

A close-up photograph of a person's face and hands. The person is wearing a light blue tank top and has their hands pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) in front of their chest. The background is dark and out of focus.

pranayama

beyond the fundamentals

AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE TO YOGIC BREATHING

richard rosen

“Richard has impressed me with his depth of knowledge in his new book. Not only are we treated to comprehensive knowledge of the tradition of pranayama but we receive minute detail of Richard’s own arduous study and exploration. I will treasure this book for years to come as a personal guide to discovering the subtleties of my breath. Thank you again, Richard.”

—Rodney Yee, author of *Moving Toward Balance*

“Rosen provides such valuable insights into a practice so often shrouded in mystery. He brings to light the classical teachings on pranayama while offering a fresh, contemporary perspective. I recommend this to all students of yoga interested in unraveling the mystery of a pranayama practice.”

—Tias Little, author of *The Thread of Breath*

“This is an exceptional guide into the labyrinth of inner yogas. Richard Rosen is impeccably thorough, and his presentation is accessible and often amusing. Reading this book, I felt as though I was in the presence of an ancient yogi-scholar who is masquerading as a close personal friend. I highly recommend this book.”

—Sarah Powers

ABOUT THE BOOK

For serious students of yoga who have an established pranayama practice, this book is a follow-up to Rosen’s previous book, *The Yoga of Breath*. Here he picks up where he left off, offering a selection of traditional yogic techniques for those who wish to deepen their practice of pranayama and their understanding of the ancient wisdom of yoga. Rosen skillfully puts forward an array of awareness disciplines, breathing practices, mudras, and seals, interspersed with anecdotes and quotes from ancient texts.

A free audio program available online offers a variety of guided practices so that listeners can create their own pranayama series, with guidance from the author. (Download instructions available in the book.)

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PRANAYAMA

BEYOND THE FUNDAMENTALS

An In-Depth Guide to Yogic Breathing

RICHARD ROSEN



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To Taleen:

Who wanted one all for herself

It is nothing but breath, the void.

~~And that green fulfillment~~
of blossoming trees: a breath.

We, who are still the breathed-upon,
today still the breathed-upon, count
this slow breathing of earth,
whose hurry we are.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *O Lacrimosa*

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Colloquy of the Vital Breaths

PRANA SAMVADA

ONCE UPON A TIME, Bhargava Vaidarbhi went to the sage Pippalada (whose name means “eater of the fruit of the sacred fig tree”), firewood in hand as a symbolic offering, and asked, “Good sir, how many powers are there that establish and maintain the universe and its creatures, and which one’s the best of all?” Pippalada thought a bit, then told this tale:

The powers—Space, Air, Fire, Water, Earth, Speech, Mind, the Eye, and the Ear—were talking among themselves, bragging really. They said: “We establish and maintain this universe and the body (*bana*, literally “reed” or “arrow”). Breath (*prana*), who was really the best of them all, happened to hear them and rejoined: “Friends, don’t fool yourselves. I establish and maintain the universe and the body.” The other powers pooh-pooed and didn’t believe her.

So Breath, rather miffed at not being believed, decided to teach them a lesson. She moved upward, and guess what? All the others moved upward too. Then Breath settled down and, yes, all the others settled down with her. It was just like a swarm of bees following their queen wherever she went.

Now the powers realized their dependence on Breath and, delighted, sang her praises:

As fire, she warms; she shines like the sun
She’s the bountiful rain; she’s the wind
She’s the earth, matter, she’s God
Both being and not-being
And what’s immortal.

Like spokes in a chariot’s wheel-hub
Everything is fixed in Breath
All the holy verses
The sacrifice, the royalty, even the priests!

As Lord of Creation, you move in the womb
And it’s also you who’s born
You live with all creatures, Breath,
And they pay tribute to you.
Your form pervades speech
And hearing and sight and mind,
Make them all gracious (*shiva*)
And don’t leave us!

All that’s in heaven and earth and in between
Is in the power of breath
Protect us, as a mother does her children
Grant us prosperity (*shri*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

I Take Refuge in the Breath

I take refuge in the breath. Breath is all this, whatever there is, and all that ever will be. I take refuge in the breath.

