

PRANAYAMA

The Complete Guide to Hindu Breath Practice

prana • ayama • kumbhaka • bandha • nadi

All 14 classical pranayamas explained in full depth. The complete nadi and chakra energy system. Kumbhaka (breath retention) — the three types and their practice. The three Bandhas that seal and direct the breath. Sacred timing, classical ratios, traditional sequences. Sources in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Yoga Sutras & Shiva Samhita. Complete contraindications and safety guidelines.

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PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS

1. What Is Pranayama? Philosophy, Purpose & History

Pranayama

prana = life force / breath • ayama = extension, expansion, control

Pranayama is one of the eight limbs of Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga — described in the Yoga Sutras (2.49–2.53) as the fourth limb, coming after asana (posture) and before pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses). It is often translated simply as 'breath control,' but this is too narrow. Pranayama is the science of extending, directing, and mastering prana — the vital life force that animates all living beings — through the vehicle of breath.

The relationship between breath and mind is the key insight of pranayama: the breath is the only autonomic function of the body that can be brought under conscious control. By consciously regulating the breath, the practitioner gains indirect access to the autonomic nervous system, the flow of prana through the nadis (energy channels), and ultimately the waves of the mind itself.

"When prana moves, the mind moves. When prana is still, the mind is still. The yogi achieves steadiness of mind through breath control. — Hatha Yoga Pradipika 2.2"

Historical Sources

- **Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (~200 BCE – 400 CE):** The first systematic treatment of pranayama as a limb of yoga. Four sutras (2.49–2.53) define pranayama as regulation of the movements of inhalation and exhalation, leading to the thinning of the veil covering the light of knowledge.
- **Hatha Yoga Pradipika (~15th century CE, by Svami Svamarama):** The most detailed classical text on pranayama — describes eight primary kumbhakas (retentive pranayamas) with precise instructions. The primary source for most of the practices in this guide.
- **Gheranda Samhita (~17th century CE):** Describes eight pranayamas with detailed instructions. Includes Sheetalī, Bhastrikā, Bhramarī, Murchā, and Plavīnī alongside the kumbhaka practices.
- **Shiva Samhita (~17th century CE):** Five pranayamas described within a broader tantric framework, with emphasis on kundalini awakening.
- **Yoga Upanishads (Various dates):** A collection of minor Upanishads including Yoga Chudamānī, Darshana, and others containing detailed pranayama instruction.

2. Prana — The Life Force Behind the Breath

Prana is not oxygen. It is not simply air. Prana is the subtle vital energy that pervades all living things and flows through the universe itself. The breath is its most accessible vehicle — but prana is also absorbed through food, sunlight, water, and the company of awakened people.

The Five Pranas (Pancha Vayu)

Classical yoga texts describe prana as differentiated into five vayus (winds or currents), each governing a different region and function of the body:

Vayu	Location	Direction	Function
Prana Vayu	Chest / heart region	Inward, upward movement	Governs inhalation, the heart, and the intake of energy, food, and excretion
Apana Vayu	Pelvis / lower abdomen	Downward, outward movement	Governs elimination — of breath (exhalation), waste, menstruation, and childbirth
Samana Vayu	Navel / digestive region	Circular, equalizing movement	Governs digestion and assimilation — of food, breath, and experience
Udana Vayu	Throat / head	Upward movement	Governs speech, expression, upward energy, and the transition of consciousness
Vyana Vayu	Whole body	Outward, expansive movement	Governs circulation — blood, lymph, nerve impulses, and the distribution of energy

3. The Nadis — 72,000 Energy Channels

The nadis are the subtle energy channels through which prana flows in the body. The classical texts count 72,000 nadis; 14 are considered primary; three are supremely important for pranayama practice.

The Three Principal Nadis

Ida Nadi — Moon Channel

Pathway: Left nostril → left side of body → base of spine (Muladhara)

Cooling, calming, feminine, lunar energy. Associated with the parasympathetic nervous system, the right brain hemisphere, and the mental/emotional body. When Ida is dominant, the left nostril is more open — the mind is receptive, creative, and introverted. Breathing through the left nostril activates Ida.

Pingala Nadi — Sun Channel

Pathway: Right nostril → right side of body → base of spine

Heating, activating, masculine, solar energy. Associated with the sympathetic nervous system, the left brain hemisphere, and the vital/physical body. When Pingala is dominant, the right nostril is more open — the mind is analytical, active, and extroverted. Breathing through the right nostril activates Pingala.

Sushumna Nadi — Central Channel

Pathway: Base of spine → through each chakra → crown of head

The most important nadi for spiritual practice. Normally dormant — prana flows primarily through Ida and Pingala. When pranayama balances Ida and Pingala perfectly, prana enters Sushumna and travels upward through the chakras, awakening higher states of consciousness. This is the ultimate goal of pranayama in the classical texts. Sushumna flows when neither nostril dominates — a brief, naturally occurring state that meditation and pranayama seek to prolong.

