

Why Do Pranayama?

by Patton Sarley (Dinabandhu)

Physical well-being. Lightness of heart. Clarity of mind. Inner and outer health and fulfillment. Weight loss. Purpose, intention, and direction. If you could produce these sorts of results without any cost, equipment, office visits, travel, or special talent, would you be interested? If all it took was 30 minutes a day, would you take the next step?

Pranayama is the art and science of yogic breathing techniques, and these techniques will reliably produce the benefits listed above. Things that sound too good to be true—the latest fad diet, get-rich-quick schemes—usually are. But yogic breathing exercises actually deliver the benefits they promise, and this article is aimed at helping you understand why and how.

Defining our Terms

It should come as no surprise that breathing is one of the most important and intricate activities we engage in. In many ways, our conscious life begins with our first breath and ends with our last. Cellular respiration, the source of all our physical energy and expression in the world, is dependent on a constant flow of oxygen being delivered to each cell and carbon dioxide being taken away. Every emotional state we experience has a corresponding pattern of breathing associated with it. Even the elemental rhythm of our heartbeat is intimately connected with the action of our lungs. The word “inspiration” itself refers to both the act of breathing in as well as the state of being filled with spirit and energy.

Because yoga comes from India, many of its terms sound foreign to Western minds and can make the practices seem esoteric or inaccessible. In reality, pranayama is as easy to practice as our next breath. “Pranayama” is a Sanskrit word made up of two halves, “prana” and “yama” (or “ayama”), and is most often translated to mean “mastery of the life force”, or sometimes, “removal of obstacles to free the flow of life force.” In yoga, the life force, known as prana, refers to the energy that animates, controls, and permeates the world in and around us. Digesting our food, changing our heart rate in response to exercise, and fighting off infections are all highly complex and variable tasks, yet each of them happen spontaneously, effortlessly, and automatically through the functions of prana. This same force is behind great migrations, the interdependence of species, and the changing of seasons. As the naturalist John Muir said, “Tug on anything at all and you’ll find it connected to everything else in the universe.” Prana is this active and intelligent force connecting everything. And pranayama is the exploration of how we can tap into this universal potential.

The aim of both yoga in general and pranayama in particular is to help us participate in the nearly unlimited intelligence of the life force so that we can share in its capacities. Instead of fighting nature, we gradually become able to partner with it. When the ancient seers began their

study of the potential of being human thousands of years ago, they soon saw that working with the breath could yield impressive results toward greater aliveness, self-expression, and power. The breath is one of the easiest doorways into the capabilities of the human nervous system because it touches every aspect of our being: physical, physiological, psychoemotional, and spiritual.

Physical Effects: Organ Toning and More

The first step in pranayama is training ourselves to use the entire range of our physical breathing apparatus. This means experiencing full yogic breathing—coordinating the lower, middle, and upper parts of the breath process—as well as learning to attenuate the outgoing breath. You can learn this type of breath from any qualified yoga instructor.

When we take full, slow, deep breaths through the nose, using all three sections of our breathing apparatus and drawing out the exhalation longer than the inhalation, a number of important things start to happen in our body. First, nose breathing filters the air, warms it, and keeps it moist. Thus the air arrives in the lungs in the best condition to provide efficient transfer of oxygen and carbon dioxide. This is no small thing. Anyone who deals with breathing difficulties will tell you just how much dusty, dry, cold air aggravates their challenges. In addition, full breathing through the nose also stimulates some of the subtle nerve structures, beginning the process of bringing light and aliveness to our inner realms (more on this later).

A full breath with the exhalation longer than the inhalation also has significant impact on the processes of the abdominal cavity, where all of our main organs are located. As the diaphragm moves up and down, each of our abdominal organs moves also, sliding against one another, changing shape, tugging on its attachment tendons and fascia, and sloshing around any liquid or food it contains. These physical actions are crucial to the health of our organs, and thus to our quality of life.

A colleague of mine emphasizes that “life is motion.” Since many of us spend too much time sitting, we don’t get the movement we need to promote optimal health, especially in our abdominal cavity. Sitting at a desk, table, or in a padded television chair undermines proper breathing by promoting a “hunched over” or compressed posture that pinches the abdomen. This compromised posture leads to an over reliance on getting our breath from the middle and upper parts of our lungs, using our diaphragm inefficiently, and costing us the health-producing movement of our key organs. It may sound odd to credit a regular pranayama practice with improving both digestion and elimination, but if you practice regularly, you will see that this is what happens.

When we practice full yogic breathing, we also increase the velocity of the fluids moving through all the tissues in our body, thus promoting an increase in nutrition to the cells, more efficient waste removal, and better immune defense. Scientists estimate that we have more than two gallons of fluid in our body that is not contained within our cells but around our blood vessels,

organs, and cells. When the breath moves in and out, it produces alternating saturating and wringing effects on our tissues and this “interstitial fluid.” Similar to cleaning a dirty sponge in a sink, this action has a significant cleansing effect.

The alternating squeezing and soaking process helps the lymph system in particular. Our lymph system is tasked with fighting infections and overall detoxification. This function requires fluid transport, but the lymph system itself does not contain a primary pump like the heart, so any activity that promotes fluid movement becomes crucial. Complete yogic breathing is one of the best facilitators of this necessary transport.