—*Chandogya-Upanishad*

THIS IS MY SECOND BOOK on pranayama. The first, *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama* (Shambhala Publications, 2002), covered the beginning ABCs of the practice along with a program that, in the best of all possible worlds, would take a diligent student about a year to eighteen months to complete. Now the wonderful folks at Shambhala have asked me to do a follow-up book—the DEFs, I suppose—that presses on bravely to more challenging material.

This new book is written for more experienced pranayama students, those who are relatively familiar with the material in the first book and follow a fairly regular, if not daily, practice. To speak this out more clearly, to benefit from this book I recommend that you have, at minimum, the following:

- A reasonably clear understanding of the “why” of breathing, the four traditional stages of practice, prana (and its five branches) and the two traditional pranayama models (classical and Hatha), pranayama benefits, obstacles and aids, and practice foundations (how often, when, where, and how long)
- A good working relationship with your Witness and the ability to quiet your sensory organs (especially the eyes, inner ears, and tongue) and watch your breath fairly consistently for at least ten to fifteen minutes (whether in Corpse Pose or during pranayama)
- A reasonably accurate “map” of the outer contours and inner spaces of your physical body (with the understanding that this cartography is an ongoing project that will never be completed definitively)
- Some familiarity with and appreciation of your unique breathing identity and the “qualities” of your breath, which you will remember from the first book we’re calling time, texture, space, and rest
- Regular practice of Conqueror and Against-the-Grain breaths in the reclining position for between six months and a year, and subsequently in the sitting position for at least six months
- A reasonably easy and balanced sitting position, even if you still need to sit on a chair, that you can sustain without too much fidgeting for at least ten to fifteen minutes
- A familiarity with basic pranayama “tools” (for example, Unspoken Hymn, Skull Brightener, and both equal and unequal ratio breathing)
- A comfortable relationship with short inner breath retention and its supporting techniques (such as throat and belly bonds)

I won’t be reviewing much of this earlier material; if I do repeat myself, it means that the subject

has been altered or amplified in some significant way. Remember that although books are fixed in time, a practice isn't; in the past three years, I've come up with some new ideas as well as modified (and hopefully improved) others.

When and How Did Pranayama Originate?

Of course, any “new ideas” I may have stumbled across are probably new only to me. Since pranayama has been around for many centuries, there's a good chance that somebody somewhere thought of each one of them long before I did. In fact some scholars trace pranayama's origins back thirty-five hundred years (and possibly more) to the Vedic sacrifice. I wish we had the time and space to consider this fascinating ritual in detail, but alas, we don't. Mainstream Western scholars tell us these sacrifices, usually sponsored by powerful and wealthy royals, were originally attempts to symbolically “feed” and thus petition the favor of the gods, through their go-betweens, for some personal gain—sons and cattle (the Vedic equivalent of modern-day real estate holdings in California) being high on the list. But a number of Indian pundits and their Western supporters vigorously maintain that there was much more to the ancient sacrifice than meets the eye. They insist the outward motions and words were cloaked in mystical symbolism, and far from being a mere grab for material gain, the sacrifice was instead a highly charged spiritual performance.

Whatever the case, there's no argument that the presiding priests believed that for the sacrifice to be effective—to get what they were asking for—everything about it (for example, the construction of the altars or the preparation of the sacrificial libation) had to strictly adhere to a rigidly fixed script. Any deviation or alteration, however small, might not only offend the gods, but actually incur their wrath. This ritual propriety was so important that one of the four primary officiating priests was assigned to monitor the performances of the other three (and their assistants), and immediately intervene to correct any mistake. This close attention to detail included the proper order of pronunciation, and intonation of the sacrificial hymns sung to the gods.

So along with memorizing hundreds of hymns—in those days writing hadn't yet been invented in India (and even when it was, the priests continued to prefer oral transmission)—the singer-priest must have been trained like an opera diva to consciously and meticulously regulate his breath. Eventually somebody, or more likely some group of singer-priests, noticed something intriguing: when they altered their everyday breath in the way needed to sing the hymns accurately, they felt differently somehow, though they couldn't quite put that feeling into words.

This must have occasioned some curiosity among the singer-priests, who then set out to investigate this strange phenomenon. Like modern scientists examining an aspect of nature, they constructed and conducted various breathing experiments, took notes, and exchanged information among themselves. These early experiments must have lasted several generations, and no doubt progress was not always straightforward: there must have been dead-end disappointments and an occasional disaster when somebody went too far too fast and blew a fuse.