Modern Science on Nasal Dominance Research at the Salk Institute and elsewhere has confirmed the 'nasal cycle' — the nostrils naturally alternate dominance every 90–120 minutes in most people. Studies show this correlates with brain hemisphere activity: right nostril open = left hemisphere more active (logical, verbal); left nostril open = right hemisphere more active (spatial, creative). Pranayama practitioners have known this for 3,000 years.

4. The Chakras & Their Relationship to Breath

The seven primary chakras are energy centers along the Sushumna nadi where multiple nadis intersect. Each chakra governs specific physiological functions, psychological states, and spiritual capacities. Different pranayamas activate different chakras.

Chakra	Region	Element	Governs	Pranayama
Muladhara	Base of spine	Earth	Security, foundation, survival	Retention (Kumbhaka) and Mula Bandha activate Muladhara
Svadhithana	Lower abdomen	Water	Creativity, sexuality, emotions	Kapalabhati and abdominal breathing
Manipura	Navel	Fire	Will, digestion, personal power	Pranastrika, Kapalabhati, Agnisara
Anahata	Center of chest	Air	Love, compassion, balance	Ujjayi, Bhramari, and equal breathing
Vishuddha	Throat	Space/Ether	Communication, purification	Ujjayi (throat breath), Jalandhara Bandha
Ajna	Between eyebrows	Light	Intuition, wisdom, inner sight	Nadi Shodhana, Trataka (gazing) combined with pranayama
Sahasrara	Top of skull	Consciousness	Unity, liberation, pure awareness	Kevala Kumbhaka; spontaneous awakening through sust

5. Sacred Timing — When and How to Practice

The Four Daily Sandhyas (Sacred Junctions)

Traditional pranayama is timed to the sandhyas — the junction points of the day when energy is particularly accessible:

Brahma Muhurta (1.5 hrs before sunrise)

The Creator's Hour: Air is purest, mind is clearest, the world is still. Considered the most powerful time for all spiritual practice.

Practices: Full pranayama sequence — all types. Particularly Nadi Shodhana, Kapalabhati, Anuloma Viloma, and meditation.

Sunrise (Pratah Sandhya)

Morning Junction: The transition from darkness to light. Solar energy begins to build.

Practices: Surya Bhedana (right nostril breathing) to build solar energy. Kapalabhati to clear morning sluggishness.

Sunset (Sayam Sandhya)

Evening Junction: The transition from light to darkness. The body begins its cooling, restoring cycle.

Practices: Chandra Bhedana (left nostril) to cool down. Bhramari and Nadi Shodhana for calming.

Midnight (Ardha Ratri Sandhya)

Midnight Junction: Rarely practiced by householders; traditional for advanced renunciants and monastic practitioners.

Practices: Advanced kumbhaka and meditation practices.

General Timing Rules

- Always practice on an empty stomach — minimum 2–3 hours after eating, 4+ hours after a heavy meal
- Morning practice: brush teeth, empty bowels and bladder, wash face and hands before sitting
- Face east at sunrise, north at other times — traditional directional alignment
- Sit on a natural fiber mat (wool, cotton, or grass) on the floor — not directly on the bare earth and not on a chair if possible
- The room should be clean, well-ventilated but not drafty, free of strong smells and noise

- Do not practice during severe illness, very high fever, or immediately after strenuous exercise
- Women traditionally rest from advanced pranayama during menstruation — gentle Nadi Shodhana without retention is generally acceptable

6. Asana, Mudra & Preparation for Pranayama

Sitting Postures for Pranayama

- **Padmasana (Lotus):** The classical meditation posture. Both feet resting on opposite thighs. Considered ideal for pranayama as it creates maximum stability and the natural spinal alignment that allows prana to flow freely. Requires hip flexibility.
- **Siddhasana (Perfect Pose):** One heel pressed against the perineum, other foot resting on the ankle. Considered by some texts as superior to Padmasana for pranayama specifically — it naturally stimulates Muladhara chakra.
- **Sukhasana (Easy Pose):** Simple cross-legged sitting. Acceptable for beginners or those with limited hip flexibility. Use a folded blanket under the hips to tilt the pelvis forward and straighten the spine.
- **Vajrasana (Thunderbolt):** Kneeling with buttocks resting on heels. The only posture traditionally permitted immediately after eating (for Kapalabhati specifically). Keeps the spine naturally upright.
- **Chair sitting:** When physical limitations prevent floor sitting — sit at the front edge of the chair, feet flat on the floor, spine erect and unsupported by the chair back.

Vishnu Mudra — The Hand Position for Alternate Nostril Breathing

The right hand is used for all alternate nostril practices. Fold the index finger and middle finger toward the palm (or rest them on the bridge of the nose). This leaves:

- The thumb — to close the right nostril
- The ring finger and little finger together — to close the left nostril

The left hand rests on the left knee in Jnana Mudra (index finger and thumb touching, other fingers extended) or Chin Mudra (palm facing up).

7. The Three Bandhas — Locks That Direct Prana

Bandhas (from Sanskrit: to bind or lock) are internal muscular contractions that seal prana in specific regions of the body during pranayama, preventing its dissipation and directing it upward through the Sushumna. The three bandhas are always applied during Kumbhaka (retention) and sometimes during exhalation.

