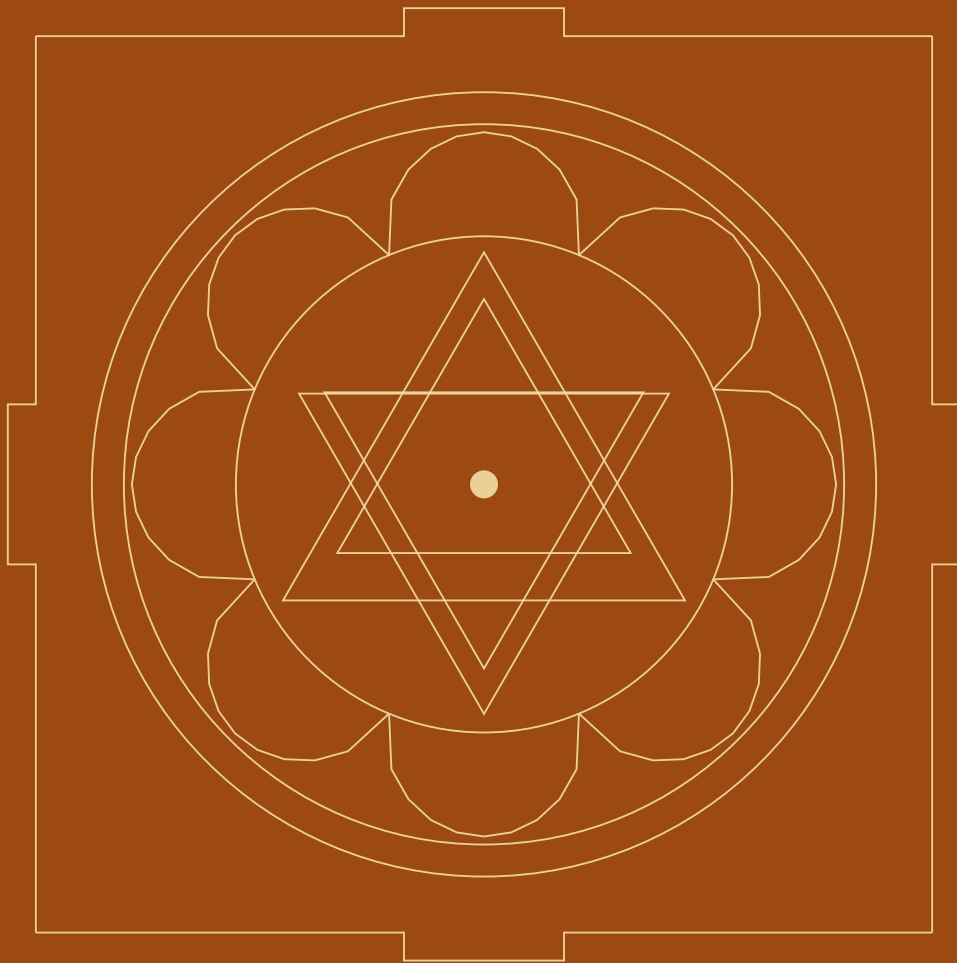


PRACTICE

Pranayama: The Breath Manual

The classical breathing techniques of hatha yoga, step by step, with the texts, the research and every precaution



प्राणायाम

prāṇāyāma

YOGIDE

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teacher or medical advice. Questions; administration@lacangel.fr

Before you begin

The Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (5.84) counts twenty-one thousand six hundred breaths in a day and a night, nearly all of them taken without a single thought. Pranayama is what happens when you start thinking about it: when the breath stops being something that simply happens to you and becomes something you can observe, shape, slow down, lengthen and, eventually, rest inside. In the yoga of India this is not a side exercise. In the classical sequence of Patanjali it is the fourth of the eight limbs, the bridge between the body (asana) and the inner limbs that lead to meditation. In the hatha yoga texts it is the heart of the whole practice.

This manual has one aim: to let you practise the classical breathing techniques correctly, safely and with an understanding of where they come from. Each technique is described the way a good teacher in Rishikesh would teach it in a small morning class: what it is called and why, what the old texts actually say about it, how to do it step by step, how long and how often, what you should feel, what mistakes to avoid, and who should not do it.

It rests on three commitments.

First, the sources are real. The verses quoted come from two Sanskrit manuals of hatha yoga, the Haṭhayogapradīpikā (15th century) and the Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (17th or 18th century), and from Patanjali's Yoga Sūtra. When this book gives an English rendering, it is either our own paraphrase from the Sanskrit or a passage from a translation that is in the public domain, named with its edition and year. Verse numbers follow those editions (see the note below).

Second, tradition and science are kept apart. The old texts make large promises: that a breathing technique "destroys all diseases", awakens Kundalini or conquers death. We report these claims as what they are, statements of the tradition, so that you can understand the texts. When this book says something about the body that a modern reader might take as a health fact, it cites a real study that you can look up, with its DOI or PubMed number. Where there is no good study, we say so.

Third, safety comes before progress. Every technique ends with its precautions. The hatha texts themselves are blunt about this: they compare the breath to a wild lion or elephant that must be tamed slowly, "otherwise it kills the practitioner".