Finally the singer-priests made an exciting discovery: they confirmed that breath is indeed related *to* and an influence *on* consciousness, but even more, that it's an expression *of* consciousness. Altering our breathing allows us not only to shape the contents of our consciousness in significant ways, it also allows us to penetrate through the levels of those contents to the very source of consciousness itself.

Early reports of these findings are scattered through a haphazard collection of books known as the Upanishads, or Secret Books. By the time of their composition, the external sacrifice of the kings and priests had been symbolically internalized by the forest hermits and other practitioners of yoga. The oldest (surviving) book, which may be upward of twenty-five hundred years old, equates our breath

with the “supreme *brahman*” (*Brihad Aranyaka-Upanishad* 4.1.3). This word means “immensity” and signifies what we might call the “root self,” the “light” or consciousness that manifests both as the individual self (*atman*), which “shines out through all beings” (*Mundaka-Upanishad* 3.1.4), and its universal counterpart, the world self (*paramatman*).

Early on, pranayama was used to dampen the endless perturbations of our consciousness in order to prepare for intense meditation. This form of practice is actually what we know today as *kumbhaka*, breath retention (we’ll go into this more deeply in chapter 18). Later, during the great Hatha revolution, when the feminine principal reemerged from its thousand-year slumber in the masculine shadow, pranayama developed into a means of awakening our dormant spiritual identity. You might say we are the inheritors of this breathing tradition; our first responsibility is to understand its traditional lessons as fully as possible and then to respectfully assimilate these lessons to our own needs and goals.

Preview

The material in this book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is by far the shortest, with only two chapters. Here we’ll look briefly at traditional Hatha pranayama and ask ourselves the big “What is pranayama?” question; cover three pranayama props; reaffirm our upright (“up and right”) sitting position; and reacquaint ourselves with our old friend, the Witness.

Part 2 material addresses the physical arena of practice. There are exercises for the head, eyes, and tongue; the hands; and the diaphragm, ribs, and spine. I’ve also come up with seven asana-based exercises (along with a few variations) that serve as preparations for both sitting and breathing. Finally, there are two chapters on the “bonds” (*bandha*, which I translated as “lock” in the first book).

In part 3, we arrive at the nitty-gritty of the practice. Here we’ll first work with “sound” and imaginary breathing exercises; next with four little known traditional pranayamas (two straight up and two modified); then with what’s currently called “digital pranayama,” the purposeful alteration of the breath using the fingertips to manipulate our nostrils; and finally with breath retention. Sound like fun?

An audio program is available online for free download for use in conjunction with the practices in this book. (See Appendix 1 for download instructions.) The appendixes include practice suggestions for using the audio instructions in the included audio program; a description (just for your edification) of a few traditional internal cleansing exercises, which are a central part of Hatha-Yoga; and a pair of traditional breathing exercises that I dug out of the ancient books. All the way through this book, I’ve sprinkled a number of short Sidelights, which I hope will help illuminate yoga in general and pranayama in particular.

Background

ONCE UPON A TIME in the beginning, Prajapati, the Lord-of-Creation, was all alone. He wasn't happy being all alone, so he meditated on himself and thus gave birth to many children. But he saw they were as lifeless as stones, without intelligence or breath. This didn't make him happy. So he thought to himself, "Let me get inside them, so they'll wake up and come to life."

He turned himself into the wind and tried to get inside, but as a single thing, he couldn't do it. So he divided himself into five breaths, which nowadays are called the High Breath (*prana*), the Low Breath (*apana*), the Middle Breath (*samana*), the Up Breath (*udana*), and the Spread-Out Breath (*vyana*).

Now, the breath that breathes in is High; the one that breathes out is Low. These two keep the body warm and alive, just as a bellows keeps a fire burning. The one that takes in, cooks, and processes food, passing the coarser elements to Low for elimination and the subtler elements to each limb for nourishment, is Middle. The one that belches or swallows what is drunk or eaten is Up, and the one that saturates and strengthens the entire body is Spread-Out.

Now, High depends on Low, and Low depends on High. In the space between them, Prajapati generated heat (*agni*). This heat is the person (*purusha*), the universal fire (*agni vaishvanara*) in all people. So we're told, "If you cover your ears, you can hear the sound of that person. When you're about to leave this life, you can't hear that sound anymore."