Mula Bandha — Root Lock

Location: Perineum (between genitals and anus)

How to apply: Contract the perineal muscles upward and inward — similar to a Kegel exercise but more subtle. The contraction rises from the pelvic floor.

Effect: Contains and redirects apana vayu upward. Seals the base of the Sushumna nadi. Awakens Muladhara chakra. Generates inner heat.

Uddiyana Bandha — Upward Flying Lock

Location: Abdomen — applied after full exhalation only

How to apply: After exhaling completely, draw the abdomen in AND up — the belly hollows and lifts toward the spine and ribcage simultaneously. Never applied during inhalation or retention after inhalation.

Effect: Massages abdominal organs. Stimulates samana vayu. Creates upward movement of prana. Awakens Manipura chakra.

Jalandhara Bandha — Net-Bearing Lock / Chin Lock

Location: Throat — applied during retention

How to apply: Lower the chin toward the chest while simultaneously lifting the sternum slightly upward. The back of the neck lengthens. The chin does not need to touch the chest in beginners.

Effect: Compresses the carotid sinus, slowing the heart rate. Prevents prana from escaping through the throat during retention. Awakens Vishuddha chakra. Prevents dizziness during kumbhaka.

Maha Bandha — The Great Lock When all three bandhas are applied simultaneously during kumbhaka, the result is called Maha Bandha (the Great Lock). This seals prana completely within the central channel, creating maximum upward pressure on the sushumna and the chakras. It is an advanced practice — each bandha must be stable individually before combining them.

8. Kumbhaka — The Art of Breath Retention

Kumbhaka

kumbha = pot or pitcher • The breath held like water in a vessel

Kumbhaka — the retention of breath — is the most transformative and the most dangerous element of pranayama. The classical texts give it enormous importance: Patanjali states that through pranayama 'the veil covering the inner light is thinned.' The Hatha Yoga Pradipika declares that kumbhaka is the practice that most directly stills the mind.

The Three Types of Kumbhaka

- **Puraka Kumbhaka (Antara Kumbhaka) — Internal Retention:** Retention after inhalation. The lungs are full; the breath is held inside. Both bandhas are applied: Jalandhara (chin lock) first, then Mula Bandha (root lock). This is the more commonly practiced form. Effect: Energizing, heating, building. Increases prana absorption. Can raise blood pressure — avoided by hypertensive practitioners.
- **Rechaka Kumbhaka (Bahya Kumbhaka) — External Retention:** Retention after exhalation. The lungs are empty; the breath is held outside. All three bandhas applied: Mula, Uddiyana, and Jalandhara. This is more advanced and more intense than internal retention. Effect: Deeply calming for the nervous system. Massages internal organs powerfully via Uddiyana Bandha. Stimulates apana vayu and detoxification. Can cause dizziness — never practiced by beginners.
- **Sahita Kumbhaka — Intentional Retention:** Either of the above practiced intentionally through effort — the form practiced by most students. Effect: Develops capacity for Kevala Kumbhaka over time.

The classical ratio for kumbhaka practice is 1:4:2 — inhale for 1 count, retain for 4 counts, exhale for 2 counts. A beginner might start with 4:4:8 counts. An advanced practitioner might work with 16:64:32 or higher.

Caution: Kumbhaka should never be practiced to the point of distress, gasping, dizziness, or involuntary breaking of the breath. Forcing retention is counter-productive and potentially harmful. Build the ratio gradually over months and years, not days. Never practice advanced kumbhaka without guidance from a qualified teacher. Contraindicated for: heart conditions, hypertension, epilepsy, pregnancy, glaucoma, recent surgery.

PART TWO: THE 14 PRANAYAMAS

9. Nadi Shodhana — Channel Purification (Basic)

Nadi Shodhana		<i>Alternate Nostril • No Retention Beginner</i>
Nadi Shodhana	<i>nadi = channel • shodhana = purification, cleansing</i>	
Ratio	Inhale : Exhale = 1:1 (e.g., 4 counts each)	
Timing	Any time; ideal morning or evening	
Benefits	Balances Ida and Pingala nadis; calms the nervous system; reduces anxiety and stress; improves focus; prepares the mind for meditation; equalizes left/right brain activity; lowers blood pressure; improves sleep quality	
Avoid if	Severe nasal congestion (practice Ujjayi instead); acute respiratory infection	

Sit in a comfortable meditation posture. Right hand in Vishnu Mudra. Left hand in Jnana Mudra on left knee. 1. Close the right nostril with the thumb. Inhale slowly and smoothly through the left nostril for 4 counts. 2. Close both nostrils briefly. 3. Release the thumb. Close the left nostril with ring+pinky fingers. Exhale smoothly through the right nostril for 4 counts. 4. Inhale through the right nostril for 4 counts. 5. Close both nostrils briefly. 6. Release ring+pinky. Close right with thumb. Exhale through left for 4 counts. 7. This completes ONE round. Practice 5–20 rounds. Key points: The breath should be smooth, slow, and soundless. The transition between nostrils should be seamless — no pause where both nostrils are open simultaneously.

