



THOUGHTS

A relaxed body and focused heart-mind bring stability and ease.

Yoga postures can transform the state of my body
and heart-mind into one that is finer and subtler.

I will balance flexibility with firmness in all aspects of my life.

EXERCISES

If you are not comfortable sitting on the floor for
meditation, try sitting in a chair. See if you are able to relax
more while still keeping your torso from slouching.

When sitting for meditation on the floor, notice what
hurts (like your hips or knees). Find out what specific
postures will help you sit without pain. Then give
emphasis to those postures in your practice.

The next time you are in a conversation with others,
notice which of your opinions may be too rigid or
too loose. What can you do to balance those?

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PRĀṆĀYĀMA

Regulation of Breath

प्राणायाम

A healthy mind has an easy breath.

ANONYMOUS

STABILIZING AND REFINING *PRĀṆA*, our life force, is the
centerpiece of yoga practice. As the fourth of the eight limbs,
prāṇāyāma is where we begin to work with our subtle body via
the breath. *Prāṇa*, equivalent to *chi* in Chinese, is responsible
for all movement in the body and directly influences our physical,
mental, and emotional health. When *prāṇa* flows smoothly, our
attention can focus and our heart-mind can calm down.

Life itself is defined by the existence of *prāṇa*; the word
prāṇa means “life force” or “breath.” When a baby is born,
everyone waits for its first breath or utterance, an indication
that its individual life (apart from the mother) has begun. After
a person’s last breath, *prāṇa* leaves the body at the time of
death. One is not declared dead until the heart stops, the
breath stops, and the pupils of the eyes are dilated and unre-
sponsive. These symptoms indicate there is not enough *prāṇa*
in the body to sustain life.

Prāṇa is the energetic link that carries sensory information in and action impulses out of the human system. *Prāṇa* moves everything in the body, including blood, lymph, nerve impulses, and ions. It also moves within our subtle energy points (*marma-s*), energy channels (*nāḍī-s*), and energy centers (*cakra-s*).

The mind influences the body, and vice versa, through the *prāṇa* flowing in the nervous system, the breath, and the subtle energy channels. Wherever the mind goes, the *prāṇa* follows. In other words, wherever our attention is directed, our life force is projected. This means that our thoughts can affect our body via the nervous system. Studies have shown that the power of a focused mind, through visualization or a complete shift in attitude, can significantly alter the course of disease. If we can control our life force, we can improve our overall health and well-being.

Prāṇa can even emanate from the body when we concentrate our attention. Thoughts are considered to be waves of *prāṇa* that have an ever so subtle effect on their destination. For example, I have noticed that when my daughter is sleeping and I think about her waking up, she stirs in her sleep. You may have experienced someone turning their head toward you after you have been looking at them from a distance, trying to get their attention.

Breath is a physical manifestation of *prāṇa*, the life force that connects all aspects of perception. When the life force is obstructed, the breath becomes irregular. For example, when we are frightened, our *prāṇa* is shocked, causing us to gasp. If we are stressed, taking a few deep breaths relaxes our body and calms our mind.

Prāṇāyāma calms the nervous system by means of breathing exercises that control and regulate the breath. Irregular breathing patterns and restlessness indicate blockages to the flow of *prāṇa* and result from the nine obstacles to practice (*antarāya-s*). *Prāṇāyāma* balances and slows down the breath, which helps

to clarify the heart-mind (*citta-prasādana*) and prepare it for the journey inward (*saṁyama*). *Prāṇāyāma* comprises both the practices involving the breath and the resulting breath regulation and control. Breathing exercises manipulate the *prāṇa* and directly affect the body and the mind through the nervous system, so they have the potential to be very helpful or very harmful. It is safest to learn *prāṇāyāma* from an experienced teacher.

According to the *sūtra-s*, there are three primary *prāṇāyāma* activities: exhalation, inhalation, and retention. Exhalation is relaxing, inhalation is stimulating, and retention is neither. Each activity is done a certain number of times, for a certain duration of time, with our attention directed toward a certain location in the body. The goal of *prāṇāyāma* is to have our breathing become smooth as silk, with no blips.

There is a fourth activity of *prāṇāyāma*, which is really inactivity: stillness of the breath, as if the air in the lungs were passively mixing with the air outside. This state occurs during the practice of *saṁyama*.

Prāṇāyāma, through its effects on the physical body and the mind, helps stabilize and calm them. Practicing this part of yoga helps us bring our attention away from sensory stimuli (*pratyābhāra*) and toward a point of focus. From there, we turn inward, practicing the inner limbs of yoga (*saṁyama*), and gradually experience more and more of a connection with that divine inner light of awareness that rests inside of our core.



THOUGHTS

When *prāṇa* flows quietly, evenly, and unimpeded, we are able to focus, and our inner light is revealed.

I can ascertain the irregularities in my breathing and take steps to even them out.

I will recondition my breathing until it becomes long, smooth, and subtle.

EXERCISES

During your *āsana* sequence, pay attention to your breath within each posture. Notice if there are any irregularities and in what positions they occur.

Sit quietly and follow your breathing pattern. Notice how easy it is to change your breath. See if you can breathe with as little movement as possible.

Seek out an experienced teacher of *prāṇāyāma* and study under their guidance.

PART 5 INNER DEVELOPMENT