After dividing into five breaths, Prajapati hid in secret: made of mind, his body is breath, his form is light, what he wills always comes true, his self is space. But he still wasn't happy. He thought in his heart one more thing was needed, so he said, "Let me enjoy the world."

First Breath

Traditional Hatha Pranayama

To breathe is life. Without breath we die.

—Mabel Ellsworth Todd, *The Thinking Body*

Why Pranayama?

The traditional texts have lots to say about the benefits of pranayama, some of it reasonable, some of it pretty weird or unbelievable, at least to our Western minds. Just remember that these old books tend to exaggerate the practices' blessings, and we should take a good portion of what they say with a grain or two of salt.

They all agree that, at the very least, pranayama is good for physical health. Over and over, we read of how the practice—or various individual practices—destroys disease (specifically phlegm and nervous diseases, dysentery, cough, and fever) and so prolongs our life; palliates hunger and thirst, y at the same time stimulates the gastric fire, which improves digestion (so the food we eat is fully assimilated) and the elimination of waste substances; purifies the blood and cleans the sinuses; and secures mental calmness.

Pranayama is also supposed to improve our looks. This may seem odd, accustomed as we are to thinking that the old yogis didn't much care about their material body and its appearance. The yoga fundamentalists among us like to point accusingly at American yoga as being “too physical,” too cosmetically oriented, and not “spiritual” enough. Yet the anonymous author of the three-hundred-year-old *Shiva Collection* (*Shiva-Samhita*, hereafter abbreviated SS) reports that the “body of the person practicing the regulation of breath becomes harmoniously developed, emits sweet scent, and looks beautiful and lovely” (SS 3.29). Svatmarama, in his *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (hereafter abbreviated HYP), seconds this: by performing the Seet-Sound-Making breath, “one becomes a second God of Love” (HYP 2.54). Ready to practice yet?

Of course, I don't mean to imply that the old yogis were chiefly concerned with looking lovely. No matter how well it works to firm our buns, all yoga practice has an ultimately spiritual intent and goal. But we can assume that an attractive exterior to some degree reflects a godly interior. The first-century C.E. teacher Tirumular wrote:

The breath within rises
And wanders where it lists;
Control that and purify within;
Then shall your limbs glow red
Your hair turn dark,
And God within shall leave you never.

—*Thirumandiram*

In the spiritual realm, pranayama is said to purify our subtle energy channels (*nadi*), which in turn

contributes to the awakening and integration of our authentic self. Then there are the strange powers that the oldsters claim accrue to the practitioner, such as levitation, the “ability to move through space” (*Gheranda-Samhita* 5.58, hereafter abbreviated GS), and clairvoyance. We won’t, of course, be concerned with acquiring these powers, although it would be nice to be able to fly and avoid airports and coach seating.

What about the benefits of pranayama according to modern books? In addition to recounting the traditional benefits, modern teachers claim that pranayama strengthens the diaphragm; tones the belly and its organs (such as the liver and kidneys); increases lung capacity; strengthens the immune system; improves blood circulation and the removal of waste gases (such as carbon dioxide); calms the brain, which reduces stress and improves concentration (and is supposed to be good for insomnia) and generally increases our life energy.

What does modern science have to say about all this? Pranayama has been studied from several angles, including the practice’s effect on the autonomic nervous system, psychological stress, blood pressure and heart rate, metabolism and obesity, memory, and even handgrip strength. One of the studies, for example, assures us that regular pranayama practice “increases parasympathetic tone, decreases sympathetic activity, improves cardiovascular and respiratory functions, decreases the effect of stress and strain on the body and improves physical and mental health . . . [It] improves autonomic and pulmonary functions in asthma patients . . . [and] has also been advocated for the treatment of anxiety disorder as it attenuates cardiac autonomic responses in such patients.”¹

Traditional Hatha Pranayama

Before we begin our practice, let’s take a quick look back at traditional Hatha pranayama as it is described in two old instructional manuals. You might think that such books are a twentieth-century innovation, but they’ve been around for at least six hundred years, maybe more.

