



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

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Spiritual Upliftment #6

Breath & Beyond

By Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

Breath is life. Expanding your breathing capacity increases your vitality, health and happiness. Ujjayi Pranayama, the breathing practice taught at the beginning of every Svaroopa® yoga class, gives you all these benefits and more. Yet, as wonderful as these are, they are not why Patanjali names pranayama as the fourth of yoga's eight limbs.

The Sanskrit word "pranayama" does not mean "breath" or "breathing practice." A compound word, "prana" (life force) and "-ayama" (to free, to liberate), it names the purpose of the practice — freeing your life force to expand fully. Prana is the energy of aliveness, the enlivening force of your own body, as well as what enlivens the whole universe. Also known as qi, chi and ki, it's what makes spring blossoms bloom, volcanos erupt and toddlers jump up at dawn, ready to run and skip through a day.

Your body is alive because your prana keeps it alive, always flowing through your spine and spreading through your whole body. When prana is unimpeded and flows freely, you feel energetic, enthusiastic and lighthearted. But many things, including spinal tensions and even your thoughts, can block the flow of your prana. When you feel cranky or upset, you can simply realize that you have less prana flowing; it's like a garden hose with kinks in it. Doing pranayama opens your pranic flows and even builds your pranic reserves. The increased prana is profoundly healing on all levels, including physical, mental and emotional.

Prana is what makes your heart beat and your breath move. While prana moves your breath, it also works the other way around: moving your breath moves your prana. They move together. In the beginning, it can be hard to distinguish the difference between the flow of your breath and the flow of prana. With continued practice, your ability to be aware expands to a more subtle level, so you can find the pranic flow hidden within the stream of your breath.

Yoga offers many pranayama practices, including: Ujjayi Pranayama (Ocean Sounding Breath), Bhastrika (Bellows Breathing), Sitali (Cooling Breath), Kapalabhati (Fire Breath) and others. While you can find them online, it's best to be taught by a qualified teacher, who will not only finesse your technique but also determine which pranayama is right for you. Swami Nirmalananda explains, "in Svaroopa® yoga, we do Ujjayi Pranayama because my Guru said it's the only pranayama you need. Additionally, it is safe for everyone. Ujjayi Pranayama heals your body, mind and heart, while it opens up profound dimensions of spiritual experience, its true purpose."

Listening to the inner sound your breath makes, while smoothing and slowing it down, lengthens each breath. Your oxygen uptake rate increases, making your breath more efficient. Thus, 20 minutes of daily Ujjayi Pranayama gives you all the health benefits of aerobic exercise. Understand that the word "aerobic" means "with air" in Greek. Both aerobic exercise and Ujjayi Pranayama oxygenate your blood more fully. Studies prove that this strengthens your heart, keeps your arteries clear, manages chronic conditions, boosts your mood and even lengthens your life. Beyond health maintenance, if you need healing in any way, do 20 minutes twice daily.

Ujjayi Pranayama also quiets your mind. The sound of your breath is captivating because it is the sound of life itself. When your mind is ruminating about the past, the future or how things should be, listening to your Ujjayi sound weaves your mind back into your body. You become fully present, bringing the best of yourself into the moment.

In the same way that oxygen is carried by your red blood cells through your circulatory system, prana moves through a network of subtle energy currents, which are mapped by different systems and called by different names. Chinese medicine calls them meridians, while yoga names them

nadis. Ujjayi Pranayama balances all the nadis in your body, which makes it a profoundly healing practice because your body is enlivened by prana.

Most importantly, Ujjayi Pranayama prepares you for the mystical experience that opens up in the pause between your breaths. At the end of every inhale, you've got a spontaneous pause, whether it is brief or longer. And at the end of every exhale, you have another spontaneous pause. Ujjayi Pranayama fills your pranic reservoir so your pauses can organically elongate. While some pranayama techniques may provoke you to strain for the pause, Ujjayi Pranayama gives you the pause naturally and spontaneously.

When you're in that momentary suspension, an easy place of profound stillness, you're ready to explore within. This is the inner place your breath arises from and absorbs back into. Your own healing power arises from this place where your breath pauses — to heal body, mind and heart. Yet it's really about using the pause as a doorway into your own essence, into your own Self. It's the pause between the breaths that Patanjali details in defining what pranayama is:

tasmin-sati "svaasa-pra"svaasayor-gati-viccheda.h praa.naayaama.h

—Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.49

Then [established in an easy & steady seated pose], your erratic breathing slows and settles into the pauses. This expansion of your individual prana [into cosmic prana] is called pranayama.¹

Last month's teachings explained how the poses cultivate your body's ability to sit in an easy, upright stillness. *Svaroopā*® yoga's core-opening poses make it easy to experience how spontaneous pranayama follows asana, like after doing a spinal sequence of poses ending with Seated Side Stretch. You want to linger in that blissful stillness that follows. That's pranayama. You're hanging out in the pause, which is an entry into the timelessness of your own Self.

The pause is one of the doorways within, making it easy to find your Self, called "svaroopā," which is your Divine Essence. Patanjali recommends it because His tradition didn't offer Shaktipat. As a jumpstart of your own inner force of upliftment, Shaktipat opens the easiest and most powerful doorway within. This is Swami Nirmalananda's specialty: to provide this awakening, through our practices or by attending a Shaktipat Retreat. You are powerfully and easily propelled into experiences of your Self again and again. And, every time, your breath will stop.

Rukmini says, "It's wonderfully familiar: 'Settle into your seat, into an easy, upright position.' I've heard Swami give these meditation instructions so-o-o-o many times. One day, after receiving Shaktipat, as I listened and softened into my meditation nest, my body began settling into a deep stillness I hadn't experienced before. As my body became still, my mind became quiet, and I experienced a timeless, vast expanse of beingness, beyond my body, beyond my mind, beyond my breath. An inner infinity that was and is Self. I didn't realize that I wasn't breathing until I spontaneously took a big breath. As soon as my breath started up, the experience began to fade. And all I wanted to do was return to it..."

To stay longer, you must build your reservoir of prana. Pranayama's true purpose is to fill your pranic reserves so you can blissfully, safely and wonderfully immerse into deep meditation for longer periods of time. You'll experience your Self over and over until, one day, your knowing will not fade. You'll forever recognize yourself as the One, Divine Self that is Existence Itself. Along the way, pranayama makes you healthier, happier, and younger. How amazing! Do more yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT," OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

To reach our teachers or to learn more about *Svaroopā*® Yoga & Meditation, contact *Svaroopā*® Vidya Ashram ♦ www.svaroopaa.org ♦ info@svaroopayoga.org ♦ 610.644.7555

¹ Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda