



## Prescriptions for Pranayama

*YJ profiles the pranayama practices of six yoga traditions and finds differences ranging from the subtle to the profound.*

By Claudia Cummins

The elegant shapes and impressive contortions of the asanas may be the most eye-catching element of hatha yoga, but yoga masters will tell you they're hardly the point of practice. According to yoga philosophy, the postures are merely preludes to deeper states of meditation that lead us toward enlightenment, where our minds grow perfectly still and our lives grow infinitely big. But just how do we make the leap from Downward Dog to samadhi? Ancient yoga texts give us a clear answer: Breathe like a yogi.

Pranayama, the formal practice of controlling the breath, lies at the heart of yoga. It has a mysterious power to soothe and revitalize a tired body, a flagging spirit, or a wild mind. The ancient sages taught that prana, the vital force circulating through us, can be cultivated and channeled through a panoply of breathing exercises. In the process, the mind is calmed, rejuvenated, and uplifted. Pranayama serves as an important bridge between the outward, active practices of yoga--like asana--and the internal, surrendering practices that lead us into deeper states of meditation.

"My first American yoga teacher, a guy named Brad Ramsey, used to say that doing an asana practice without a pranayama practice developed what he called the Baby Huey syndrome," says Ashtanga teacher Tim Miller. "Baby Huey was this big cartoon duck who was very strong but kind of stupid. He wore a diaper. Basically what Brad was trying to say was that asana will develop your body but pranayama will develop your mind."

Like Miller, many accomplished yogis will tell you that minding the breath is central to the practice of yoga. But take a tour of a dozen yoga classes in the West and you're likely to discover just as many approaches to pranayama. You may be taught complex techniques with daunting names like Kapalabhati (Skull Shining) and Deergha Swasam (Three-Part Deep Breathing) before you even strike your first pose. You may find breathing practices intermingled with the practice of the postures. Or you may be told that pranayama is so advanced



and subtle that you shouldn't bother with it until you're well versed in the intricacies of inversions and forward bends.

So what's a yogi to do? Breathe deep into the belly or high up into the chest? Make a sound so loud the walls shake or keep the breath as quiet as a whisper? Practice breathing techniques on your own or weave them throughout your existing asana practice? Dive into pranayama from the get-go or wait until you can touch your toes? To help answer these questions and sample the range of yogic breathing, we asked experts from six yoga traditions to share their approaches to pranayama.

### ***INTEGRAL Connecting Movement with Meditation***

In the integral yoga tradition propounded by Swami Satchidananda, pranayama is incorporated into every yoga class. A typical session starts with asana, moves on to pranayama, and ends with seated meditation. "A hatha yoga class in the Integral Yoga system systematically takes the person deeper," says Swami Karunananda, a senior Integral Yoga teacher. "Asana is meditation on the body, pranayama is meditation on the breath and subtle energy currents within us, and then we work with the mind directly, with the ultimate aim of transcending body and mind and experiencing the higher Self."

While practicing asana, students are advised when to inhale and exhale, but no additional manipulation of the breath is introduced. Within the pranayama portion of the class--which may comprise 15 minutes of a 90-minute session--students sit in a comfortable cross-legged posture with their eyes closed.

Three basic pranayama techniques are routinely taught to beginners: Deergha Swasam; Kapalabhati, or rapid diaphragmatic breathing; and Nadi Suddhi, Integral Yoga's name for alternate nostril breathing. In Deergha Swasam, students are instructed to breathe slowly and deeply while envisioning that they are filling their lungs from bottom to top--first by expanding the abdomen, then the middle rib cage, and finally the upper chest. When exhaling, students envision the breath emptying in reverse, from top to bottom, pulling in the abdomen slightly at the end to empty the lungs completely.



"Three-part deep breathing is the foundation of all the yogic breathing techniques," Karunananda says. "Studies have shown that you can take in and give out seven times as much air--that means seven times as much oxygen, seven times as much prana--in a three-part deep breath than in a shallow breath."

In the Integral tradition, Kapalabhati consists of multiple rounds of rapid breathing in which the breath is forcefully expelled from the lungs with a strong inward thrust of the abdomen. Students might start out with one round of 15 breaths in quick succession and build up to several hundred breaths in one round. In Nadi Suddhi, the fingers and thumb of the right hand are used to close off first one nostril and then the other. This pranayama starts with an exhalation and an inhalation through the left nostril, followed by a full breath through the right, with the whole pattern repeated several times.