The older manual, titled *Light on Forceful Yoga (Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika)*, was written in the mid-fourteenth century C.E. by Svatmarama Yogendra; the former name means “one who takes pleasure in his own self (atman),” and the latter is an honorific title meaning “lord of yoga.” The 390 verses of the text are divided into four chapters—on posture (*asana*), conscious breathing (pranayama), seals (*mudra*) and bonds (bandha), and *samadhi*. This last Sanskrit word, which literally means “putting together,” is often left untranslated, or is rendered variously as “contemplation,” “concentration,” “absorption,” “trance,” or “ecstasy.” None of these English words, though, quite gets to the nitty-gritty of *samadhi*’s meaning. The word that comes closest is *enstasy*, coined by the great yoga scholar Mircea Eliade. A play on the word *ecstasy*, literally, “to stand outside” yourself, *enstasy* means “to stand *inside*” yourself, suggesting a “putting together” with your innermost being. Considering how asana practice dominates American Hatha-Yoga, it’s interesting to note that only about one-tenth of the HYP’s verses (about three dozen) are dedicated to asana, while the bulk of the teaching focuses on pranayama and the seals and bonds, both of which attract scant attention in this country.

The younger book is titled *Gheranda’s Collection (Gheranda-Samhita)*, written near the end of the seventeenth century by someone whose name is now lost, if it was ever known. The name *Gheranda* refers to the teacher, whether historical or legendary, who delivers the teaching summarized in the book. It’s shorter than the HYP by about forty verses, though it consists of seven chapters, one for each of the seven limbs (*sapta anga*) of the Hatha practice. The GS covers the four limbs of the HYP along with six physical purifications (*karma*) (which have chapters of their own), sense withdrawal (*pratyahara*), and meditation (*dhyana*). According to Gheranda, each of these seven limbs (listed here in their hierarchical order) is said to bestow a different benefit on the practitioner:

- Cleanliness (*shodhana*) comes from purification exercises (the “six acts”).
-
- Strength or solidity (*dridhata*) comes from the postures.
 - Stability (*sthairya*) results from the seals and bonds.
 - Constancy or composure (*dhairya*, also translated as “calmness” or “courage”) comes from sense withdrawal.
 - Lightness (*laghava*, also translated as “ease”) results from conscious breathing.
 - Clear perception (*pratyaksha*) comes from meditation.
 - Immaculateness (*nirliptata*) comes from ecstasy.

This is actually an outline of the process or course of traditional Hatha practice. Unlike classical practice, which begins with the restraints (*yama*) and observances (*niyama*), Hatha practice begins with rather extensive “housecleaning” of the physical body, including the intestines, stomach, throat and tongue, ears and eyes, and assorted other nooks and crannies. Then the body is further tempered with posture, which, just as in the classical practice, readies it for the rigorous demands of pranayama and meditation. Next come the seals and bonds, which are used to restrain the transformative energy generated by pranayama and channel it through the body. After a brief lesson in sense withdrawal, which helps gather and focus self-awareness, the process is completed with the three closely related practices of conscious breathing, meditation, and samadhi.

Last Word

Keep in mind that Hatha pranayama and the classical pranayama of Patanjali are similar in some respects and dissimilar in others. The latter is essentially what we call kumbhaka, which we loosely translate as “retention.” The classical practitioner is, as you know, intent on quieting the fluctuations (*vritti*) of his consciousness, which is only possible after he has quieted the fluctuations of his physical body, from the gross but mostly unconscious fidgetings to the subtle expansions and contractions of everyday breathing. Stopping or at least greatly inhibiting these movements is a necessary prelude to sense withdrawal and meditation, the core of classical practice.

On the other hand, while retention is also a technique in her arsenal, the Hatha practitioner uses pranayama not only to subdue her *overactive* brain but to stimulate her *underactive* spiritual powers. Both practitioners have self-realization as their goal, though the nature of their realization differs. Classical realization may be characterized as transcendence (from the Latin *scandere*, “to climb”), which the practitioner climbs beyond the everyday world to live alone in the spiritual (*kaivalya*). Conversely, the Hatha practitioner integrates or “makes whole” (from the Latin *integer*, “intact”) the material and her spiritual worlds and remains in the former in joyful play (*lila*) as a *jivan-mukti*, “free” embodied self.

When You Need a Helping Hand

Pranayama Props and Tips

Sopashraya [“sitting with support”] is squatting tying the back and the two legs with a piece of cloth called “Yoga-pattaka” (a strong piece of cloth by which the back and two legs are tied while squatting).

