.

Diaphragmatic (Belly) Breathing - Reminder

Diaphragmatic breathing, also known as belly breathing, is a fundamental yoga technique. It helps to calm the nervous system, increase oxygen intake, massage internal organs and relax the body to enable safe yoga practice.

How to Practice:

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Or practice seated.
2. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your belly.
3. Inhale deeply through your nose making belly rise
4. Exhale slowly through your nose, drawing your belly back towards your spine.

Ujjayi (Ocean) Breath

Ujjayi breath is a gentle, audible nasal breath made by slightly constricting the back of the throat so the breath sounds like a quiet ocean — used to calm the mind, warm up or cool down, slow down breathing, steady the nervous system and link breath with movement.

How to Practice:

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Or practice seated.
2. Breathe in through your nose, then breathe out through your mouth as if to fog up a mirror.
3. Notice the slight constriction at the back of your throat when you do it.
4. Try to keep the constriction in place when you inhale through your nose.
5. Half way through your exhale close your mouth and finish the breath out through the nose.
6. Breathe in and out through your nose as if to fog up the mirror, keeping the throat constriction.

Sitali (Cooling) Breath

Sītalī is a cooling pranayama where you inhale through a rolled tongue or pursed lips, and exhale through the nose. It cools the body, calms the mind, and soothes the nervous system — ideal for hot days, after an active practice, or to reduce stress.

How to Practice:

1. Find a comfortable position to practice, seated, standing or lying down.
2. Roll your tongue into a tube (like a straw to drink through).
3. Or purse your lips into a small “O” shape (like if you were drinking through a straw).
4. Inhale slowly through the tongue or lips, feeling the coolness in your mouth.
5. Let the belly gently expand and contract as you breathe.
6. When you’ve finished, breath in and out through your nose.

Bhrāmarī (Bee) Breath

Bhrāmarī is a calming breathing technique where you make a gentle humming sound on the exhale — like a bee. The vibration naturally soothes the mind, relieves tension, and can support focus and relaxation, giving you a break from racing thoughts.

How to Practice:

1. Find a comfortable position to practice, seated, standing or lying down.
2. Inhale slowly through the nose.
3. Exhale through your nose with a humming sound “mmm” sound (like a bee).
4. Feel the vibration in your lips, face, or chest.
5. When you’ve finished take few relaxed breaths in and out through the nose.

Nadi Shodhana (Alternative Nostril) Breath

Nadi Shodhana means “energy channel purification.” It’s a breathing technique where you alternate breathing through each nostril to balance your unique energy, regulate the nervous system, focus the mind, and bring a sense of harmony.

How to Practice:

1. Find a comfortable seated position with a long spine.
2. Aim for equal lengths of inhale and exhale (e.g., 4 counts in, 4 counts out).
3. Hand position: using your dominant hand:
 - Use your thumb to close the right nostril, and ring finger to close the left nostril.
 - The index and middle fingers can be folded toward the palm or extended onto the forehead.
4. Close the right nostril with your thumb - inhale through the left nostril slowly and steadily.
5. Close the left nostril with your ring finger - exhale through the right nostril.
6. Stay as you inhale through the right nostril.
7. Close the right nostril with your thumb - exhale through the left nostril slowly and steadily.
8. Stay as you inhale through the left nostril.
9. Close the left nostril with your ring finger - exhale through the right nostril.
10. Continue, only swopping the nostril after you breathe in.
11. When you’ve finished take few relaxed breaths in and out through both nostrils.

Square / Box Breath

Box breath is a structured breathing technique where you **inhale, hold, exhale, and hold** for equal counts — like tracing the sides of a square. It’s often used in yoga, meditation, and stress management to bring balance and focus.

Experiment with the count for this technique, making sure you feel comfortable, especially when holding. There should not be a struggle or discomfort. Below we use a count of four but adjust this to suit you.

How to Practice:

1. Find a comfortable position to practice, seated, standing or lying down.
2. Breathe in and out through your nose.
3. Inhale through the nose for a count of 4 - imagine tracing the first side of a square.
4. Hold the breath in for a count of 4. This is the top side of the square.
5. Exhale through the nose for a count of 4. This is the third side of the square.
6. Hold the breath out for a count of 4. This is the final side of the square.
7. When you’ve finished breathe in and out few times in your natural breath.

Key Postures Explored

I've recorded a short video for you covering the breathing techniques we've learnt, some of the poses you're hopefully getting more familiar with, as well as the few new poses we've explored.

- Worrier 1
- Chair
- Boat
- Knees, Chest, Chin) lowering to the floor
- Forward fold to low lunge and back

Next Steps

Next week we will explore the Sun Salutation sequences and their modifications. These are guided in many yoga classes as part of a warm up.