

PRANAYAMA: THE POWER OF BREATH

Phani Saikrishna Pakala

Physical Education Teacher, ZPHS, AMBAVARAM, Prakasam (District)

Introduction

Pranayama is a Sanskrit word which means ‘control of breath’. In *pranayama*, we consciously control our breathing through various breathing techniques as it is a meditative practice. We can divide the types of breathing techniques in *pranayama* into three stages: Inhalation through nose (*Purak*), retention (*kumbhak*) and exhalation (*Rechak*). And we use these breathing techniques not only used in yoga practices but also in meditative practices. We can control the rhythm of *pranic* energy through *pranayama*. Pranayama methods, which are various types of breathing exercises, have been used by saints living in caves for the prevention of diseases and long-term survival from the ancient period, under natural circumstances. It has been proposed by Patanjali, (600 BCE), the codifier of yoga science that the control of *prana* (mind) is possible by regulation of inhalation and exhalation. This is accomplished by eliminating the pause between inhalation and exhalation or expending it by retention. It regulates the motion of the lungs, resulting into control of heart and vagus nerve. In a more recent study, transcendental meditation has been reported to provide beneficial effect on blood pressure and insulin resistance components of the metabolic syndrome. Various types of *pranas* help in keeping body and mind healthy. The best time to perform *pranayama* is early morning on empty stomach. It is very important to get an open fresh air while performing *pranayama*. It is one of the most ancient disciplines as it helps in attaining peace and self-awareness. *Pranayama* is helpful in treating various health related disorders like asthma, diabetes as well as mental disorders like stress and depression.

The Eight types of *pranayama* and its benefits are as follows:

- ***Nadi Sodhana***

Nadi Sodhana is done by sitting in a cross legged position comfortably. Then using the right hand, one should close the right side of the nose while inhaling deeply with the left nostril. One must repeat this procedure with the right nostril as well. There are various benefits of *Nadi Sodhana* if one practices it daily for 10-15 times. This technique helps in purifying the energy channels of the body. Due to alternate nostril breathing, it brings balance to the mind, body and

soul of the human body. This type of technique is said to be innovative and it also helps in stress, anxiety and curb the desire of smoking.

- ***Shitali Pranayama***

One can do this type of *pranayama* by rolling the tongue in an O shape and inhaling through the mouth. One should hold the breath and practice chin lock (*jalandhar bandh*), then exhale through nostrils after sometime. You should repeat this until you reach 8 and 15 cycles. *Shitali pranayama* is said to be the most refreshing breathing exercise which is effective in cooling down the body. It also helps in reducing anxiety.

- ***Ujjayi Pranayama***

One can do this type of *pranayama* by breathing through the mouth while sitting in a cross-legged position. One should try to mimic the sound of ocean waves by constricting the throat. Then after closing the mouth, breathing should be done through the nose by again constricting the throat. This procedure should be done 10-15 times. This may feel awkward in the beginning but gives great relaxation. It also helps in throat related issues. It can act as an alternative treatment for stress and PTSD as it helps in reducing anxiety.

- ***Kapalabhati Pranayama***

One can do this type of *pranayama* by forcefully exhaling from lungs and inhaling is done involuntarily. The exhalation should be so forceful that one should suck the belly by releasing the air. In the same way after inhaling, the belly should go back to the same position. Usually we do *kapalabhati pranayama* for warm up. This cycle of inhalation and exhalation should be done for few minutes. This type of *pranayama* is quite beneficial in strengthening the diaphragm and abdominal muscles. It also helps in increasing focus, reducing anxiety and burning calories.

- ***Bhastrika Pranayama***

You can do this type of technique by sitting in a cross legged position while keeping the spine straight and closing the eyes. Inhaling and exhaling should be at a fast rate. In this *pranayama*, one needs to inhale deeply and exhale forcefully in such a way that the stomach goes inside. One needs to remain consistent in this type of breathing technique. This is one of the best *pranayama* as it helps in increasing the blood circulation in the body and also activates body channels. It also plays an important role with worry, tolerance of anxiety as well as PTSD.

- ***Bhramari Pranayama***

You can do this type of *pranayama* by closing the ears with the thumbs and eyes with the finger. One should mimic the sound of a bee while inhaling and exhaling slowly. One can also

chant 'OM' while exhaling. This is also known as 'humming bee breath'. Once you complete the cycle, you should repeat it. This should go on till 5-10 minutes. This humming sound calms the mind and body naturally. It helps in increasing concentration, alertness, memory improvement and relieving stress. *Bhramari is also great for stimulating the vagus nerve, a nerve in charge of our wellbeing. The vagus nerve activates the parasympathetic nervous system and helps us come into a state of relaxation and calmness.*

- **Anuloma & Viloma Pranayama**

This *pranayama* is divided into two stages: Paused inhalation and paused exhalation. It is done by inhaling for 2-3 seconds and pausing, then again restarting inhalation and pausing for few seconds while sitting in a comfortable position. Inhalation should be done until lungs are full of air. Exhalation must be done slowly. One must relax the mind and body. This is *Viloma Pranayama* where pausing of breathing is in regular intervals. In *anukoma pranayama*, one must breathe nostrils in an alternative way. Both are similar. These techniques help in relaxing, reducing stress and cleansing of nasal passages.

