

THE YOGA OF BREATH



A Step-by-Step
Guide to Pranayama
Richard Rosen



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By Richard Rosen

13-minute read

Synopsis

The Yoga of Breath (2002) outlines the health benefits of breathing efficiently, and explores why many of us are not breathing in the best way. These blinks also describe simple yoga exercises that will help you control your breath and usher in a calmer state of mind.

Who is it for?

- Anxiety sufferers looking for self-help
- Yoga fans seeking a fresh perspective
- Busy professionals hoping to de-stress

About the author

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What's in it for me? Take a better breath.

You've probably noticed that your breathing changes depending on your mood. When you're feeling anxious, you might hyperventilate, and when you're feeling relaxed, your breathing feels leisurely and relaxed, too. But what if you've been thinking about breathing in the wrong way? What if, as well as your mood affecting your breathing, your breathing also affects your mood?

As you'll learn in these blinks, how you breathe throughout the day has a big impact on your mental and physical health. But, unfortunately, many of us breathe poorly. This leads to big problems for our well-being.

These blinks will reveal how you can start taking better breaths, for a happier, healthier you. You'll learn fascinating health insights and straightforward exercises. Think of these blinks as your beginner's guide to controlling your breath through yoga. If you apply the advice, it'll help you feel calmer and less stressed – all the time.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how to fill your lungs to maximum capacity;
- why inefficient breathing is bad for your mental health; and
- how you can achieve nasal balance.

There is a right way and a wrong way to breathe.

What advice would you give to someone who needs to calm down? You might tell him to take a deep breath. Yoga practitioners have known about the relationship between breathing and consciousness for thousands of years. In fact, working with your breath is an essential part of yoga tradition. This practice is known as *pranayama*, derived from the sanskrit words *Prana*, meaning “breath,” and *Ayama*, meaning “control.”

Pranayama is thought to have originated with Brahman priests – ancient holy men who worshipped by chanting hymns known as the *Vedas*. These priests realized that if they controlled their breathing during their chanting, they could recite the *Vedas* with more force. Even more crucially, breathing differently let them alter their states of mind.

But the benefits of practicing pranayama go far beyond ancient worship. We live in a hectic world where many of us spend hours hunched over a desk. Pranayama can provide a blissful antidote to stress and ill health.

The key message here is: There is a right way and a wrong way to breathe.

Incorrect breathing often stems from poor posture, weak respiratory muscles, or simply chronic stress.

So what does *bad* breathing look like?

Inefficient breathers take quick, shallow breaths, and they primarily use their mouths to breathe. We've all had moments of panic and hyperventilation, but breathing inefficiently on a regular basis can cause big problems for your body. Fast, shallow breaths lower the amount of carbon dioxide in your circulatory system. This slows down the circulation of oxygen in your brain and body. The result? Poor oxygenation causes a racing or irregular heartbeat and chronic anxiety. It can even make you confused and forgetful.

On the other hand, breathing in the right way leaves you feeling instantly revitalized.

Efficient breathers take slow, streamlined breaths. Unlike bad breathers, who breathe from their upper chest, efficient breathers breathe from their entire diaphragm and torso. They also breathe through the nose, rather than the mouth. Nose breathing slows your breath down, and it allows your lungs to extract plenty of oxygen with each inhalation. This keeps your body at a healthy oxygen-to-carbon-dioxide ratio, and it leaves you with a clear head and a calmer state of mind.

In the next blink, you'll prepare to start your pranayama journey to healthier breathing.

You should enter your pranayama practice in a calm state of mind.

Pranayama means learning how to control your breath, but that's not all there is to this ancient practice. As part of yoga tradition, pranayama is accompanied by certain rituals that you should observe. These simple rituals, as well as breath control, will form a key part of your practice.

The most basic pranayama rituals are concerned with *regularity*, *time*, and *space*.