The last physical benefit of pranayama practice is that full yogic breathing tends to empty the lungs completely. This has two important consequences. First, this means that the bottom third of the lungs gets a thorough airing when we do pranayama exercises. Like the bottom of any container, gravity will tend to accumulate material there. When we use our lungs completely on a regular basis, we have a better chance of keeping the bottom third of our lungs cleaner. Second, regular practice of a full-breath technique will keep the tissues of the lower lungs more nourished, flexible, and free of toxins. Just like the heart can starve for blood when the arteries harden and narrow, the lower lung tissue can starve for nutrients and oxygen when it is insufficiently used and seldom moved.

Physiological Effects

Most of us have heard of the “fight or flight” response, the automatic reaction that happens in difficult or threatening situations. This response comes from our unconscious nervous system (the autonomic nervous system), which actually consists of two halves: the sympathetic system and the parasympathetic system. The sympathetic system helps us get “pumped up” or energized to deal with external demands or threats, and is thus the originator of the stress response. The parasympathetic system moderates or de-energizes the body, and is thus the originator of the relaxation response. In a healthy system, these two halves of our autonomic nervous system should turn off and on regularly and in response to life events.

Unfortunately, our nervous systems do not always function in a healthy way. In our modern world, it is well established that we overstimulate our sympathetic nervous system and understimulate our parasympathetic nervous system—with disastrous impacts on our health. Living with an overamped sympathetic nervous system in a habitual stress response contributes to almost every domain of illness, from heart disease and hypertension to digestive difficulties, diabetes, backaches, joint pain, autoimmune disorders, and insomnia.

A daily pranayama practice stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system as well or better than any other activity—you can test this yourself by starting a regular practice and noticing that at some point during your breathing session your salivary glands will kick in and fill your mouth with saliva, one of the key indicators of parasympathetic activity. Taking time each day to consciously activate the parasympathetic nervous system will, over time, reprogram our bodies’

habitual pull toward an overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system and significantly reduce the health risks associated with that overstimulation.

Psychoemotional Effects

Do you remember your parents or grandparents telling you to take 10 deep breaths when you got angry and before you acted on that anger? This folk wisdom endures because it has a solid base in science—and begins to demonstrate some of the most powerful benefits of pranayama: that the breath pattern will automatically change when the emotional pattern changes. We breathe in one pattern when we're joyous, another when we're angry, another when we're depressed, another when we're distracted, and so on. This presents an important opportunity.

When we spend several minutes a day consciously regulating our breath, we break our unconscious patterns of breathing—and thus the unconscious emotional patterns that underpin them. This is a very important phenomenon. We function best when we are flexible, agile, and able to flow with the changes that life brings. Unfortunately, many of us fall into habits of thinking and feeling that come to dominate our consciousness, even when they are out of step with what life is presenting. We wind up narrowing the range of our emotional and cognitive experience and become more rigid, more habitual, and less creative. Daily practice of breath regulation works against this ossifying tendency. Just as many times computer glitches can be solved simply by rebooting the hard drive, so too can habitual emotional glitches be solved simply by regularly changing the patterns of our breath.

One of the most important psychoemotional benefits of practicing breath regulation is the confidence it gives practitioners to self-regulate in other areas of their lives. Because pranayama takes focus, overall concentration increases as well. Since you are stimulating the relaxation response, you are able to be calmer in many areas of life. Since you are increasing oxygen levels in your blood each day, your cellular respiration becomes more efficient and your energy levels start to build. Because you are starting to see success in so many areas, your self-confidence gets a boost and that growth in confidence brings a higher level of performance, thus further bolstering self-confidence. Pranayama practice is the priming mechanism for the pump that starts the virtuous cycle of feeling good about yourself.

Over time, pranayama practice also generates awareness of the more subtle layers of interconnection between our choices and their effects. Many people doubt that such simple exercises can produce the results I am talking about, but those who actually practice have no doubts whatsoever, including the yogis who have confirmed this over and over for thousands of years. Think about it—if it weren't effective, would humans have bothered to keep this knowledge alive as long as they have? Try it for yourself.

Spiritual Effects

Looking at the catalog of the benefits of pranayama practice in these domains, there is more than enough inspiration to begin practicing, but the real payoff goes beyond these.

Western science focuses on the gross nervous system, but yogic wisdom always posited the existence of a matching subtle nervous system. Full pranayama practice aims to illuminate and enliven this subtle nervous system. Yoga teaches that the human nervous system has potentials far beyond the normal regulation of the physical and mental bodies. In yoga, the human nervous system is like a set of antennae that can focus and channel the creative power of the universe into expression in a single life.

Pranayama practice polishes the capacity of the nervous system to conduct this cosmic creative potential into real, tangible manifestation. It is similar to increasing the capacity of a wire inside a lightbulb so that it can handle more wattage without burning out. When the wire can handle more wattage, it produces more light and heat. When we practice pranayama every day, our subtle wiring gradually becomes stronger and we begin to fill up with light and energy. In many ways, this is all we really mean when we talk about being “enlightened.” There is really no end point, just a gradually increasing capability of our nervous system to handle all forms of energy.

As the light body is gradually polished and enlivened, we also develop a much richer inner life and a deep sense of spiritual balance. When pranayama is followed by a short period of meditation, the connection to inner stillness increases by leaps and bounds and will ultimately create the period of rest, integration, and quietness that we crave in our practice.

In the end, breath, movement, and energy is life, and life is breath, movement, and energy. The yogic practice of pranayama combines all of these elements into a single integrative experience that is well worth the investment and one that will absolutely generate both inner aliveness and resilience and a powerful outward expression. The only thing you need to do is practice each day.

Why not get started?

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