10. Anuloma Viloma — Alternate Nostril with Retention

Anuloma Viloma

Alternate Nostril • With Retention |
Intermediate

Anuloma Viloma

anuloma = with the grain, natural order • viloma = against the grain

Ratio	Inhale : Retain : Exhale = 1:4:2 (classic). Beginners: 1:1:2
Timing	Morning practice; never before bed (energizing)
Benefits	All benefits of Nadi Shodhana plus: awakens Sushumna nadi; develops lung capacity; massages heart and lungs; builds pranic energy; develops concentration and one-pointedness; classical text says it destroys all diseases with consistent practice
Avoid if	Hypertension (avoid or use minimal retention); heart conditions; pregnancy; epilepsy; glaucoma. Do not practice Anuloma Viloma if you cannot do Nadi Shodhana comfortably for 10+ rounds.

Same setup as Nadi Shodhana. Begin with a comfortable ratio — a common beginner ratio is 4:4:8 (inhale 4, retain 4, exhale 8). 1. Close right nostril. Inhale left for 4 counts. 2. Close BOTH nostrils. Apply Jalandhara Bandha (chin lock) and Mula Bandha (root lock). Retain for 16 counts. 3. Release bandhas (Mula first, then Jalandhara). Open right nostril. Exhale right for 8 counts. 4. Inhale right for 4 counts. 5. Close both. Apply both bandhas. Retain for 16 counts. 6. Release bandhas. Exhale left for 8 counts. 7. This is one complete round. Start with 3 rounds, build to 12. Progress the ratio gradually: 4:4:8 → 4:8:8 → 4:8:16 → 4:12:8 → 4:16:8 over months. Never rush.

11. Surya Bhedana — Sun Piercing

Surya Bhedana

Single Nostril • Right Activating |
Beginner–Intermediate

Surya Bhedana

surya = sun • bhedana = piercing, breaking through

Ratio	Inhale right : Retain : Exhale left = 1:4:2
Timing	Morning; when sluggish, cold, or depressed; NOT at night or when hot
Benefits	Activates Pingala (solar) energy; generates body heat; increases alertness and mental clarity; stimulates digestion; energizes and uplifts mood; useful for cold climates and cold constitutions; the HYP says it 'destroys wind disorders and worms'; modern research: activates left brain hemisphere
Avoid if	High blood pressure; Pitta (fire) constitutions already running hot; summer practice in hot climates; insomnia; anxiety; do NOT use when already agitated or overheated

Sit in meditation posture. Right hand in Vishnu Mudra. 1. Close the LEFT nostril with ring+pinky fingers. 2. Inhale slowly and completely through the RIGHT nostril. 3. Close both nostrils. Apply bandhas. Retain. 4. Release bandhas. Open the LEFT nostril. Close the right with thumb. 5. Exhale completely through the LEFT nostril. 6. This is one round. Inhale is ALWAYS through right; exhale ALWAYS through left. Practice 3–12 rounds. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika recommends practicing until the body breaks a light sweat as a sign of adequate stimulation.

12. Chandra Bhedana — Moon Piercing

Chandra Bhedana

Single Nostril • Left Calming |
Beginner–Intermediate

Chandra Bhedana

chandra = moon • bhedana = piercing

Ratio	Inhale left : Retain : Exhale right = 1:4:2
Timing	Evening; when overheated, anxious, or agitated; before sleep
Benefits	Activates Ida (lunar) energy; cools the body and mind; reduces anxiety and anger; lowers blood pressure; promotes deep sleep; calms Pitta (fire) constitutions; activates right brain hemisphere; excellent for hot climates and hot seasons
Avoid if	Depression; low energy; cold constitutions; winter practice in cold climates; Kapha (earth/water) constitutions prone to lethargy; hypothyroidism (use caution)

Exact mirror image of Surya Bhedana. 1. Close the RIGHT nostril with the thumb. 2. Inhale slowly and completely through the LEFT nostril. 3. Close both nostrils. Apply bandhas. Retain. 4. Release bandhas. Open right nostril. 5. Exhale completely through the RIGHT nostril. 6. Inhale is ALWAYS through left; exhale ALWAYS through right. Practice 3–12 rounds. Can be practiced lying down in bed as a sleep aid — in this case, omit the retention.

13. Ujjayi — The Victorious or Ocean Breath

Ujjayi

Throat Breath • Both Nostrils |
Beginner (basic) / Intermediate
(with retention)

Ujjayi

ud = upward, expanding • jayi = victorious, conquering

Ratio

Inhale : Retain : Exhale = 1:4:2 (traditional). Without retention: 1:0:2

Timing

Morning practice; also the only pranayama practiced during asana

Benefits

The most widely known pranayama in modern yoga practice. Generates internal heat (tapas). Calms the nervous system while maintaining alertness — neither sedating nor overstimulating. Massages the vagus nerve at the throat, activating parasympathetic response. Improves lung capacity; treats thyroid conditions (classical text); excellent for anxiety accompanied by cold extremities; the 'ocean sound' provides internal focus during asana practice.

Avoid if

Severe thyroid conditions (consult doctor); any condition where increased internal heat is contraindicated; do not practice with force — the sound should be soft

The key is a slight constriction of the glottis (the throat). To find the Ujjayi breath: open your mouth and breathe out as if fogging a mirror — notice the slight 'haaa' sound and the sensation at the back of the throat. Now close the mouth and make the same constriction while breathing through the nose. The resulting sound is a soft oceanic hiss or whisper — like distant waves, or like Darth Vader breathing very gently. Both inhalation and exhalation produce the sound equally. The breath is slow, smooth, and full. The sound should be audible to you but not to someone across the room. With retention: after the full Ujjayi inhale, close the nostrils, apply Jalandhara Bandha, and retain. The Ujjayi constriction is maintained throughout. Release and exhale through Ujjayi.

14. Kapalabhati — Skull Shining Breath

Kapalabhati

Active Exhalation • Kriya
(Cleansing Practice) | Beginner
(technique) / builds over time

Kapalabhati

kapala = skull • bhati = shining, illuminating

Ratio	~1–2 exhalations per second. 30–120 strokes per round.
Timing	Morning only — never at night. Before other pranayamas in the sequence.
Benefits	Clears the respiratory tract and sinuses ('skull shining' = the head becomes clear and luminous). Strengthens the abdominal muscles. Massages all abdominal organs. Generates significant heat. Detoxifying — classified as a Shat Kriya (one of six classical cleansing practices) rather than a pranayama proper. Increases metabolic rate. Improves focus and mental clarity. Stimulates Manipura chakra.
Avoid if	Pregnancy; menstruation; hypertension; heart conditions; hernia; recent abdominal surgery; epilepsy; vertigo or history of fainting; detached retina or glaucoma. DO NOT practice if you feel dizzy at any point — stop immediately.

Kapalabhati is defined by sharp, forceful exhalations with completely passive inhalations.

1. Sit upright. Take a normal breath in.
2. FORCEFULLY contract the lower abdomen inward — this expels the breath in a sharp, short burst through both nostrils.
3. IMMEDIATELY release the abdomen completely. The lungs refill passively — you do NOT actively inhale. The inhalation is automatic.
4. Repeat rhythmically at about 1–2 exhalations per second.
5. Beginners: 30 pumps, rest, 30 pumps, rest, 30 pumps (3 rounds).
6. Advanced: Up to 120 pumps per round, 3–5 rounds. After each round, take a full natural breath and observe the stillness of the mind. This rest period between rounds is as important as the practice itself.

15. Bhastrika — Bellows Breath

Bhastrika

*Active Inhalation AND Exhalation |
Intermediate — more intense than
Kapalabhati*

Bhastrika

bhastrika = bellows (the blacksmith's bellows that fans a fire)

Ratio	~1 breath per second. 10–20 breaths per round for beginners.
Timing	Morning only. After Kapalabhati in a traditional sequence.
Benefits	The most powerful heating pranayama. Balances all three doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) according to Ayurveda. Rapidly increases oxygen and prana in the body. Awakens Kundalini energy. Purifies all nadis. Quickly clears physical and mental lethargy. The HYP calls it 'destroyer of all diseases caused by excess wind, bile, and phlegm.'
Avoid if	Stricter than Kapalabhati — all the same contraindications PLUS anyone with Pitta imbalance (overheating, anger, inflammation); high-altitude environments; extreme heat; NEVER practice more than 3 rounds without rest

Unlike Kapalabhati where only the exhalation is forceful, BOTH inhalation and exhalation are equally forceful in Bhastrika. 1. Sit upright. Take a breath to prepare. 2. Forcefully exhale through both nostrils — lower abdomen pumps in. 3. Immediately and forcefully inhale — lower abdomen expands out. 4. Continue rhythmically: forceful out, forceful in, forceful out... 5. After the round (10–20 breaths for beginners), take one deep complete inhalation, then retain with bandhas for as long as comfortable. 6. Exhale slowly. Rest. Observe the energy in the body. 7. Repeat for 2–3 rounds maximum. The movement is from the lower abdomen — the chest moves secondarily. Do not move the shoulders. The breath should sound like bellows — rhythmic and powerful, not erratic.

16. Bhramari — Humming Bee Breath

Bhramari

Humming Exhalation • Extremely Calming | Beginner — one of the safest pranayamas

Bhramari

bhramara = large black bee • named for the humming sound it produces

Ratio	Inhale : Exhale with hum = 1:2 or longer. No strict ratio required.
Timing	Any time; particularly powerful before sleep and meditation
Benefits	The fastest pranayama for reducing anxiety, anger, and agitation. The sound vibration (particularly at the 'M' frequency) directly stimulates the vagus nerve and activates the parasympathetic system. Reduces blood pressure. Helps with insomnia. Stimulates Ajna (third eye) and Sahasrara (crown) chakras through vibration. Used in classical texts for preparation of samadhi (deep meditative absorption). Excellent for singers and speakers — tones the vocal cords.
Avoid if	Ear infections or severe ear pain (the vibration increases pressure); very few other contraindications — one of the most universally accessible pranayamas

1. Sit comfortably. Optionally use Shanmukhi Mudra (described below). 2. Inhale deeply through both nostrils. 3. On the exhalation, close the lips and produce a steady 'mmmm' hum — like humming a note with your mouth closed. The sound should be smooth, continuous, and resonant throughout the entire exhalation. 4. Feel the vibration in the skull, face, and chest. 5. Inhale again and repeat. Practice 5–21 rounds. Shanmukhi Mudra (advanced addition): Close the ears with the thumbs, place index fingers lightly on closed eyelids, middle fingers on the sides of the nose, ring fingers above the upper lip, pinky fingers below the lower lip. This seals all senses and intensifies the internal experience dramatically — the hum fills the skull like a bell.

