



LESSON 25: "PRANAYAMA (BREATHING TECHNIQUES)"

Breathing helps us detoxify and cleanse our bodies and at the same time regulates stress levels. Proper breathing is incredibly important for our overall wellbeing and yet, we tend to under-breathe (meaning that while we breathe more often, we don't breathe deeply enough). How many times a minute do you breathe in and out? And how deep are the breaths you take? We are often so busy and stressed that we don't even pay attention to our breath anymore and therefore become shallow and quick breathers. Another big problem is that when we *do* pay attention to our breath, we often focus on breathing *in* more than on breathing *out* ("Take a deep breath in!" is uttered constantly, but we fail to emphasize the "deep breath out"), yet we should aim for even longer exhalations than inhalations. We inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, which is a known stressor in our nervous systems. So, what happens when we inhale more deeply than we exhale? Excess carbon dioxide remains in our lungs and as a response, our bodies ask for more oxygen, yet we can't inhale quite as much because our lungs are still partially filled with carbon dioxide. Our breaths become more and more shallow and we remain constantly stressed. You may be so used to feeling stressed that you don't even perceive it as abnormal anymore.

In Yoga, *Pranayama* refers to breathing techniques. What Western societies have come to understand as Yoga, namely the physical postures we associate with the term, are in fact only the tip of the iceberg, the *asanas*. Yoga is a philosophy that is thousands of years old and that existed long before the physical postures which were added about a thousand years ago. The main goal of the physical Yoga practice (which includes the asanas, pranayama and meditation (or rather, the seated posture we adopt to meditate) is to calm down the mind. Focusing on your posture and breath makes it more difficult to get distracted. Our breath is also closely linked to our emotions. Have you ever been under emotional distress or angry and someone told you to calm down and breath deeply? Or, have you ever noticed your breath and/or body temperature changing as you were getting upset or agitated about something? Everything is linked and when you learn to control your breath, you learn to influence your emotions as well.

Note: If you're someone who has a hard time meditating because you feel too restless, then actively focusing on breathing rather than meditating can be a great alternative that will give you amazing benefits as well.

Here are a few basic breathing techniques that you can practice daily:

Deep breathing:

1. Close your eyes and sit or lie in a comfortable position.
2. Exhale all the air that is still in your lungs (breathe out in an almost exaggerated way).
3. If you're sitting, make sure your back is straight and your shoulders are relaxed.
4. Take a deep and long breath in for 4 counts and then an even deeper breath out for 8 counts.
5. Repeat this for about 10–15 breaths and try to see if you can make your breaths even longer.
6. Sometimes focusing on a specific mantra (like “om”) can help you focus even more. Short, positive affirmations are amazing too. Here's a tip: take one of your biggest fears or concerns and make your affirmation the opposite of that. So, if you're constantly stressed or don't think you are doing well enough at work or school (stress like that, which is often linked to perfectionism, can be paralyzing and lead to procrastination and self-sabotage), then try a phrase like “I do my best and trust the rest”. You can think “I do my best” when you breathe in and “and trust the rest” when you breathe out. The beauty of this is that you don't have to believe what you're saying, that's kind of the whole point. You say what you wish you believed and if you repeat it often enough, then you will end up believing it. Too often, we put this into practice, but in a damaging way. If you tell a child that they're not good enough often enough, they will believe you, even though it's not true. It works both ways, so we might as well use it to empower ourselves.

Three part breathing

1. Sit in a comfortable position or lie on your back with your legs bent (this will help relax your psoas).
2. Exhale all the air that is still in your lungs through your nose (breathe out in an almost exaggerated way).
3. Place your hands on your upper ribcage on each side and breathe into that part of your body for 4 counts (which means that you intentionally don't make your breaths as deep). Breathe out for 6–8 counts.

4. Repeat 10 times.
5. Now lower your hands to right below your ribcage and breathe into that part (a little deeper). In for 4 counts, out for 6–8 counts. Repeat 10 times.
6. Lower your hand all the way to your lower stomach and now breathe all the way into your stomach (very deep breaths). In for 4 counts, out for 6–8 counts. Repeat 10 times.

Dynamic exhalation:

This technique is ideal at the end of a long day or if you just feel like you want to let go of something (or someone).

1. Stand with your feet a little wider than hip distance apart and soften your knees.
2. Pull your shoulders up to your ears and then let them fall. Repeat this a few times until you feel a little more relaxed.
3. Let your arms hang loose and make sure your back is straight.
4. Take a deep breath in and right before you exhale, focus on everything you want to let go, your stress, your problems, everything. Visualize it right in front of you.
5. As you exhale, let your whole upper body fall to the front (as if you were a puppet hanging from a string and someone let go of the strings controlling the upper body.) Sigh loudly as you exhale all the air from your lungs and imagine that everything you want to let go of is just falling from your body and drifting away.
6. Repeat as many times as you wish!

Visualization breath

This one is more of a guided mini meditation than a breathing technique, but I'm including it here because it's still closely linked to your breath and it's one of my favorite ways to relax or shift my energy.

1. Lie down on your back in a comfortable position either on the floor or on your bed. Feel free to play some classical or other relaxing music in the background, just make sure it's not too loud and that it'll help you relax more deeply. Your feet should be about hip distance apart or a little wider. Take a mental tour of your

body and see if all your parts of your body are relaxed. If any part feels tense, tighten then muscles in that area even more and then let go completely.

2. Close your eyes and repeat the deep breathing technique (the first one described in this lesson). As you exhale, try to imagine any toxins or stress factors in your body as dark gray matter (let your imagination decide on the texture and exact look, it could be smoke-like or a gooey substance), Associate that gray (feel free to change the color) matter with everything negative in your life. Everything that's weighing on you, fear, worry, guilt, shame... And as you exhale, imagine a force pulling that matter out of you and see it leaving your body through your nose and mouth.
3. As you inhale, imagine a golden white and warm light slowly entering your body and filling every cell of your body. Associate that light with everything you feel grateful for and everything that brings you joy. Sunshine, a loved one, a song you like, anything. As you inhale and exhale, start seeing the gray matter leaving your body entirely until you are filled with the light and you feel an overall sense of warmth and wellbeing.
4. Repeat this for at least 10 breaths or as long as you wish. This can be done at any time of the day and as often as you wish.