—Swami Hariharananda Aranya, commentary to *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*

Pranayama Props

You might think yoga props are a modern invention, but yogis have been using them in one form or another in their practice for many hundreds of years. For example, in the preceding quote, a contemporary yoga master is describing a yoga belt that yogis have used to stabilize their sitting position for more than a millennium. Props are like the training wheels on a kid’s bike; they help us stay upright and moving forward until we learn to pedal on our own.

But props are unwelcome guests in some yoga schools, and their detractors make a good case against them. Critics feel that we can become overly dependent on our props to the point where they slow our progress, just like a person who continues to lean on a crutch long after a broken leg has healed and thus inhibits recovery. So it’s important to use props judiciously and, as your practice develops over time, be willing to gradually diminish your need for them or at least find a way to gradually increase your self-reliance.

For many of the exercises in this book, I’ll recommend one or more of the usual prop suspects which I covered in the first book, including the following:

- A cotton yoga belt or strap (six or eight feet long) with a metal or plastic buckle.
- A yoga block of either foam or wood (though foam is usually preferred). Do you remember our block terminology from *The Yoga of Breath*? The block has two ends, two sides, and two faces. For this book, let’s add the term *edges*, of which our block has a grand total of twelve, though for our purposes we only need to distinguish two. Look straight on at one end of the block, with its long axis and faces parallel to the floor. We’ll say that the edges along the top and bottom of the end, which angle with the block’s faces, are called the “end-face edges,” while the end’s other two edges are the “end-side edges.” Follow? This will come in handy in chapter 4.
- A couple of firm woolen, wool/synthetic-blend, or cotton blankets.
- A couple of sandbags (though they’re no longer filled with sand, as they were about twenty-five years ago), usually weighing ten pounds each. Yoga prop makers, by the way, are missing a golden opportunity to expand their business by not thinking outside the box. Why, I wonder, are all bags shaped like hot dogs, and why do they all weigh ten pounds? I’ve made some diamond-shaped, five-pound bags that have all sorts of possible uses for pranayama.
- A bolster, either cylindrical or flat.
- A metal folding chair.

- An Ace bandage for wrapping the forehead and eyes (which can also be rolled up and used as chin support in Net-Bearer Bond).
- A timer, preferably a digital watch with a countdown function (though an everyday kitchen timer will suffice). I won't mention the timer again; just assume you'll need it for any timed exercise.
- And last but not least, an eye bag. The standard bag measures about four inches by eight inches, weighs about eight ounces, and covers only the eyes. I own a larger bag, which I find more useful—it measures about five inches by ten inches and weighs about twenty ounces. This oversize bag also covers about half my forehead, which helps to quiet both my eyes and my busybody brain.

Although I recommend these props, you should understand that they're optional. If you feel the props just get in your way, then *don't use them*. Remember though that some exercises may also demand a prop, depending on your capacities; for example, when sitting in Hero Pose (*virasana*), tight quadriceps may prevent your buttocks from resting comfortably on the floor, and tight front ankles may scream in protest. It's best in this case to sit on a block (or some other firm height, such as a folded blanket) until your quads and ankle muscles lengthen enough to allow you to sit with your buttocks on the floor.

We'll also be using three newfangled props (which are again optional) that you might not have sitting around your practice room.

ELASTIC BAND

Elastic bands are made from latex and come in different colors to indicate their degree of resistance (for example, the yellow band is relatively thin and offers less resistance, while the silver or black bands are relatively heavy and offer greater resistance). These bands are available at many sporting goods and back-care stores, as well as online. You'll need a band about four feet long, which will cost a few dollars. I favor either the red or blue bands, which offer medium to heavy resistance, but you may like less or more resistance. These bands are typically used as fitness or therapy devices, but we'll use ours (if you decide to get one) for a diaphragm exercise in part 2.

NOSE CLIPS

Rubber nose clips, the kind that swimmers wear to pinch their nostrils, are available in sporting goods stores. We won't be pinching our nostrils completely closed or going for a swim; rather, we'll be using our clips to partially close our nostrils for a breathing exercise in part 3.

EARPLUGS

There's one traditional pranayama, Bee breath (which we'll work with in part 3), in which we block our ear canals with our thumbs. It's a bit awkward to do this in the traditional way and difficult to pressure the ears evenly. I've discovered a modern alternative to thumbs: foam earplugs, which are readily available and fairly cheap at drugstores and (because power tools make lots of noise) hardware stores. I recommend a pair for Bee, unless you're determined to adhere to traditional ways.