17. Sheetali — Cooling Breath (Curled Tongue)

Sheetali

*Cooling • Inhale through mouth |
Beginner — but genetic variation in
tongue-rolling ability applies*

Sheetali

sheetal = cool, cold • the cooling breath

Ratio	Inhale through tongue : Retain : Exhale through nose = 1:4:2
Timing	Summer; hot climates; midday; when overheated or feverish; after heating practices
Benefits	Dramatically cools the body — the tongue acts as a cooling coil. Reduces Pitta (fire) imbalance. Excellent for fever (classical texts mention this specifically). Reduces hunger and thirst. Calms anger and irritability. Purifies blood. Reduces acidity. The HYP states it 'destroys gulma (abdominal tumors), fever, disorders of the spleen and bile, hunger, thirst, and poisons.'
Avoid if	Cold or Kapha constitutions; winter; cold climates; low blood pressure; asthma (the cold inhaled air can trigger); respiratory infections; sinus conditions. Also — approximately 25-35% of people cannot curl their tongue genetically; use Sheetkari (next chapter) instead.

1. Sit comfortably. Stick the tongue out slightly. 2. Curl the sides of the tongue upward to form a tube (like a straw). 3. Inhale slowly and completely through this tongue-tube — you will feel the cool air passing over the tongue. 4. Draw the tongue in, close the mouth, retain with bandhas. 5. Exhale slowly and completely through BOTH NOSTRILS. 6. This is one round. Practice 8–15 rounds. The cooling effect is quite noticeable — the tongue and mouth become cool within a few rounds.

18. Sheetkari — Cooling Breath (Hissing)

Sheetkari

Cooling • Alternative to Sheetalī |
Beginner

Sheetkari

sheet = cold • kari = producing, making

Ratio	Inhale through teeth : Retain : Exhale through nose = 1:4:2
Timing	Same as Sheetalī — summer, heat, after heating practices
Benefits	Same cooling effects as Sheetalī — available to those who cannot curl their tongue. Additionally: strengthens gums and teeth (classical texts). The HYP states it makes one 'beautiful as the god of love, beloved of women.'
Avoid if	Same as Sheetalī. Also: dental sensitivity or conditions where cold air on teeth causes pain

1. Press the upper and lower teeth together lightly. 2. Part the lips to expose the teeth — like a wide, slight smile. 3. Inhale slowly through the teeth, drawing air through the gaps — this produces a soft 'ssss' hissing sound. The tongue rests naturally. 4. Close the mouth. Retain with bandhas. 5. Exhale through both nostrils. 6. Practice 8–15 rounds. The hissing sound gives this practice its name. The cooling effect is slightly less dramatic than Sheetalī but achieves the same physiological result.

19. Murcha — Swooning Breath

Murcha

*Advanced • Altered Consciousness
| Advanced — requires established
pranayama practice*

Murcha

*murcha = to faint, to swoon • produces a swoon-like state
of consciousness*

Ratio

Long inhale : Very long retention : Slow exhale. No standard ratio — guided by direct experience.

Timing

Morning meditation practice only

Benefits

Produces a profound internalized state resembling the borderline of consciousness — the mind withdraws from external sensation and enters a deeply blissful, expanded state. Used specifically as a bridge between pranayama and meditation (dhyana). The HYP describes it as giving 'bliss' and 'the experience of the dissolution of the mind in consciousness.'

Avoid if

Strictly for advanced practitioners with an experienced teacher. Not appropriate for beginners under any circumstances. All previous contraindications apply plus: should never be practiced alone; can produce genuine altered states — do not practice before driving or operating machinery

This practice is traditionally taught only in person from teacher to student. The general outline from classical texts: 1. After establishing a full, steady pranayama practice, inhale deeply through both nostrils with Ujjayi breath. 2. Apply Jalandhara Bandha (chin lock) FIRMLY — this is what creates the swooning effect by compressing the carotid arteries. 3. Apply Mula Bandha. 4. Retain for an extended period — beyond what is comfortable, until the mind begins to expand outward. 5. Release both bandhas slowly. Exhale very slowly. 6. The 'swooning' or bliss state follows naturally. Do not pursue this practice from text instructions alone. Seek a qualified teacher.

