

Safe Breathing

Apart from psychological concerns, the special physiological hazards of breathing exercises is that they can cause problems without giving us traditional signals warning us against doing something harmful. In athletics, the practice of asana, experiments with diet, or just tinkering with any object in the physical world we depend on our senses to tell us that we are exceeding our capacity or doing something inadvisable. But breathing exercises are different. In that realm, we are dealing with phenomena that our senses, or at least our untutored senses, are often unable to pick up, even though they can still effect the body. And because of this, advanced exercises should be undertaken only by those who are adequately prepared. - H. David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* (pp 131-2).

Pranayama is a highly developed and complex science, and the advanced techniques require expert guidance. They should not be attempted purely on the basis of instructions found in books. Unless one has the prerequisites for such advanced techniques, more harm than good will result. - Swami Rama, *Science of Breath* (p.93)

In general, pranayama should not be done during menstruation or pregnancy or by anyone with fever, bronchitis, pleurisy, pneumonia or a recent history of heart attack. Also, a person with highly metastasized cancer should not perform pranayama, nor should they while undergoing chemo- or radiation therapy. Nor should a person suffering from severe psychological conditions such as grief, sadness, anger or suicidal depression engage in pranayama. There should be a gap of at least one hour before or after bathing, eating, or sexual activity before doing pranayama. – Vasant Lad BAM&S, MSc, “Pranayama for Self Healing”

Not every practice is suited for everyone. We must be very careful when explaining matters pertaining to sadhana to others. Those with heart problems should not do too much pranayama; they should also not exert too much strength when inhaling and exhaling. Those with abnormal blood pressure should also be careful; they should only do a little bit of pranayama. They should not tire themselves too much.

In olden days, when one approached a Guru for instructions on pranayama, the Guru would place the tip of a grass blade under the person's nose. He or She would then instruct the candidate to first exhale gently, and then with great force. Only after observing the movement of the grass blade during the exhalations would the Guru advise the *sadhak* on how many cycles of pranayama he or she should do, how it should be done and other related issues.

– Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma.org)

By improper practice of pranayama the pupil introduces several disorders into his system like hiccups, wind, asthma, cough, catarrh, pains in the head, eyes, and ears, and nervous irritation. It takes a long time to learn slow deep steady and proper inhalations and exhalation. Master this before attempting kumbhaka (breath retention). – N.K.S. Iyengar Light on Yoga

Pranayama affects the circulatory and nervous systems on the physical level, but also moves prana in very specific ways through the energetic sheath. Subtle energetic shifts are effected, emotions, mental thought patterns, mood, and toxins may be set into motion. Retention exaggerates or exacerbates what is in motion. Practitioners' thought processes, mental function and focus, emotions, decision-making, impulse control, mood, and frame of mind can all be profoundly affected. When a student is prepared, has a firm foundation of safe and beneficial lifestyle choices, has safe and helpful ways to process experience, has emotional stability and support, and generally is prepared to do the sadhana, the intense spiritual work, and of course is physically able, then the more advanced practices and retention may be decided upon by a qualified teacher. This is very often not the case in yoga classes in the west, where people may drop into a group class taught by someone with little-to-no depth of understanding of the paradigm of yoga practice which carefully employs the subtle as it is much more powerful than the grosser level of being.

The breathing practices seem to accentuate whatever is in the mind, whether it be benevolence or malevolence, harmony or disharmony, virtue or vice. On the negative side, experienced teachers report that quirkiness of any sort gets accentuated in students who go too far. It might be an abusive streak, laughing inappropriately, speaking rudely, flightiness, twitchiness or nervous tics. Right to left physical imbalances also become exaggerated. Unfortunately. Novices often close their eyes to these warnings: (Coulter, p 131)

All practices should be practiced with awareness, ahimsa, and discernment.

Generally Safe Pranayama Practices for Everyone

- Breath awareness
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Sandbag breathing with very light weight (up to 5 lbs)
- Complete breath
- Diaphragmatic breathing with “so hum” mantra
- Exhale counting down (starting at 27, 54, 108, etc.)
- **With observation of no difficulty (no catch breath, tension in shoulders, jaw, etc.)** ratio-ed breathing, beginning to lengthen the exhalation
- Om chanting