This book is not medical advice.

If you are pregnant, have high or very low blood pressure, heart disease, epilepsy, glaucoma, a hernia, asthma or any lung disease, a detached retina, have recently had surgery, or have a history of panic attacks or psychiatric illness, speak to your doctor before practising, and use only the gentle techniques marked as suitable in Chapter 15. Stop immediately and breathe normally if you feel dizzy, faint, short of breath, have chest pain, palpitations, a headache, tingling in your hands or face, or strong anxiety. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

A note on the texts and their numbering

The Haṭhayogapradīpikā ("Light on Hatha Yoga", abbreviated HYP in this book) was compiled by Svātmārāma, probably in the 15th century. Its second chapter is entirely about pranayama and the six cleansing actions; its third chapter is about mudras and bandhas. In this manual, verse numbers for the HYP follow the English translation by **Pancham Sinh, published by the Panini Office, Allahabad, in 1914** (Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. XV, part 3; the digitised copy is dated January 1915), which is in the public domain. Other editions sometimes shift a verse by one or two numbers, because some manuscripts contain extra verses. If you compare with another edition and find a verse one number away, that is the reason.

The Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā (abbreviated GS) is presented as a dialogue between the sage Gheraṇḍa and his disciple Caṇḍa Kāpālī. Its fifth chapter (the text calls its chapters "lessons") deals with pranayama. Numbers follow the translation by **Srisa Chandra Vasu, 1914–1915** (Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. XV), also in the public domain.

For the Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali, the numbering of the sutras is stable across editions; renderings are our own.

How to use this manual

Read Chapters 1 to 4 before you practise anything: they explain the vocabulary, the setting and the foundation without which the classical techniques are either useless or uncomfortable. Then learn the techniques in the order of the chapters, which is the order of difficulty. Chapter 12 explains the popular modern techniques (box breathing, 4-7-8, cardiac coherence) and gives a four-week programme for them. Chapter 14 gives a twelve-week programme and ready-made sessions of 10, 20 and 30 minutes. Chapter 15 gathers every precaution in one table: read it once now, and again whenever your health changes.

Pronunciation and spelling

Sanskrit words appear first in their common English spelling (pranayama, ujjayi), and, at their first important appearance, in scholarly transliteration (IAST: prāṇāyāma, ujjāyī) and sometimes in Devanagari script (प्राणायाम). A line over a vowel (ā, ī, ū) means it is long: prā-ṇā-yā-ma has three long "a" sounds. A dot under a letter (ṭ, ḍ, ṇ) marks a sound made with the tongue curled back. Ś and ṣ are both close to English "sh". C is always "ch" as in church: cakra is said "chakra". A short glossary is at the end.

Chapter 1. What pranayama is

The word

Prāṇāyāma (प्राणायाम) joins two words. Prāṇa (प्राण) is breath, and by extension the life force that breath carries; in Sanskrit the same word is used for "life" itself, and the plural prāṇāḥ can mean the vital functions of the body. The second part is usually read as āyāma, "extension, stretching, drawing out", though some commentators read yama, "restraint, control". Both readings are old and both describe the practice: pranayama lengthens the breath, and it brings it under control.

Note what the word does not say. It does not say "breathing exercise" in the sense of a fitness drill. In the texts, the breath is the most visible expression of prāṇa, and prāṇa is closely linked to the mind. Working on the breath is a way of working on the mind.

The breath and the mind: the founding verse

The second chapter of the HYP opens with three verses that pranayama teachers in India know well. In our own paraphrase:

- **HYP 2.1.** Once the posture is established, the yogi, master of himself and eating moderate, wholesome food, should practise pranayama as taught by the teacher.
- **HYP 2.2.** When the breath moves, the mind moves; when the breath is still, the mind is still. By this, the yogi gains steadiness. Therefore, restrain the breath.
- **HYP 2.3.** As long as breath remains in the body, there is life. Death is the departure of the breath. Therefore, restrain the breath.

The second verse, *cale vāte calaṃ cittam niścale niścalaṃ bhavet* (चले वाते चलं चित्तं निश्चले निश्चलं भवेत्), is the whole philosophy of pranayama in a single line. Anyone who has noticed their breath become short and high when frightened, or slow and deep when falling asleep, has already observed half of it. Pranayama uses the other half: by deliberately making the breath slow, even and quiet, you invite the mind to follow.

Notice also the order in verse 2.1: posture first. The texts assume you can already sit steadily and comfortably before you start serious breath work. This is why Chapter 3 of this manual is about sitting.

Pranayama in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra

Patanjali's Yoga Sūtra, a compact text whose date is debated (somewhere between the last centuries before the common era and around 400 CE), lists eight limbs (aṣṭāṅga) of yoga: yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, samādhi. Pranayama is the fourth. Patanjali gives it only five sutras (2.49 to 2.53). In our rendering:

- **YS 2.49.** When the posture is established, pranayama is the interruption of the movement of inhalation and exhalation.