20. Plavini — Floating Breath

Plavini

*Advanced • Swallowed Air |
Advanced — unusual technique*

Plavini

plu = to float, to swim • enables the body to float

Ratio	No standard ratio — based on the capacity to swallow air
Timing	Morning; specialized practice
Benefits	The classical texts claim that with mastery of Plavini, a practitioner can float on water and survive for extended periods without food. While these claims are taken metaphorically by most modern scholars, the practice does produce a distinctive expanded sensation in the abdomen and is used to develop awareness of the pranic body. Considered a preparation for the Vayus practices in advanced Hatha Yoga.
Avoid if	Not appropriate for those with digestive disorders, GERD, hiatal hernia, or any condition affecting the esophagus. Advanced practice only.

Plavini involves filling the stomach (not the lungs) with air — similar in mechanism to what practitioners of gastric insufflation do. 1. Swallow air in small gulps, accumulating it in the stomach — similar to the mechanism that produces a belch. 2. Fill the stomach until it feels full and distended with air. 3. Breathe normally while maintaining the stomach full of air. 4. Practice specific retention and movement exercises while in this state. 5. Release the air gradually. This is a highly specialized practice rarely taught in contemporary yoga — primarily of historical and classical interest.

21. Surya Anuloma Viloma — Solar Channel Breathing

Surya Anuloma Viloma

Right Nostril with Alternate Retention | Intermediate

Surya Anuloma Viloma

surya = sun • anuloma viloma = alternate flow with retention

Ratio	Inhale right : Retain : Exhale right = 1:4:2 (then switch sides)
Timing	Morning; for building vitality and digestive fire
Benefits	Specifically activates Pingala (solar) nadi more intensely than standard Surya Bhedana. Builds vitality and ojas (vital essence). Improves digestive fire (Agni). Builds immunity according to Ayurvedic medicine. Generates sustained warmth and energy.
Avoid if	Same as Surya Bhedana — hypertension, Pitta imbalance, overheating. Not for summer or hot weather.

A more structured alternation than Surya Bhedana: 1. Inhale through right nostril. 2. Retain with both bandhas. 3. Exhale through right nostril (same side — NOT switching to left). 4. Then for the next cycle: inhale right, retain, exhale left. 5. Then: inhale left, retain, exhale left. 6. Then: inhale left, retain, exhale right. This creates a spiral pattern through the channels rather than simple alternation, producing a more complex pranic effect. Taught as a specialized practice in some Hatha Yoga traditions.

22. Kevala Kumbhaka — Spontaneous Retention

Kevala Kumbhaka

*Spontaneous • Beyond Practice |
Not practiced — it arises*

Kevala Kumbhaka

kevala = alone, absolute, complete • kumbhaka = retention The retention that stands alone — not preceded by inhale or exhale

Ratio No ratio — it is spontaneous and not intentionally timed

Timing Arises spontaneously during deep meditation

Benefits The Hatha Yoga Pradipika states: 'Nothing in the three worlds is difficult to attain for one who has attained Kevala Kumbhaka.' Considered the highest state of pranayama — where breath retention occurs naturally without effort, indicating that prana has entered and is flowing through Sushumna. The mind rests in samadhi. This is the goal that all other pranayamas are preparing for.

Avoid if Not applicable — this is not a technique to be attempted

Kevala Kumbhaka cannot be practiced intentionally — it is a fruit of sustained pranayama practice over years. What the classical texts describe: during deep meditation, after years of pranayama practice, the breath spontaneously becomes so refined and subtle that it ceases naturally — the practitioner is neither inhaling nor exhaling, yet there is no distress. The mind is perfectly still. This is understood as prana entering the Sushumna and the veil covering samadhi becoming very thin. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika (2.72): 'When the breath is restrained in Kevala Kumbhaka without the effort of inhaling or exhaling, there is nothing that cannot be achieved in all the three worlds.'

PART THREE: PRACTICE & INTEGRATION

23. Traditional Sequences — How to Combine Pranayamas

The Classical Morning Sequence

Step	Practice & Duration	Purpose
1. Kapalabhati	3 rounds of 30–60 pumps —	Clears the respiratory tract; generates heat; prepares the body. Rest between rounds.
2. Bhastrika	2–3 rounds of 10–20 breaths —	Intensifies the heat and pranic charge built by Kapalabhati. Skip if already overheated.
3. Nadi Shodhana	19–20 minutes. An alternate of the practice —	balancing and purifying the channels.
4. Ujjayi	5–10 minutes —	Deepens the internalized quality. Prepares for meditation.
5. Bhramari	5–10 minutes —	Quiets the mind completely. The bridge between pranayama and meditation.
6. Meditation (Dhyana)	15–30 minutes —	The natural fruit of pranayama practice. Sit in the stillness generated.