Instruction in the breathing practices is systemized in the Integral system, with each technique practiced for a specific duration or number of rounds in one session. As students progress, they are taught to incorporate specific breathing ratios--inhaling for a count of 10, for example, while exhaling for a count of 20. Students move on to advanced practices only when they meet specific breathing benchmarks along the way, indicating that the nadis, the subtle energy channels of the body, have been sufficiently purified and strengthened.

Only at more advanced levels do students learn to incorporate retention, or breath holding, into pranayama. At this point Jalandhara Bandha, the chin lock, is introduced. Retention is said to be important because "it super-injects prana into the system," says Karunananda, and "builds up tremendous vitality." Students are also sometimes invited to incorporate healing visualizations into this practice. "As you inhale you can visualize that you're drawing into yourself unlimited quantities of prana--pure, healing, cosmic, divine energy," Karunananda says. "You can picture any form of natural energy that appeals to you. Then on the exhalation, visualize all the toxins, all the impurities, all the problems leaving with the breath."



**KRIPALU**  
***Cultivating Sensitivity and Awareness***

Pranayama is also introduced from the very beginning in the Kripalu tradition. Here, however, breathing exercises are just as likely to be offered before asana practice as after. "I always begin my classes with 10 to 15 minutes of pranayama," says Yoganand, director of advanced yoga teacher training at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts. "I have folks sit down and do pranayama until they're quiet, they're sensitive. If we can feel more when we go into our postures, we're more likely to be aware of our limits and be respectful of the body." Pranayama is almost always taught in a seated position in the Kripalu tradition, with eyes closed and with little emphasis on particular bandhas, or energy locks, until intermediate stages of practice. Students are counseled to follow a slow and gentle approach. Teachers may stop and ask students to note sensations, emotions, and thoughts that come up for them, in order to help them taste more subtle aspects of the practice.

"In Kripalu Yoga, one of the premises is that through developing sensitivity to the body we can learn a lot more about the unconscious drives," Yoganand says. "Breathing is a really integral part of that because unconsciously we choose how much we're going to feel by how much we breathe. When we breathe more deeply, we feel more. So when I'm leading pranayama, I'm primarily encouraging folks to slow down, to release constrictions in breathing and focus on what they feel."

Attention is also paid to the breath during the practice of postures. In beginning asana classes, students are instructed when to inhale and exhale as they enter and release postures, and to simply pay attention to their breath at other times. In more advanced classes, students are encouraged to observe how different postures change their breathing patterns and what feelings arise with these changes. In addition, seasoned students are encouraged to employ a gentle version of Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath), a practice in which the throat is slightly constricted and the breath made softly audible.

In the pranayama portion of the class, beginners usually start with a three-part deep breathing pattern similar to that of Integral Yoga. Beginners are also introduced to the Ujjayi breath during seated pranayama, as well as to Nadi Sodhana, Kripalu's term for alternate



nostril breathing. In addition, Kapalabhati is taught in a particularly slow and steady fashion. "When I teach this," says Yoganand, "I usually have folks visualize that they're blowing out a candle, and then I have them exhale in the same way but through the nose." Students learn to extend this practice gradually, starting with 30 to 40 breaths and adding repetitions as well as speed as they grow more adept.

Only at more advanced levels do students move on to additional pranayama practices, Yoganand says. At this level, students use a centuries-old yoga manual called the Hatha Yoga Pradipika as a guide, mastering the subtleties of the eight formal pranayama practices detailed in this text. "The pranayama is to make you more sensitive," says Yoganand. "As folks become more aware of sensations and feelings, there's a real possibility for personal growth and integration."

## **ASHTANGA**

### ***Unifying Action, Breath, and Attention***

Join a workshop with students from different yoga traditions and you can pick out Ashtanga practitioners with your eyes closed. They're the ones who sound like Darth Vader even when they're standing in Tadasana. That's because they're practicing Ujjayi breathing, which is carried all the way through the vigorous series of postures in this tradition.

Ashtanga teachers say the deep and rhythmic breath fuels the inner energetic flames, heating and healing the body. Just as importantly, Ujjayi breathing keeps the mind focused. By returning again and again to the subtle sound of this breath, the mind is forced to concentrate and become quiet. "Since the Ashtanga practice is very breath-oriented, in a sense you're doing a kind of pranayama from the moment you begin the practice," says Tim Miller, who has been teaching this approach to yoga for more than two decades.

