Breathing exercises – pranayama

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Breathing is the most accessible skill for calm and cheerfulness. Here is how to learn complete breathing and bring it into every day.



Note. We do the exercises slowly and without strain. If discomfort or dizziness appears, we breathe normally. With heart and lung difficulties, high blood pressure and in pregnancy we practise without holding the breath. The effects described come from the experience of people who treated their difficulties with yoga and kept their health.

Breathing is one of the few functions that we perform both unconsciously and consciously. That is why it is a natural beginning for work on ourselves: when we change the way we breathe, the way we feel changes too.

What breathing can give you

Research shows that slow breathing (fewer than ten breaths a minute) brings a feeling of comfort, relaxation and alertness [1][2]. Yogic breathing is safe when practised with an experienced teacher [4].

Breathing links several systems of the body. The **respiratory system** gets a deeper and more even breath, the **cardiovascular system** a calm heart rhythm [2], and the **nervous system** shifts into a state of relaxation and alertness [1]. Our starting point is that the nervous system, through hormones, also acts on the **endocrine system**, which keeps all the others in step; that is why calm, regular breathing changes the whole body.

Rhythm

Rhythm is the most important thing in every breathing exercise. We breathe to a beat and count a set number of heartbeats. Yoginis and yogis devoted to practice take the heartbeat as a measure for controlling the breath: they feel the pulse and count the inhale and exhale by it [5][6]. A beginner breathes in for six beats, holds for three, breathes out for six, then pauses for three beats. Later the inhale and exhale are lengthened up to about fifteen beats, and rhythm matters more than length [6]. We begin every exercise with a strong exhale.

Complete breathing

Complete breathing is the basis of all the other exercises. It joins three parts into one unbroken, wave-like movement: lower (abdominal), middle (rib) and upper (collarbone) breathing. It gives a feeling of peace and security [5]. In time, let it become your usual way of breathing, whenever it feels pleasant.

How to do it. Sit, stand or lie down. After an exhale, breathe in slowly through the nose and count six heartbeats (more later). First the belly swells, then the ribs widen, and last the collarbones rise. Breathe out in the same order, for the same number of beats: draw the belly in, bring the ribs together and lower the shoulders, while the air slowly leaves through the nose. Between the inhale and exhale you can hold the breath briefly, as long as it is pleasant.

A first exercise: sigh breathing

This is the best-studied exercise. Breathe in through the nose to about half, add a second short breath in through the nose so that the lungs are full, then breathe out long and slowly through the mouth, longer than you breathed in. Repeat for five minutes a day. In a trial with 108 adults, people who practised sigh breathing for five minutes every day for a month gained more in positive feelings than those who practised mindfulness meditation [3].

How to bring breathing exercises into every day

- **Five minutes in the morning.** Complete breathing before breakfast, with the window open.
- **A short pause in the middle of the day.** A few deep exhales when you feel tension.

- **A long exhale in the evening.** Breathe out for longer than you breathe in and relax the shoulders.
- **Practise with someone.** Breathing is learned most easily with guidance; classes are online, and live by arrangement in Loznica.

Abdominal breathing

How to do it. Standing, sitting or lying down, we direct our attention to the area around the navel. As we breathe out, we draw in the belly. Then we breathe in slowly through the nose, relaxing the diaphragm, and the belly gently swells, so that the lower part of the lungs fills with air. On the exhale we draw the belly in as far as possible and the air leaves through the nose. Only the belly moves, while the chest stays still.

Effect. Abdominal breathing relaxes, calms and gently massages the digestive organs and the glands that govern their work, which helps digestion [5].

Middle (rib) breathing

How to do it. We direct our attention to the ribs. After an exhale we breathe in slowly through the nose and widen the ribs to both sides. On the exhale we bring the ribs together and the air leaves through the nose. The middle part of the lungs is filled, while the belly and shoulders stay still.

Upper (collarbone) breathing

How to do it. We direct our attention to the tops of the lungs. After an exhale we breathe in slowly, raise the collarbones and shoulders, and the air fills the upper part of the lungs through the nose. On the exhale we slowly lower the shoulders. The belly and the middle of the chest stay still.

Complete three-layer breathing

In complete breathing the lower, middle and upper parts of the lungs take part in the movement evenly. In many practitioners general well-being improves after a few weeks [5].

Effect. A feeling of peace, good ventilation of the lungs, calming of the nervous system, slowing of the heart rate and stimulation of digestion, with a balanced action of the glands that govern the heart and the digestive organs [5].

Alternate nostril breathing (nadi shodhana)

How to do it. We sit upright with the shoulders relaxed. With the right thumb we close the right nostril and breathe in slowly through the left, counting four heartbeats. Then with the ring finger we close the left nostril, open the right and breathe out through it for the same number of beats. We breathe in through the right, close it, breathe out through the left. That is one round. We begin with five rounds, and later we can lengthen the exhale. The breathing is quiet, without strain.

Effect. It calms the nervous system and the heart and stimulates attention. A review of 44 trials shows a favourable effect on the nervous and cardiopulmonary systems and on attention, with the note that further research is needed in ill people [7]. Whoever knows about their health difficulties practises in line with the recommendations of their doctor; whoever does not yet know, often notices for the first time, in attention to the breath and the body, what they need.

Cleansing breathing

How to do it. Standing with the legs apart, we breathe in slowly through the nose as in complete breathing. When the lungs are full, we press the lips firmly against the teeth so that only a small, narrow opening remains, and through it we push the air out in short, broken bursts. This takes a great effort from the muscles of the belly, the diaphragm and the intercostal muscles; if we let the air out easily, the exercise loses its meaning. We do it slowly, at most a few repetitions, and stop as soon as we feel dizzy.

Effect. It cleanses the lungs of air breathed in in poorly ventilated rooms [5].

Breathing to strengthen the nerves

How to do it. Standing with the legs apart, after an exhale we breathe in slowly and raise both arms in front of us to shoulder height, palms up. We clench the fists and, holding the breath, quickly draw them towards the shoulders, stretch the arms out again, quickly bring them back again and repeat the movement once more. On the exhale we relax the arms and rest bent forward. We stretch the arms out slowly and with effort, as if overcoming resistance, so that they tremble. Whoever cannot hold the breath three times should do the movement twice.

Effect. It strengthens the feeling of resilience and confidence in public appearances [5].

“Ha” breathing in a standing position

How to do it. In a straddle stance we breathe in as in complete breathing and slowly raise the arms above the head. We hold the breath for a few seconds, then bend suddenly forward, relax the arms and breathe out strongly through the mouth with the sound “ha”. We do not make the sound with the vocal cords, but with a fast stream of air. Then, breathing in slowly, we straighten up with the arms above the head, then breathe out slowly through the nose and lower the arms. We do the bend carefully; whoever has back problems, high blood pressure or dizziness should leave the exercise out or adapt it.

Effect. A feeling of freshness and cleansing. Recommended to those who work in tense circumstances, to relieve themselves of negative impressions after work [5].

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

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