24. Classical Ratios — The Numbers Behind the Practice

The ratio of inhale : retain : exhale is one of the most precisely developed aspects of pranayama. Different ratios produce markedly different physiological and psychological effects:

Ratio	Description	Used in	Effect
1:0:1	Equal breath, no retention	Beginner Nadi Shodhana	Balancing, calming, neutral
1:0:2	Exhale twice as long	Ujjayi, calming practices	Activates parasympathetic; reduces anxiety
1:1:1	Equal thirds	Sukha Purvaka	Gentle balance; suitable for most
1:2:2	Retention = exhale	Transitional	Mild pranic building
1:4:2	Classic pranayama ratio	Anuloma Viloma, Surya/Chandra Bhedana	The most transformative ratio — builds prana, stills mind
1:4:4	Extended exhale variant	Advanced practice	Deep calming; powerful parasympathetic activation
1:8:4	Extended retention	Advanced kumbhaka	Significant pranic pressure; advanced practitioners only
1:16:8	The 'perfect ratio'	Classical texts' ideal	The ratio described in classical texts as most effective for

25. Pranayama by Goal — Which Practice for What Outcome

Goal	Recommended Practices (in order)
Reduce anxiety immediately	Bhramari (fastest) • Chandra Bhedana • Nadi Shodhana without retention
Build energy and alertness	Kapalabhati • Bhastrika • Surya Bhedana
Cool down (heat, anger, fever)	Sheetali • Sheetkari • Chandra Bhedana
Prepare for sleep	Chandra Bhedana • Bhramari with Shanmukhi Mudra • Long exhale Ujjayi
Prepare for meditation	Nadi Shodhana (balanced) • Bhramari • Ujjayi
Deepen spiritual practice	Anuloma Viloma with bandhas • Bhramari with Shanmukhi Mudra • Kevala Kumbhaka (arises n
Improve lung capacity	Ujjayi • Anuloma Viloma • Bhastrika (build gradually)
Detoxify and cleanse	Kapalabhati • Bhastrika • Uddiyana Bandha with Bahya Kumbhaka
Balance mood and emotions	Nadi Shodhana • Anuloma Viloma • Bhramari
Reduce blood pressure	Chandra Bhedana • Nadi Shodhana (no retention) • Bhramari

Increase body heat (cold climate)	Surya Bhedana • Bhastrika • Kapalabhati
Develop concentration	Anuloma Viloma with retention • Ujjayi • Bhramari with Shanmukhi Mudra

26. Safety, Contraindications & Common Mistakes

Universal Safety Rules

- NEVER force the breath. If at any point you feel distress, dizziness, chest pain, or the irresistible urge to breathe — stop immediately and breathe normally.
- Build slowly. The classical texts describe months and years of progression, not days and weeks. Patience is not optional — it is part of the practice.
- Pranayama is not suitable for everyone. Consult your physician before beginning if you have any cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, or mental health condition.
- Never practice under the influence of alcohol or recreational drugs.
- Never practice while driving, operating machinery, or in water.
- Seek a qualified teacher for any retention practices. This guide provides information, not a substitute for direct instruction.

Absolute Contraindications (Do Not Practice Without Medical Clearance)

- Uncontrolled hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Heart arrhythmias or recent cardiac event
- Epilepsy or seizure disorders
- Severe anxiety or panic disorder (start only with Bhramari and gentle Nadi Shodhana)
- Detached retina or glaucoma
- Pregnancy (all retention and forceful practices)
- Recent abdominal surgery
- Active tuberculosis or severe asthma
- Severe mental illness or psychosis

Common Mistakes

- **Mistake — Breathing too fast:** Slower is almost always better. The mind follows the breath.
- **Mistake — Moving the shoulders during Kapalabhati/Bhastrika:** All movement should come from the lower abdomen.
- **Mistake — Forcing retention beyond capacity:** Retention should end before you feel desperate to breathe.
- **Mistake — Skipping the rest periods between rounds:** The stillness between rounds is when the practice integrates.

- **Mistake — Practicing with a full stomach:** Always wait at least 2–3 hours after eating.
- **Mistake — Expecting immediate results:** Pranayama works deeply and sometimes slowly. Trust the process.

27. The Classical Texts on Pranayama

Text	Relevant Section	Content
Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (~200 BCE–400 CE)	Sutras 2.49–2.53	The foundational yogic text. Defines pranayama as the regulation of inhalation, exhalation, and retention of breath.
Hatha Yoga Pradipika (Svami Svātāmara, ~15th c.)	Chapter 2: Pranayama	The most detailed classical pranayama text. Describes eight kumbhakas: Surya, Bhramari, Uddiyana, Kapalabhati, Anuloma, Viloma, Bhastrika, and Trisanku.
Gheranda Samhita (~17th c.)	Chapter 5: Pranayama	Eight pranayamas described with detailed instructions. Organizes pranayama into eight types: Uddiyana, Bhramari, Anuloma, Viloma, Bhastrika, Trisanku, Kapalabhati, and Surya.
Shiva Samhita (~17th c.)	Chapter 3	Five pranayamas described in a tantric context. Emphasizes the relationship between pranayama and the subtle body.
Yoga Chudamani Upanishad (date uncertain)	Verses on Pranava and Prāṇasāya	Discusses the relationship between Om (pranava), the breath, and consciousness.

"The yogi who knows Pranayama and Pratyahara is freed from all diseases and lives for a hundred years. — Hatha Yoga Pradipika 2.39"

May your practice bring stillness, clarity, and the living experience of prana moving freely through you.