
Kapalabhati (Cleansing Breath / Skull Shining Breath)

Kapal: skull | Bhati: to shine or to be lustrous

While often referred to as a pranayama technique, kapalabhati is in fact a kriya – a cleansing or purifying practice.

Purpose and Effects

- Helps you feel alert and refreshed
- Energising, stimulating
- Cleanses nasal passages and sinuses
- Strengthens the abdominal muscles
- Prepares you for pranayama practices
- Clears the body of stuck or stagnant energy
- Assists in purifying the nadis (energy channels)

Technique & Principles of Practice

In kapalabhati, the emphasis is on an active and forceful exhale created by an inward thrusting of the abdominal muscles, followed by a passive and quiet inhale. The inhale will naturally happen with no effort required.

Rolf Sovik gives us a great way to imagine the action of this forceful exhalation: ‘if a gnat were to fly into one nostril, a sudden burst of air would be our first attempt to send it packing’!

- Sit in a comfortable seated position, create length through the spine.
- You may wish to rest the hands in chin or jnana mudra
- Eyes rest behind closed eyelids
- The shoulders, chest, throat and face remain relaxed throughout
- Exhale through both nostrils with a forceful contraction of the abdominal muscles
- Allow the inhale to arrive passively – the abdominal muscles relax
- Complete 10 breaths in rapid succession
- This is one round
- Allow natural resting breaths between rounds
- Practice 2-3 rounds (this can be increased to 5 rounds once you feel comfortable with the practice).
- As you complete your final round, exhale fully. Inhale with a full yoga breath (belly, chest, upper chest), allow a subtle pause, and exhale using soft ujjayi. You may wish to rest your awareness at the space in front of the closed eyes, or at the ajna (third eye) chakra
- Observe any effects.

Note:

The pumping action of the exhale involves the abdominal muscles only – the chest, shoulders and face remain relaxed. The action is centred in the lower abdomen.

Kapalabhati is practiced after asana (postures) and before pranayama (breathing practices). You may also practice kapalabhati after jala neti (nasal wash).

As kapalabhati is energising it generally practiced in the morning. If done in the evening you may find it keeps you awake.

Variation

Once you are experienced in the technique, you may wish to practice a single nostril version. Use nasagra/Vishnu mudra (see Anuloma handout for a reminder).

- 1: Close the left nostril. Practice kapalabhati through the right nostril for 2 – 3 rounds
- 2: Close the right nostril. Practice kapalabhati through the left nostril for 2 – 3 rounds
- 3: Complete by practicing through both nostrils for 2 – 3 rounds

Considerations & Cautions

If you feel lightheaded or dizzy this indicates that you may be breathing too forcefully. You should not feel breathless at any stage of the practice.

Kapalabhati should not be practiced in the following situations:

- After eating. Allow at least 2 hours after food.
- During menstruation
- During pregnancy
- High blood pressure, low blood pressure or cardiac conditions
- Glaucoma
- Herniated/slipped disc
- Anxiety / Panic Attacks
- During an episode of sinusitis
- Recent abdominal surgery (6 months)
- Conditions affecting the abdomen e.g. hernia / gastric ulcer
- Vertigo