I've also discovered serendipitously that the plugs are useful for all the other breaths, so now I use them as a matter of course for my daily breathing practice. If you decide to get a pair, try the following exercise and see if they help you too.

Preliminary

Roll and squeeze one plug between your right thumb and index finger. Then reach across the top of your head with your left hand, gently pinch your right upper ear, and pull it up until you look like you're half-Vulcan. This will open the ear canal a bit more and allow you to slip the rolled plug carefully into the canal's opening. Release both your ear and the plug, and the foam will slowly expand and block the canal. Repeat with the other ear, reversing the hand-ear directions.

Practice

Lie on your back in Corpse Pose (*shavasana*), propped in any way you like. First find your imaginary yoga ear. Draw a line between the openings of your physical ears, which will pass right across the top of your spine (at the atlas). Now gently nod your head a few times, and notice how it seems to rock on the axis of that line. Next draw another line perpendicular to the first, from your upper lip (at the root of your nose) to that little bump on the base of your skull (the occipital protuberance). Your yoga ear is located at the intersection of these two lines (see [fig. 2.1](#)).

Now perform simple Conqueror (no ratio or retention) for a few minutes. Focus the sound of the Unspoken Hymn in your yoga ear and listen carefully: notice, even at your relatively advanced stage of practice, how your breath's texture still quavers slightly. See if you can smooth over the fluctuations, so the Hymn sounds the same from beginning to end, on both the inhale and the exhale.



FIGURE 2.1

How It Helps

Blocking your ears helps internalize and amplify the sound of your breath, which makes it easier to monitor the nuances of its texture and make finer adjustments to its movement. This heightened sound is akin to white noise, which helps quiet the chattering brain.

Like all sound, the Hymn sound is vibrating energy, which can be used to invigorate the body and soothe the brain. Try these three successive “radiations” of this sound-energy. First from its focal point in your yoga ear, radiate the sound outward and let it softly massage your brain. Then channel it down along your spinal cord to your tailbone, and feel it vibrate your spine, as if it were a lightly plucked guitar string. Finally, radiate the energy out from your spine into and through your entire body, so that eventually every cell is vibrating in harmony. I sometimes feel my skin tingling during this exercise, bubbling like carbonated water.

Pranayama Tips: Sitting and the Witness

By now I assume you don’t need as many pranayama tips as you did when you first started your practice way back when. But I’d like to remind you briefly of a few important points about the sitting position and the Witness.

Proper sitting is a prerequisite for any kind of pranayama; in fact, there’s little point in sitting for formal breathing until you can first sit in balance and relatively quietly for a minimum of ten to fifteen minutes. Imbalance and fidgeting are related, the former encourages the latter, and together they disturb the brain and prevent the diaphragm from pumping freely. Pranayama practice will then be a chore at best and at worst a painful experience you’ll not want to repeat. That’s why tradition emphasizes that a regular “balancing act,” an asana practice, is so important as a foundation for pranayama.

Balanced sitting depends primarily on two things. The first is the position of the pelvis: the top rim of this “bowl” (the Latin *pelvis* means “basin”) should be parallel to the floor, or put another way, the tip of the tailbone and bottom of the pubis should be equidistant from the floor. When the pelvis is so positioned, the spine then has the opportunity to lengthen upward to its full extent, freeing the diaphragm.

For this to happen, the body must be grounded or anchored, which requires two related actions (remember that actions are imaginary, not actual physical movements). The first involves the heads of the thighbones (femurs), the ball-shaped structures that snuggle deeply within the cup-shaped hip sockets. In any sitting position, you should imagine these heads sinking deeper into your pelvis and toward the floor. You’ll know you’re having some success if your belly softens and hollows slightly and your breath drops to the bottom of your pelvis. The second action involves the tailbone, which you imagine uncurling (the coccyx curls slightly forward toward the pubis) and lengthening down into the floor like the taproot of a large tree, anchoring your back spine to the earth.

Together, the grounding of the femur heads and tailbone create a rebound effect along the front of the spine, which spontaneously lengthens upward through the crown of the head. You might once have been asked, when aligning your head with your torso, to imagine it being “pulled up” from above. But I feel it’s better to think of your head being “pushed up” from below by the anchoring action of the femur heads and tailbone. Then your head will seem to float lightly atop your spine.