In the Ashtanga tradition Ujjayi breathing is taught in concert with both Mula Bandha (Root Lock) and Uddiyana Bandha (Abdominal Lock). This means that while breathing, the pelvic floor and the belly are gently drawn inward and upward so that the breath is directed into the upper chest. When inhaling, students are instructed to expand the lower chest first, then the middle rib cage, and finally the upper chest.



## Teacher Training

Seated pranayama practices are also a part of this tradition, although Miller says that Pattabhi Jois, the father of Ashtanga Yoga, hasn't taught it to groups since 1992. Today only a handful of teachers regularly teach this series, which is comprised of six different pranayama techniques. These practices are learned progressively, each one building upon the previous, and are practiced in a seated position with the eyes open. Typically, they are only introduced after students have practiced yoga for three to five years, Miller says, and have mastered at least the Primary Series of Ashtanga postures.

"As Patanjali says in the Yoga Sutra, one should have reasonable mastery of asana first, which means for sitting pranayama practice you need to have a comfortable seat," he says. "Not that people necessarily need to be able to sit in Padmasana [Lotus Pose] for 45 minutes, but at least they have to be able to sit in an upright position where they can be relatively still." In the first pranayama technique, students practice Ujjayi breathing while adding a pause at the end of the exhalation, a pattern called Bahya Kumbhaka. Then they reverse that pattern and pause at the end of the inhalation, a pattern called Antara Kumbhaka. Once mastered, these practices are integrated into a single sequence: three Ujjayi breaths with no breath holding, three Ujjayi breaths with exhalation retention, and then three Ujjayi breaths with inhalation retention. Mula Bandha and Uddiyana Bandha are engaged throughout, and Jalandhara Bandha, the Chin Lock, is added only during the inhalation retention.

The second practice in the Ashtanga sequence combines the retentions learned in the first sequence into each breath cycle, so that the breath is held after both the inhalation and the exhalation. The third sequence builds on the second, this time adding alternate nostril breathing, and the fourth incorporates Bhastrika (Bellows Breath), a rapid, forceful, diaphragmatic breathing that's similar to the practice Integral Yoga calls Kapalabhati. The more advanced practices build upon the first four in ever more complicated and demanding patterns.

"I think a lot of people are scared off by pranayama, and yet personally I think it's the most important part of yoga," Miller says. "People spend all those years making a 'good seat' with asana practice. At some point I hope they're going to use it."



## **IYENGAR**

### ***Developing Precision, Power, and Subtlety***

Like Ashtanga yoga, the Iyengar tradition takes seriously Patanjali's counsel that pranayama should be introduced only after a student is firmly grounded in asana. In this approach, formal breathing practices are separated from asana and are introduced in a slow and methodical fashion. Mary Dunn, a senior teacher in the Iyengar tradition, says students are ready to begin pranayama when they can practice deep relaxation in Savasana (Corpse Pose) with a calm and attentive mind. "They have to really be able to go inward and not just drop off into sleep," she says. "And they have to have a refined place where they can stop and simply be--not in an action or in the imagination, but in recognition of their internal state."

Pranayama is introduced in a reclining position, with the chest and head supported, so students can focus on the breath without the distraction of needing to maintain proper posture. Precise directions are offered to ensure that basic aspects of yogic breathing are well understood before students move on to more strenuous practices. True to Iyengar's "Come watch" approach, it's not uncommon to see 40 students fervently gazing at their teacher's rib cage, watching the instructor point to the precise area of the chest that should be engaged in any given phase of the breath.

Fundamental breathing awareness is introduced first, with students guided to observe the rhythm and texture of inhalation and exhalation. Ujjayi breathing is then introduced, first extending the breath on the exhalation and then reversing that pattern, lengthening the inhalation while exhaling normally. The belly is kept passive, and the lower ribs are activated first, followed by the middle ribs, and finally the upper chest--as if filling the chest from the bottom to top. Even when exhaling, emphasis is placed on maintaining an expansive quality to the rib cage.

The practice of Viloma Pranayama (Stop-Action Breathing) is also introduced early on. Here, a number of pauses are interspersed into the breath--first during the exhalation, then during the inhalation, and finally during both. Dunn says this teaches students how to direct the breath into specific areas of the chest, ensuring that the entire rib cage is fully activated while breathing deeply. "Viloma allows you to work on a piece of the breath at a time, and it also allows you to be



more subtle in terms of placement, developing steadiness, control, and inwardness.”

Once seated pranayama is introduced, Iyengar teachers focus on maintaining a balanced posture, starting out with a well-supported Sukhasana, or simple cross-legged posture, with the hips elevated on folded blankets. Specific breathing practices are introduced with the same methodical approach as when students lie down for pranayama, and in a similar sequence. Special emphasis is placed on Jalandhara Bandha, which Dunn says should be maintained throughout pranayama practice to protect the heart from strain.

