

Chapter 2: Breathing

Chapter 2, Verses 1-3

*After mastering poses, the yogi, possessing self control
and eating a suitable, moderate diet, should practice pranayama
as taught by his guru.*

In modern times, you can and should practice pranayama (mastery of the breath) at the same time you are working on mastery of the poses, possessing self control, and eating a suitable diet. Breath is life. Bigger, slower, more mindful breathing is essential to wellbeing. In daily life, simply bringing awareness to your breath and slowing it down changes your mood and your energy. Making your exhale longer than your inhale turns on your rest and restore functions. It calms you down. In the written history, however, the word yoga first shows up in reference to breathing practices, so the techniques the ancient yogis used to “harness” or “bind” the breath have been around for thousands of years, and many of the ones we still practice today come from this book. In Svatmarama’s time, meditation was the primary practice. The poses were mostly focused on developing a comfortable seat, and the breathing practices helped not just to bind the breath, but also the mind, the whole life, and the spiritual path.

When the breath is unsteady, the mind is unsteady.

*When the breath is steady, the mind is steady,
and the yogi becomes steady.*

Therefore, one should restrain the breath.

Although the text starts to introduce more poetic and metaphorical passages at this point, Svatmarama has a gift for clarity when required.

As long as there is breath in the body, there is life.

Death is the departure of breath.

There, one should restrain the breath.

The first breathing exercise introduced is well known in the modern world: alternate nostril breathing, known as “nerve-purifying” or **Nadi sodhana**. The essential yogi breath quickly calms the heart and overactive mind. The ancients believed it cleared and purified the energy channels (nadis) in the body. Svatmarama tells us we should always practice with a clear mind, and that practicing this technique for three months will result in purity.

Here’s how: From your comfortable seat, begin to find your 3 part breath, which is inhale, hold, exhale. Don’t overdo it at first. Breath “control” means no gasping, so learning to lengthen all 3 parts of the breath takes time. After a few cleansing rounds, bring your right hand up and place your thumb on the right nostril, pinky finger on the left. The process is inhale through the left, close off the left nostril with your finger, and exhale through the right. After a moment, inhale through the right, close off the nostril with your thumb, and exhale through the left. Continue switching back and forth, at your own pace, listening for the moment in your body when your inhale breath hits its peak. Allow it to swirl until your body tells you it is time, and slowly release until you feel empty. Without gasping, or grasping, breathe in a long and slow cycle of in and hold and out, switching nostril to nostril at the top of each breath.

Svatmarama advises increasing the number of rounds to 80, and practice 4 times a day: morning, noon, evening, and midnight. He recommends consuming milk and ghee at the beginning, and to be prepared for sweating and trembling at the outset. All of that will go away as you progress. However, he warns against doing it wrong.

Chapter 2, Verse 15

*Just as a lion, elephant or tiger is tamed step by step,
so the breath is controlled.
Otherwise it kills the practitioner.*

So whatever you do, do it right! Svatmarama claims proper breathing weakens all diseases, and improper breathing strengthens them. In the modern world, we know that to be true; our short, rapid, stressed out breathing patterns make wellness nearly impossible. With or without this practice, all deep, slow breathing weakens disease. However, if you want to take the challenge, take a BEFORE picture. At the end of three months, Svatmarama promises the body will be noticeably leaner and brighter.

*Exhale the breath very properly. Inhale it very properly.
Retain it very properly. Thus, one obtains success.*

Easy! And if you have too much “fat or phlegm in the body” Svatmarama recommends cleaning your body with the 6 “karmans” first. You are not going to do 3 of them, trust me. Even Svatmarama admits that many teachers don’t approve of them, believing that “all impurities dry up by pranayama alone.” Here are 3 you can try.

Trataka: Gaze without blinking at a fixed point until tears flow, to clean the eyes.

Nauli: Pull your stomach muscles in and move them in a circular fashion from left to right, with the speed of a fast whirlpool, to clean the gut. (It’s not easy.)

Kapalabhati: Inhale and exhale, quickly, with a lot of force on the exhale, like “the bellows of a blacksmith” to clean the lungs and sinuses.