Remember that just as this book had a first draft that needed a good deal of editing and refinement, your initial sitting position is similarly a kind of rough “first draft.” Despite the classical criteria that a successful pose be “steady and comfortable,” I believe that in order to achieve the latter, it is necessary to make continual subtle adjustments to the sitting position as the practice session progresses. And just as my editor (thank goodness) perceptively remarked on how I might improve the content and organization of my material, so will your breath (if you listen attentively) make continual

insightful “suggestions” on how you might improve your sitting position, which helps you breathe more fully and freely. There’s a constant interplay between body and breath, so that the former is never really rock-solid steady; rather, it’s in constant subtle motion, responding to and rhythmically pulsing with the breath.

Witnessing

Balanced sitting awakens and enlivens our old friend, the Witness. All practice is rooted *in* the Witness, since all practice (and every practice manual that ever has been or ever will be written) ultimately emerges *from* the Witness. Witnessing, in and of itself, is transformative: whatever’s being witnessed changes, and this change typically allows us to witness more clearly and closely, which produces further change in an endless feedback loop. Actually many people believe that Witnessing is all we really need to do, that the best breathing technique is *no* technique, or rather, the best technique is simply to witness the breath and allow it to follow its own natural rhythms.

Witnessing induces stillness. Initially we feel the stillness, when our body relaxes and then our brain, for once, quiets down. This in turn leads to surrender, “letting go.” Westerners—and particularly Americans—are inclined to be go-getter types and not very good at surrendering. We tend to think of surrender as waving a white flag, of throwing in the towel, of giving up in disgrace. But in yoga we actually surrender things we no longer need, things that stand in the way of our own self-fulfillment.

Simple witnessing is the first stage of pranayama, what I call conscious breathing, where we surrender, to a greater or lesser extent, the breathing impediments we’ve acquired over the years, whether physical or mental. In return, we gain some degree of understanding of our authentic breath, which, once it’s consciously established, allows us to move along to the next practice stage.

The second stage of practice, which I call formal breathing, is what we all think of as pranayama. Formal breathing is technique-driven, which means we’re not just passively watching our breath anymore but influencing it in some way, say by purposely encouraging it to slow down or reassemble altogether. Some teachers mistrust technique, but if properly applied, technique is a catalyst that can speed up the transformative process. Remember though that technique isn’t the same as control; rather, it involves a cooperative effort with the breath and should never be used to force the breath to do things it doesn’t want to do.

Scientists estimate that air-breathing has been evolving on this planet for four hundred million years, and by now breath knows its job better than anybody, including our intellectually powerful but insightfully limited Western ego, which is only about twenty-five hundred years old. Breath doesn’t mind if we try to work with it, as long as we show it suitable respect, but it reacts when we try to control it—sometimes irritably, other times violently.

As we continue to breathe and surrender, we slowly *become* the stillness, or maybe we realize our identity *with* the stillness. At this point we naturally enter the third stage of pranayama, what I call spontaneous breathing (the Latin origin of this word, *sua sponte*, means “of one’s own accord”) in which all technique falls away and the authentic breath emerges and expresses itself fully “of its own accord.” Patanjali, compiler of the *Yoga-Sutra* (2.51, and hereafter abbreviated as YS), calls this stage the “fourth” (*chaturtha*), by which he means that it transcends the three everyday phases of inhaled, exhaled, and the in-between rest (YS 2.51). As a result, he says the veil is lifted off our “inner light” (YS 2.52), our awakened mind (*buddhi*). Naturally we can’t make this stage happen—it’s a gift given to us in return for the ultimate surrender of our false or mistaken attachment to self-alienation.

Let’s reacquaint ourselves with our Witness through an exercise from *The Yoga of Breath*, which

- **[click The Shortest History of Europe](#)**
- [read online Fluent in 3 Months: How Anyone at Any Age Can Learn to Speak Any Language from Anywhere in the World here](#)
- [click Three Hundred Million](#)
- [click Goats: Small-scale Herding for Pleasure and Profit](#)

- <http://www.celebritychat.in/?ebooks/Bloodshot.pdf>
- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/Fluent-in-3-Months--How-Anyone-at-Any-Age-Can-Learn-to-Speak-Any-Language-from-Anywhere-in-the-World.pdf>
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