At more advanced levels of practice, students incorporate Kumbhaka (Breath Retention) into Ujjayi and Viloma techniques, and are introduced to alternate nostril breathing. Mula Bandha and Uddiyana Bandha aren't even mentioned until students have reached the most advanced levels of practice. Outside of pranayama practice, Iyengar Yoga has a reputation for focusing more on alignment than breath, and often in a beginning asana class you won't hear much more than "Breathe!" But Dunn says the system attends carefully to the breath during movement, just in somewhat subtle ways. She points to *Light on Yoga*, the bible for Iyengar students, in which B.K.S. Iyengar offers detailed descriptions about breathing during the practice of specific postures. "There are instructions about the breath all the way through. It's the linchpin; it's in every pose," she says. "Once the shape and actions of the asanas are mature, form and breath merge," Dunn adds. "The breath in all its aspects becomes an integral part of the experience of practice."

### **VINIYOGA**

#### ***Creating a Personalized Practice***

In the Viniyoga approach, pioneered by T. Krishnamacharya and his son T.K.V. Desikachar, breathing is the foundation upon which all other practices are built. "For us, even at the level of asana the focus is on the relationship between the flow of the breath and the movement of the spine," says Gary Kraftsow, founder of the American Viniyoga Institute and author of the forthcoming *Yoga for Transformation* (Penguin, 2002). "Even within asana itself our emphasis is to understand very technically, even biomechanically, how to control the flow of the inhalation and the exhalation, and how and when to progressively deepen the flow of the breath."



During asana practice students are instructed to breathe in a way that supports the movement of the spine: usually inhaling during backbending movements, for example, and exhaling during forwardbending and twisting movements. Students are sometimes asked to change the length of the exhalation relative to the inhalation in a particular posture, or even to briefly hold their breath. At other times they are asked to alter their breathing pattern progressively as they repeat a movement. "Let's say we do an asana six times," Kraftsow says. "We can make the exhalation four seconds the first two times, six seconds the second two times, and eight seconds the last two times."

Once students are familiar with the quality and control of the breath during asana, they are introduced to formal breathing practices. Pranayama is generally introduced in a comfortable seated position--occasionally even in a chair--and is adapted in a reclining position for those who aren't able to sit for long periods of time. Long retentions and bandhas aren't introduced until more advanced stages of practice, Kraftsow says, unless there are therapeutic reasons for incorporating them.

In the Viniyoga approach, students are often taught to inhale from the top down, emphasizing an expansion of the upper chest first, then the middle torso, then the lower ribs, and finally the abdomen. "Our view is that chest-to-belly expansion will actually help you deepen the flow of breath," Kraftsow says. "If I'm trying to expand my chest, chest inhalation is going to facilitate that. If I'm trying to straighten my thoracic spine, chest inhalation is going to facilitate that. But there are many contexts in which chest breathing is contraindicated. If I have asthma, chest breathing might aggravate this condition." In such cases, he notes, a student would be offered a different breathing pattern, one that eases rather than exacerbates the condition.

True to the Viniyoga approach, which holds that yoga's practices should be offered in a personalized form that matches the needs of each particular student, Kraftsow says there's no set sequence of pranayama techniques once an essential awareness of the breath has been cultivated. "My first emphasis will be progressively lengthening the flow of the inhalation and the exhalation," he says. "And then the direction I'll go depends on your needs or interests. If you find yourself having low energy in the morning, I'd suggest one thing. If you're



overweight or have high blood pressure, I'd suggest a different pranayama."

And although Viniyoga focuses on adapting the practice to suit the needs of each person, this doesn't mean students can approach the breath in a willy-nilly fashion. "One should be careful unless one has been initiated by someone who knows what they're doing," Kraftsow says. "I would encourage students to seek out a well-qualified and highly trained teacher before going deeply into strong pranayama practices."

### ***KUNDALINI***

#### ***Combining Mudra, Mantra, and Breath***

In Kundalini yoga, introduced to the West by Yogi Bhanjan, breathing practices are integrated into all classes along with asana, chanting, meditation, and other cleansing practices designed to liberate healing flows of energy from the base of the spine. Strong pranayama techniques are fundamental to this approach, and breathing is given greater emphasis than precision of movement or technique. "In Kundalini Yoga, breath is as important as asana," says Kundalini instructor Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa. "That's the root, that's the structure — breathing into a soul, living within a body. Everything else is frosting on the cake."