- **YS 2.50.** It is external, internal or stopped; it is regulated by place, time and number, and becomes long and subtle.
- **YS 2.51.** The fourth goes beyond the domains of the external and the internal.
- **YS 2.52.** From it, the covering of the inner light is thinned.
- **YS 2.53.** And the mind becomes fit for concentration (dhāraṇā).

Three practical teachings come out of these few lines. First, again, posture before breath. Second, the breath can be observed and regulated by "place" (where in the body you feel it, or how far it travels), "time" (how long each phase lasts) and "number" (how many rounds), which is exactly how this manual will teach you to measure your practice. Third, the aim is a breath that becomes dīrgha (long) and sūkṣma (subtle, fine). Pranayama is not about breathing big and loud. It is about breathing long and quiet.

The three phases and the two kinds of pranayama

All pranayama is built from three phases, named in both the HYP and the GS:

Sanskrit	IAST	Meaning
Puraka	pūraka (पूरक)	Inhalation; literally "filling"
Kumbhaka	kumbhaka (कुम्भक)	Retention; literally "like a pot" (kumbha), the breath held as water in a jar
Rechaka	recaka (रेचक)	Exhalation; literally "emptying"

Retention can happen after the inhalation (antara kumbhaka, inner retention) or after the exhalation (bāhya kumbhaka, outer retention). The words echo YS 2.50 (bāhya, external; ābhyantara, internal); as names of two kinds of kumbhaka they belong to modern Indian teaching, where they are universal today.

HYP 2.71 to 2.73 then distinguish two kinds of retention. Sahita kumbhaka is "accompanied" retention: it comes with a deliberate inhalation and exhalation, and it is what you practise. Kevala kumbhaka is "alone" or "absolute" retention: the breath stops by itself, without effort, inhalation or exhalation. The text says (2.72) that one should practise sahita until kevala arises. In other words, kevala is not a technique you do; it is a state that may come. No beginner's manual can teach it, and you should distrust anyone who claims to.

The "eight kumbhakas" of the Hatha texts

What we now call "pranayama techniques" are called kumbhakas in the HYP, because in the hatha tradition the retention was the core of the practice and the breathing pattern around it gave each one its name. HYP 2.44 lists eight:

HYP 2.44 (Pancham Sinh 1914)	Common name today	Covered in
Sūrya bhēdana	Right-nostril breath	Chapter 11
Ujjāyī	Victorious breath	Chapter 6
Sītkārī	Hissing breath	Chapter 8
Śītalī	Cooling, rolled-tongue breath	Chapter 8

HYP 2.44 (Pancham Sinh 1914)	Common name today	Covered in
Bhastrikā	Bellows breath	Chapter 10
Bhrāmarī	Humming bee breath	Chapter 7
Mūrcchā	"Swooning" breath	Chapter 13, mention only
Plāvinī	"Floating" breath	Chapter 13, mention only

The GS (5.46) gives a slightly different list of eight: Sahita, Sūrya bheda, Ujjāyī, Śītalī, Bhastrikā, Bhrāmarī, Mūrcchā and Kevalī.

Two of the most practised techniques today are not in either list. Nāḍī śodhana (alternate nostril breathing) appears in both texts as the preparatory purification of the channels (HYP 2.7–10, GS 5.36–45), before the eight kumbhakas. Kapālabhāti is not a pranayama at all in the HYP: it is the sixth of the six cleansing actions (ṣaṭkarma, HYP 2.22 and 2.35). Modern teachers have placed both at the heart of daily practice, and so does this manual.

Nadis, ida, pingala and sushumna

You cannot read the pranayama chapters of the hatha texts without meeting three words.

- Nāḍī (नाडी): a channel or conduit in the subtle body through which prāṇa flows. The texts speak of thousands of them. These are not nerves or blood vessels in the anatomical sense, though translators of the early 20th century (Pancham Sinh among them) often tried to match them to anatomy.
- Idā and piṅgalā: the two main side channels, associated with the left and right nostrils. Ida is linked with the moon (candra), coolness and calm; pingala with the sun (sūrya), heat and activity. When the HYP says "inhale through the moon", it means the left nostril.
- Suṣumnā: the central channel, running along the spine. In hatha yoga the goal of pranayama is to bring prāṇa out of the side channels and into the central one, which the texts associate with the stilling of the mind (HYP 2.41–42) and the awakening of Kundalini.

You do not need to believe in these channels to practise the techniques well. But knowing the vocabulary lets you read the texts, understand your teachers and see why, for example, alternate nostril breathing was considered the first and most important practice.

The promise and the warning

HYP 2.16 states that properly practised pranayama removes all diseases, and that improper practice creates them. HYP 2.17 lists what improper practice can cause: hiccups, asthma, cough, pains in the head, ears and eyes. HYP 2.15, in Pancham Sinh's 1914 translation:

HYP 2.15.

"Just as lions, elephants and tigers are controlled by and by, so the breath is controlled by slow degrees, otherwise (i.e., by being hasty or using too much force) it kills the practiser himself."

Read the first claim as tradition, not as medicine; no study shows that any breathing technique cures "all

diseases". Read the warning as practical advice that every good teacher still gives: go slowly, never force, never strain.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 50 pages.

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