- **Sheetkari Pranayama**

This *pranayama* is done by producing 'sheetkar' sound from the mouth. This technique is done by inhaling air while keeping the tongue behind the teeth. One must do the *jalandhar bandh* and hold the breath. After that one must exhale the air through nostrils. This *pranayama* is great when done in summer as it helps to keep the body cooler. In this way it plays an important role in keeping the body temperature under control.

The Power of Pause during Inhalation and Exhalation

To control, eliminate, and expand the pause during breathing, is the main process in doing *pranayama*. In Sanskrit, the pause is called *kumbhaka*, which is controlled by all the breathing exercises. Hath yoga manual, mention eight varieties of *kumbhaka*, which are practiced by highly adapted yogis, who know the secrets of the nature of the pause. These should be practiced under guidance of experienced yogis. These practices can take us to deeper states of the mind resulting in to autonomic control heart beat and brain waves via electrocardiographic and electroencephalographic studies respectively. *Kumbhaka* is the pause during the breath. It should be practiced under supervision of an expert, not by reading manuals. It is important to apply *bandhas* before practicing *kumbhakas*. *Bandhas* are locks, which may be of different types; *jalandhara bandha*-the chin lock, *uddiyana bandha*-the abdominal lock, and *mulabandha*-the anal lock.

Chin Lock (*Jalandhara bandha*)

Internal carotid arteries, situated on both sides of the neck that are responsible for blood supply of the brain. If the chin lock is used to apply conscious pressure to these arteries, the nerve impulses traveling to the brain fade the body consciousness and bring about a trance like condition. Such stimulation is associated with decrease in heart rate and conscious control of *vijnani nadi*, the channel of consciousness. It has been mentioned in *sivasamhita* that by the application of pressure on the carotid sinus nerves, a blissful state of mind may be experienced. If the chin lock is practiced both during inhalation and exhalation, the control of the channel of consciousness or *vijnani nadi* turns easy. Long practice for years may be needed to control chin lock. After deep inhalation, the air in the lungs wants to rush out if the chin lock is not applied, after the retention of the breath, despite the glottis being kept closed. The air rushes through the auditory tubes resulting in manipulations in the ears—in the inner ear. It is possible that such manipulations by chin lock in the inner ear could be useful for the treatment of ear disorders. The chin lock is properly applied after closing the glottis, for easy practice of *kumbhaka*. Practice of *jalandhara bandha*, yogis bring about conscious control of this phenomenon and thus attain a state of joy before doing meditation. Putting pressure on the carotid arteries may provide yogic anesthesia to the person for minor surgery. The martial art experts, in the schools of Kung Fu also use this technique whenever necessary.

Abdominal Lift (*Uddiyana bandha*)

This is an exercise involving the diaphragm, ribs and the abdominal muscles. It can be practiced either in standing or sitting in one of meditation postures. If it is practiced in standing position, the feet are kept two feet apart and spine straight, then the knees are bend slightly and lean forward from the waist far enough to place the palms of the hands just above the knees. After achieving this posture, exhale completely and place the chin on the hollow of the throat, then suck the abdominal muscles in and up without inhaling, pulling the novel toward the spine. These procedures pull the diaphragm up and create a cavity in the front side of the abdomen under the rib cage. There would be slight curving in the back and this position is maintained as long as it remains comfortable and tolerable. Now slowly inhale and relax. It is important not to force the abdominal muscles outward. The use of force should be gentle, pulling the muscles in and upward. Contraindications for not practicing this exercise are hypertension, hiatal hernia, ulcers, heart diseases, menstruation, or pregnancy. This exercise is the best for disease of the abdominal organs.

Anus Lock (*mulabandha*)

In this exercise both the internal or external muscles of the sphincters of the anus are contracted and then held. This anal lock may be practiced during pranayama and meditation.

Conclusion

Pranayama, the science of controlled, conscious expansion of Prana (the life force) is the fourth limb of Classical Yoga. The art and science of Pranayama has immense therapeutic potential in a wide range of psychosomatic disorders such as diabetes, hypertension and asthma. It can be used either as a monotherapy or in combination with Asanas and other aspects of Yoga. Pranayama is of vital importance to any sincere Yoga practitioner trying to achieve the state of Yoga. Unless the mind is controlled, the higher aspects of Yoga are not possible and the best and only way to really control the mind is by regular, dedicated and determined practice of Pranayama with awareness, consciousness and purity of thought, word and deed. These are the 8 best types of *pranayamas* which help in anti-aging and making a person look and feel younger. Apart from doing these breathing exercises, it is also important to stay positive and exercise regularly. Healthy eating habits and a healthy lifestyle are also equally important. When practiced on a daily basis, *Pranayama* helps to reduce various skin disorders like eczema, scleroderma and psoriasis. Practice Pranayama before or after every yoga session for better skin. For healthy and young skin, proper blood circulation is necessary. One often starts to look older or get wrinkles if the lifestyle or choice of food is poor and if the person is experiencing stress and anxiety. Due to these reasons, there can be less glow and freshness on the face over time. Treating these skin problems with costly chemical products can be harmful for the skin and is often only a temporary solution. The most effective natural way to keep skin young and healthy apart from yoga and massage is *pranayama*. It helps increase blood circulation and will create glowing skin. *Pranayama* energizes both body and mind and releases anxiety. It also helps in removing energy blocks. *Pranayama* calms the mind and purifies the blood. In this way, *Pranayama* helps in getting youthful, glowing and healthy skin. Combine the 8 *pranayamas* here and practice them regularly to reduce aging and keep your skin forever young.

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