Pranayama techniques in this tradition are often woven directly into the practice of asana. For example, in a class students might hold a posture like Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) for five minutes or more while breathing rapidly, inhaling through the mouth and exhaling through the nose. Or one particular movement--standing on your knees and then bowing down into Child's Pose--may be repeated for 10 minutes or so, while breathing in a particular rhythm and chanting one phrase or mantra, sometimes to music.

An important element of Kundalini Yoga is the Breath of Fire, a rapid diaphragmatic breath similar to what's called Kapalabhati in other traditions. Khalsa doesn't overwhelm beginning students with detailed techniques; instead, she encourages them to dive into the practice immediately. "Usually I just say, Open your mouth and pant like a dog," Khalsa says. "or, Pretend you're a Saint Bernard in the Mojave Desert." Once students get a feel for this fast-paced breath, with the belly swelling on the inhalation and pressing back in toward the spine



on the exhalation, Khalsa instructs them to close the mouth and continue this breath through the nose. In a typical class, Breath of Fire might be practiced for several minutes on its own or else performed while moving through a repetitive series of movements, like scissoring the legs back and forth overhead while lying on one's back.

In addition to Breath of Fire, students are also taught techniques that emphasize long, deep breathing, Khalsa says, as well as alternate nostril breathing. Kriyas (cleansing practices), mantras (sacred sounds), and mudras (hand gestures) are combined together with various breath techniques. Khalsa says the unique combination of these techniques helps turbocharge the breath and foster deeper states of meditation. "Breath alone is just a physical exercise," she says. "But when you start adding the other components, that brings change about much quicker than sitting and following your breath alone."

Consideration of the chakras, or energy centers, is also integral to the Kundalini tradition. Khalsa encourages her students to feel the breath originating from the lowest three chakras at the base of the torso. "We have to bring forth the prana, the life force, from the source," she says. "And the source is really the mother, the Earth."

When they're not practicing a particular breathing pattern, Khalsa encourages her students to breathe in a very relaxed and easy fashion, with the belly swelling on the inhalation and then releasing back toward the spine on the exhalation. Sometimes if she notices that a student's belly isn't moving with the breath, she'll place the spine of a book into the belly horizontally and tell the student to press against it with the abdomen on an inhalation and then release the pressure against the book on an exhalation. "So many people do yoga for years and never breathe right," Khalsa says. "Their breathing is nutty; it's barely there. Their practice might look really good, but it's not taking them where they really want to go," she says. "Most of us inhale way more than we exhale, and we need to reverse that so we give back more than we take. The breath heals more than anything else in the whole wide world."

### ***Finding Your Own Way***

How can so many experts offer such different approaches to pranayama? In part this variety results from the brevity of the ancient



texts upon which our modern practices are based. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, for example, says that lengthening the exhalation can help to reduce disturbances of the mind, but doesn't offer detailed techniques for doing that.

"Different people come along and interpret these very succinct verses in different ways, and then they practice based on their interpretation," says Kripalu's Yoganand. "Yoga is so powerful that people tend to get an effect almost regardless of what they do. So someone says, 'I did it this way and it worked, so I must be right,' and someone else says, 'I did it completely differently, but it worked, so I must be right.' Since neither can convince the other and since they both have experience to support their beliefs, they go off and generate two schools. It makes perfect sense that no one can agree. Everyone's experience is different."

In the West you can even find teachers who counsel us to step with caution into traditional pranayama practices. When students aren't well prepared, they say, classical breathing techniques can actually distort natural and organic patterns of breathing, forcing us into rigid and controlled ways of being.

"Most people begin yoga with so many pre-existing blocks and holding patterns that to introduce a controlled breathing regime right away further concretizes the blocks," says Donna Farhi, yoga teacher and author of *The Breathing Book* (Henry Holt, 1996). "I think it's extremely important to remove the blocks and holding patterns first, to reveal the natural breath that is our birthright. And then it can be very interesting to explore the subtle movement of prana through formal pranayama work. But for the most part this controlled practice is introduced too soon and often only obscures the unconscious forces that drive the breath-holding patterns." Viewed alongside one another, these varied perspectives offer us the unsettling yet inspiring prospect that there may not be one right way to reap the gifts of pranayama. Our teachers offer us skilled instruction, but we need to use our experience and discrimination to discern which approach works best. Each of us must decide for ourselves which method steers us closest to yoga's ultimate gift: the ease, balance, and inner quiet that help us see into the very heart of life.