Yoga tradition emphasizes the importance of *regularity*. You should aim to practice pranayama seven days a week, though you can take one or two days off, if you must. The optimal *time* to practice pranayama is during the hour of *Brahma* – that's the period just before sunrise. During *Brahma*, your mind and body are tranquil and revitalized from sleep, and the atmosphere is charged with cosmic energy. If this early morning routine isn't possible, then you can pick another time. The most important thing is to practice at the *same* time each day.

The key message here is: You should enter your pranayama practice in a calm state of mind.

You should dedicate a physical space to your pranayama practice. Choose a room that feels peaceful and secure. Go to your practice wearing loose, comfortable clothes, and with an empty stomach, so digestion won't distract you.

Starting calmly is essential, because concentrating on your breath is difficult if you're feeling angry or sad. You

can calm yourself down by adding a brief opening ritual to the beginning of each session. Start this ritual by facing east. This is the direction from which the sun rises, and yogis also consider the east to be the repository of the world's soul. Then, spend a few minutes in silence. Take this time to consider how you will dedicate your practice to the divine.

More practical considerations are important, too. Don't forget that you will be breathing through your nostrils throughout your pranayama practice. That means you'll need to unblock your sinuses if they feel congested. You can do this by making a nasal wash from warm water and salt. Administer this wash using a *neti pot*, a small ceramic pot with a long spout.

It's also a good idea to keep a diary of your pranayama journey. Reflecting on your practice this way will enable you to adjust course along the way, continuing with what's working for you, and disregarding what's not.

Your witness looks beyond your emotions and sees your true self.

As a new student of pranayama, you'll probably be keen to start your practice – excited to change how you breathe, and how you feel. Many eager students start their pranayama journey with complicated breathing exercises. This is a problem, because they have not yet completed the groundwork for their practice. So before you rush off on your journey, remember: in order to know where you want to *go*, you first have to understand where you *are*.

Before you begin pranayama, get comfortable with an exercise that will help you gain more insight into both your mind and your body.

To do this, enlist the help of the *witness*. The witness is a friend who helps you contemplate yourself objectively. This person makes no judgments about you, and has no expectations.

The key message here is: Your witness looks beyond your emotions and sees your true self.

The witness helps you see that your emotions and thoughts are purely transient – they do not define you. You're probably tempted to analyze or judge these transitory states in which you find yourself. The witness teaches you simply to accept them instead. Let them light upon you and then float off again.

In case you haven't already guessed, this witness is not another person. Instead, it is a new way of viewing the world that you can harness all on your own.

So how can you get in touch with your inner witness?

Start by making yourself comfortable in a chair, and shutting your eyes. Now picture yourself stepping away from your physical body and looking at yourself from this slight distance. Imagine you're looking at an

interesting puzzle to be solved. Now cast this dissociated eye over your whole body, from your toes to the crown of your head. How does every part of you feel, from your skin, to your back, to your bones? What do you notice about how your body breathes?

The witness exercise is useful because it lets you recognize how you usually breathe. As a new student, you may realize that you weren't previously aware of your authentic breathing style. You may also discover that some aspects of your breathing are inefficient or unnecessary. Even more helpfully, you may even find that once you've noticed your bad breathing habits, they start to disappear on their own.

To breathe better, you need to map the inner spaces of your body.

It would be foolish to set out on a journey without a map. The same is true for your pranayama journey. But you won't be able to buy your pranayama map in any store. Instead, you'll be making it yourself, with a little help from your witness.

At the outset of your pranayama practice, you'll map your body's surface – including the areas you can't see.

That's because when you breathe without awareness of your body's inner areas, problems arise. It's not good to think of your body as something flat and two-dimensional. That mindset results in shallow breaths that don't reach deeply into your body, leaving you hungry for air.

The key message here is: To breathe better, you need to map the inner spaces of your body.

You do this by lying in *shavasana*. *Shavasana* translates into English as *corpse posture*. This yoga position involves lying on your back and being as mentally and physically still as possible, as if you were a dead body. Once you've put yourself in the corpse posture, get in touch with your witness. Now you are ready to begin mapping your inner areas.

