

Suggestions for pranayama practice

Breath work should be an integral part of your yoga practice, and the following are just a few suggestions on how to practice with the breath.

Anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing) meditation

The first step is to become (more) aware of your natural breath through the practice of Anapanasati (mindfulness of breathing) meditation. This practice is an important preliminary step to the practice of pranayama, and should also be developed alongside pranayama practice, as the two practices support and complement one another. When Anapanasati is done alongside pranayama, it is advisable to focus on the movements of the chest and the abdomen, rather than placing one's attention at entrance of the nostrils. Initially, the easiest is to simply pay attention to the rhythm of your breath. This means not just the overall length of the breath (short / long, deep / shallow) but also its spacing (i.e. the length of each component: inhalation, exhalation and pauses). Later, other aspects of the breath such as its location (movement) and its quality (texture, flow) can also be explored in anapanasati practice, and the understanding of the working of the breath gained through this observation can be put to good use in pranayama practice.

Sama vritti pranayama (balancing and extending the breath)

In the Sama Vritti pranayama practice, the breath is controlled in order to make the inhalation and the exhalation exactly the same length. Initially, work from the natural breath and extend the part (inhalation or exhalation) that is naturally the shortest to make it as long as the longest part. Once balancing inhalation and exhalation is comfortable, both "sides" of the breath can be extended by slowing down the flow of the breath and by deepening it. When extending the breath, it should always remain smooth and relaxed. Once you can comfortably double the length of your natural breath, you can move on to the more challenging practice of Visama Vritti Pranayama.

Visama Vritti Pranayama (the long breath)

In the Visama Vritti Pranayama practice, the breath is controlled in order to make the exhalation exactly twice as long as the inhalation. Again, work from the natural breath and extend the exhalation to make it twice as long as the natural inhalation. In the first stage of the practice, the inhalation is kept flowing naturally, only the exhalation is controlled. Once this is easily achieved, the breath can be gradually extended by slowing down the flow of both the inhalation and the exhalation. The breath should be lengthened gradually, always paying attention to its quality, which must remain smooth and relaxed, especially the beginning of the inhalation. A good rule of thumb is that the rhythm of the breath should be comfortable enough to be kept going almost indefinitely. Recovery breaths are a warning sign that the practice is not sustainable.

Nadi sodana (alternate nostril breathing)

The benefits of Nadi sodana practice are so many and its contra-indication so few that it's probably the best classical pranayama to start with.

Combining Nadi Sodana with Visama Vritti (i.e. practising on a 1-2 ratio) is a challenging practice, so it may be necessary to go back to Sama Vritti when you are starting with it, but as soon as possible, go back to Visama Vritti.

Further reading:

- Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing by Thich Nhat Hanh
- Prana and Pranayama by the Bihar School of yoga
- Moving into meditation, by Anne Cushman

Other resources:

- The Practice section of the Satiyoga.eu website has useful pranayama practice guidelines
- More information on the study from the University of Louvain in Belgium can be found at: <https://satiyoga.eu/blog/breathemotions.php>