Modern yogis also practice cleaning techniques from Ayurveda, yoga’s sister science, including:

Neti: Today, clean yogis use a water based nasal cleansing system called a “neti pot” which involves pouring water in one nostril and allowing it to drain out the other side. 600 years ago, Svatmarama was using string, like the weird kid in 2nd grade, so just pick up a neti pot at the pharmacy if you are interested.

Dry Skin Brushing: Before your shower, lightly brush your skin, always toward the heart. Three to seven strokes over every part of you, from feet up, circles around the tummy, from head down and around to the heart, and lifting your arms overhead to brush down from hand to shoulder. Then, cover your body lightly with coconut oil and let it settle in for 10 minutes before taking a cool shower.

Tongue Scraping: Your toothbrush is not clean enough nor designed for good tongue scraping. You can pick up a simple tool at the market, and it is exactly what it sounds like: drag the scraper gently over your tongue, from back to front, cleaning all the white stuff away.

Oil Pulling: Put a tablespoon of coconut, almond, avocado or similar oil in your mouth and swish it around for 20 minutes, then spit it in the trash and rinse.

*Even Brahma and the other gods practiced pranayama, because
they feared death.*

Therefore, everyone should practice pranayama.

*As long as the breath is retained in the body,
as long as the mind is calm,
and as long as the sight is in the middle of the brows,
where is the fear of death?*

Then, Svatmarama teaches us 8 more breathing techniques, called Kumbhakas. Kumbhaka refers to the retention (holding in) phase of breathing. Descriptions vary from text to text, but in most cases, Svatmarama gives only a very short description of the practice. Different lineages of modern yoga may enhance the descriptions with their own interpretations. I chose 6 practical ones that we still use today, and stuck pretty close to what the translations said.

Svatmarama recommends engaging the chin lock after the inhale, and abdominal lock after the exhale. You'll find the how to for that on page 34. Each practice is accompanied by information about the miracle cures each breath produces, but I make no such claim.

Suryabhedana: "Sun piercing breath" is similar to alternate nostril breathing, except you don't alternate. Always in the right nostril, always out the left. Try to double the time of the exhale, (4 seconds in, 8 seconds out) and when you add retention, work toward a 1:4:2 ratio (4 in / 16 hold / 8 out). Svatmarama advises you to hold the breath in from hair to toenails.

Ujjayi: A very common modern yoga breathing practice, Ujjayi draws the breath in through both nostrils with the back of the throat closed, creating a rasping sound. Today, we keep that "dragon breath" moving with our bodies in certain flowing styles of practice. In Svatmarama's day, Ujjayi included a long hold, and an exhale through the left nostril only.

Sitkari: One of 2 cooling breaths, for Sitkari open your lips and float the tongue toward the top of the mouth. Gently pull the breath in between the teeth and around the tongue, making a “seet” sound, and exhale through the nose. The air cools as it comes in.

Shitali: The second cooling breath, Shitali requires you to curl the sides of your tongue into a straw, and pull the breath slowly in through the “straw,” which also has a cooling effect. If you can not curl your tongue, stick with Sitkari.

Bhastrika: Similar to Kapalabhati, the cleansing breath described above, Bhastrika is a “bellows” breath. From Lotus position (or Easy Pose) bring the focus to a forceful exhale, and allow the inhale to drag in along the back of the throat. Keep the breath moving at a forceful but natural pace, and when you need a break, inhale long through the right nostril and hold it, slowly exhale through the left.

Bhramari: Known as “bee breath” because it requires a humming or buzzing noise on the exhale, this one varies from text to text. One common practice is to place your hands on your face: thumbs close off the ears, first fingers on brows, second fingers on eyes, ring and pinky fingers on cheek bones. Use your ring fingers to apply gentle pressure to the sides of the nostrils. With your gaze on the third eye, begin humming through the nose and back of the throat as you take short quick inhales and exhale, long and slow.

Exercise for developing breath control: Start with gaining a little comfort and control over a long slow inhale, a little holding, and a long slow exhale. Then, choose Nadi Shodana and Ujjayi as practice tools, and simply explore the other techniques as you advance. Each day, set aside 10 - 20 minutes to practice, but it isn’t hard to find opportunities to practice any time: long car rides, line ups, board meetings, bed time, bath time, household chores time....

Pranayama Practice Log	
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