One of the most important inner regions to map is your rib cage.

Your ribs are in constant motion as you inhale and exhale. In fact, if your ribs didn't move, you wouldn't be able to breathe. What's more, they move in all directions – not just up and down, but also in and out, and back and forth. This movement is driven by your respiratory muscles, including your scalenes and your intercostals. Sadly, many of us have stiff ribs that don't move well, often due to bad posture or emotional anxiety.

To start building a mental map of your rib cage, simply take three or four minutes to observe the movement of your ribs. Put your hands over the ribs at the front of your chest, beginning with the bottom ribs. Gradually bring your hands upward toward the top of your rib cage, crossing your hands over. Your left hand should

touch the right side of your torso, and vice versa. How does your chest cavity, known as your thorax, change as you breathe? Can you get a sense of its width, length, and breadth? Once you've gained some insight into how your rib cage is moving, feel free to write this information down in your pranayama journal.

How you use your nostrils has a big impact on your consciousness.

By now, you've met your witness and mapped your body. But you'll need a few more tools to start your pranayama journey in earnest. One simple but essential pranayama tool is *nasal balance*. Mastering this technique will help you prepare for more complex techniques further along your journey.

Bringing your nostrils into balance is important, because your breath does not flow equally through both of your nostrils. At any given time, you are primarily breathing through either your right or left nostril, and the other one is somewhat blocked. This phenomenon is known as *nostril dominance*. You unconsciously swap between nostrils about every two hours.

The key message here is: How you use your nostrils has a big impact on your consciousness.

When you breathe through your left nostril, your right brain is more active. In yoga tradition, your right brain is connected to *ida-nadi*, which is seen as your more tranquil and feminine aspect. But when you breathe through your right nostril, it's your left brain that's in the driving seat. This means that *pingala-nadi*, your fierce and masculine aspect, becomes dominant.

Importantly, yogis do not seek to swap one nostril for another. Rather, they change the way they breathe so that both nostrils are used simultaneously. This balance is a key element of yoga. In fact, the word "yoga" is often translated as "balance." Equalizing the air flow of both nostrils eliminates the thoughts, perceptions, and emotions that unbalance our consciousness.

Yogis traditionally balance their nostrils with a crutch-shaped staff, known as a *danda*. But you can achieve nasal balance by using only your hands. First, press your finger against one side of your nose, so that the nostril on this side is blocked. Now, inhale through the nostril that is still open. Make a mental note of how easily the air flows through this nostril. Then repeat this process for the other nostril. The nostril through which air flows most easily is your dominant one. Now ball your hand on your dominant side into a fist, and hold this fist under your armpit on your nondominant side. Use your arm to press down on this fist for three or four minutes. Afterward, press on the sides of your nose again. You will hopefully find that your nostrils have been balanced.

You can practice pranayama by slowing down parts of your breath cycle.

In Sanskrit, *ujjayi* means "to conquer." So our next tool, *ujjayi pranayama*, is known as *Conqueror's breath*. When you perform Conqueror's breath correctly, you will proudly puff out your chest like a military general. This will cause your lungs to swell to their true capacity.

To prepare for Conqueror's breath, sit up straight or recline. First, bring your nostrils into balance by using the clenched fist technique. Once this is done, call upon your witness to observe how you are breathing. At this stage, you should not be trying to control your breath. Instead, just notice what's already happening – imperfections and all. If you can, don't think of yourself as breathing – think of your body as breathing *you*.

The key message here is: You can practice pranayama by slowing down parts of your breath cycle.

After a few minutes of noticing your regular breath, it's time to change it. Concentrate on slowing down your inhalations and exhalations. As you slow your breathing, ask yourself, *How is my state of mind altering?* Do you feel different when you inhale more slowly? What about when you slowly exhale?

Once you have considered these questions, you are ready to perform Conqueror's breath.

Start your inhalation deep within your body. Think of your inhalation as an elevator that is traveling upward. It starts from the basement floor – that would be your groin. Then it goes all the way up the attic, located in your uppermost torso. As you inhale, try to expand your chest along your breastbone and your collarbone. Expanding these areas will create more space for your breath to enter. Notice that, when you inhale, you start to feel lighter, almost as if you are a balloon that could float away. You can balance this lightness by anchoring your inhalation to the floor. To do this, lengthen your tailbone toward the ground as much as possible.

Taking this deep inhalation should leave you feeling energized and ready for anything. In fact, within the yoga tradition, the inhalation is regarded as the route to action, known as the *pravritti marga*. Think of your inhalation as a simple physical act that animates your body *and* mind. Consider that every time you inhale, you are flooding your body with the spirit of the entire universe.

To better understand your breathing, break it up into steps.

Just because you *think* about doing something doesn't always mean you're *going* to do it. It is often in this gap between thinking and doing that we reflect on ourselves

and what we really want. In other words, this gap brings us to greater awareness of ourselves. This is also true for breathing. If you think about inhaling or exhaling, but then choose to delay or interrupt it, you achieve greater awareness of your breath.

This technique is known as *viloma pranayama*, or *Against-the-Grain breath*. It runs counter to how you usually breathe. Normally, your breaths go from start to finish without interruption. But when you breathe using the Against-the-Grain technique, you interrupt your breath. You make it stop and go intermittently.

The key message here is: To better understand your breathing, break it up into steps.

So, for each step of your inhalation, another part of your torso is filled with air. And with each step of your exhalation, another part of your torso empties. In order to know when to start and when to stop breathing, you'll need to divide your torso into sections. For example, think of one section as running from the base of your collarbone to just beneath your armpits. Another section might run from your armpits to your breastbone. You can interrupt both your inhalations and your exhalations. But when you're beginning this technique, it's best to just interrupt one or the other in each session.

When you interrupt your breath, witness how it affects your state of consciousness. Does your state of mind fluctuate depending on whether you are actively breathing or pausing? Your consciousness might change during your rest periods. See if you can maintain this altered state of consciousness even when you start breathing again.

Against-the-Grain breath is so powerful because it makes you highly aware of your breathing. And it helps you control your breath. Through this technique, you'll learn that each breath has a starting point, a midpoint and a conclusion. You'll realize that your breaths are punctuated with small breaks that provide opportunities for reflection. By actively *choosing* these breaks and points of reflection, rather than letting them happen automatically, you'll gain greater insight into your breathing. And you'll discover how each part of the process affects your consciousness.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Bad posture and emotional distress can lead to bad breathing habits. In turn, this inefficient breathing causes more anxiety and emotional distress. The result is a vicious cycle of poor well-being and incorrect breathing. But you can take back control of your breath, and your state of mind, by mastering pranayama. With

patience and dedication, you'll start taking better breaths, ensuring that your body and mind are energized throughout the day.

Actionable advice:

Practice pranayama in a pair

You might find it useful to have a friend join you while you practice pranayama. This yoga partner can watch you as you assume postures and complete exercises. She can tell you when your body is misaligned or crooked. Your partner can also put her hands over your rib cage as you breathe, and make a note of what she feels. In this way, she can give you feedback about any changes you could make to breathe more efficiently.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *The Yoga of Breath* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *Breath*, by James Nestor

Now you've been introduced to the practice and benefits of pranayama, why not delve deeper into the science of breathing by checking out the blinks to *Breath*?

You'll go on a journey to uncover why your breathing technique is so crucial to your health. Along the way, you'll glean fascinating insights into breathing from the most unlikely sources, from ancient civilizations to professional choirs to Soviet research laboratories. So head over to the blinks to *Breath*, and learn how breathing can affect your sleep, your athletic ability, and even your susceptibility to chronic illness.