Pranayama

The study and practice of pranayama requires an appreciation of both prana and the anatomy of breathing, so now is a good time to go back and refresh yourself on the following handouts:

'Breathing – The Fundamentals' – Day 1
'Subtle Anatomy' – Day 6

Pranayama – The Fourth Limb

Pranayama is the fourth of Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga, and refers to the breathing practices that utilise and enhance one's life force energy - prana.

Pranayama is the conscious, deliberate regulation of the breath replacing unconscious patterns of breathing. It is possible only after a reasonable mastery of asana practice.
TKV Desikachar, Yoga Sutra 2.49

The word pranayama is made up of the Sanskrit words 'prana' and 'yama' and you will frequently find this translated as breath control or restraint.

However, there is another way of looking at this, depending on how we separate the word into its component parts:

Prana = life force energy
Yama = restraint (remember the Yamas and Niyamas, where we learnt that yama translates as restraint)

Yet if we break the word down in a different way it takes on a slightly different form. When we add 'a' to the beginning of a word in Sanskrit, it takes on the opposite meaning, and so in this case…

Pran = life force energy
Ayama = stretch, extend

When viewed this way, pranayama means the extension of life force energy - creating freedom within the breath and extension of prana throughout the body.

"Our in breath and out breath… mirror the divine creative gesture.
With the inhalation, we draw into our own centre, our own being.
With the exhalation, we expand out into the world"
Sally Kempton

Benefits of Pranayama:

According to the Yoga Sutras, as a result of pranayama "the veil over the inner light is destroyed" (Sutra 2.52).

Remembering or reconnecting to this inner light is the path to discovering our true nature, our true Self. (Patanjali also speaks of this inner light in Sutra 1.36).

Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati tells us that as these veils disappear “the practitioner is propelled into greater understanding of the depths and dimensions of his being, which are beyond those of ordinary experience” – our awareness expands and we are able to sense the subtle energy of prana.

On the way to this discovery, pranayama practice also…

- Strengthens and supports the respiratory system (example research study)
- Regulates the nervous system, activating the parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation response - rest & digest)
- May help to manage pain
- May support the healthy functioning of the cardiovascular system and the heart, improving heart rate variability (the heart’s ability to adapt and adjust to activity)
- Generates feelings of vitality and wellbeing
- Settles and calms the mind, relieves stress and anxiety (example research study)
- Balances the emotions
- Supports resilience of body and mind. Helps to increase the ‘Window of Tolerance’ and better manage the ups and downs of everyday life. (See Relaxation Handout from Day 5 for a reminder of the Window of Tolerance).
- When practiced appropriately and in a way that supports one’s constitution, it reduces rajasic and tamasic tendencies – leading to a sattvic state (for a reminder of the 3 Gunas refer back to Day 5 Handout: Principles of Balances)
- Prepares you for concentration and meditation (dharana and dhyana)
- Creates a deeper awareness of your inner state of being (interoceptive awareness)
- Purifies the nadis (energy channels) and removes energetic blockages within the body
- Deepens and progresses your experience of yoga

The Foundations of a Pranayama Practice

Developing a pranayama starts with developing an awareness of the breath – this creates the foundation for a stable and effective pranayama practice.

Through developing this awareness we notice the subtle qualities of the breath, we learn to feel the sensations of the breath within the body – noticing perhaps where our breath or energy (prana) feels free and where it feels stuck, and we begin to develop the ability to become an observer – practicing detachment as we simply watch the breath come and go regardless of any distractions.
With these foundational skills we can also notice any habitual tendencies, such as breath holding or shallow breathing, and take steps to transform any unhelpful patterns. Over time, simply by developing a deep awareness of the breath we may notice that the breath flows a little more freely, our breathing capacity increases and we feel generally more vital and refreshed.

“Nature made the breath as a kind of doorway, and that doorway is something we can enter. We can enter into our ownselves through that breath awareness” Rolf Sovik

Both the Subtle Breath Awareness and Three Part Breath that you practiced at the beginning of the course form these building blocks of awareness so that you can begin to progress to more complex practices of pranayama. It is important that you feel comfortable with these practices before moving on to pranayama techniques and ratios. The Subtle

Breath Awareness is a profound practice in its own right, and one that you can always return to if any of the pranayama practices or techniques don't feel right for you or leave you feeling unsettled or agitated. In the same way that you take a rest in Child or Tadasana in your asana practice when you need to, you can always return to the Subtle Breath Awareness whenever you need to. (A recording of the Subtle Breath Awareness practice is available in the Foundation Course Portal).

Pranayama Techniques

There are many ways to practice pranayama, and we have already covered some of these in the course:

- Ujjayi Breath (Victorious Breath) - encourages focus and concentration
- Anuloma Ujjayi (With the Grain) - calming
- Viloma Ujjayi (Against the Grain) - energising
- Brahmari (Bee Breath) – calming
- Nadi Shodhana (Alternate Nostril Breath) - balancing
- Kapalbhati - cleansing

Each of these techniques regulates the breath in some way. With many techniques to choose from it can be tempting to skip from one to the other. While it's useful to explore the different techniques to find which resonates the most with you, one of the keys to developing a sustainable practice and experiencing lasting benefits is consistency. So, choose a technique that's most nourishing for your current state of mind or condition and work with that for a while. When finding your most appropriate technique it may be helpful to connect with your intuition and ask "what do I need right now" and see what arises.

Another way to choose your technique is by selecting something that will help to reduce the patterns or issues that are no longer helpful to you. Consider what led you to yoga and why you continue to practice, for example:

- To reduce pain so that I can move freely and comfortably
- To reduce worry so that I can feel joy
- To reduce sadness so that I can remember that I am filled with light
- To reduce my breath holding so that I can feel relaxed
- To reduce the activity in my mind so that I can sleep better at night.
- Add your own reason here to this list of possibilities…

When your practice reduces that which is no longer serving you or isn't helpful, that which is nourishing and helpful is able to rise to the surface. So you could ask yourself:

- What do I want to reduce
- What do I want to rise to the surface
- What will help that quality to rise

It may take some time for benefits of your practice to reveal themselves, so be patient with yourself. However, if the technique that you choose instinctively feels like the wrong fit, then stop the practice and return to the Subtle Breath Awareness or Full Yoga Breath for a while – after some time return to the pranayama practice or select another. You can also ask the advice of a trusted and experienced yoga teacher or Yoga Therapist.

As we begin to explore some of the deeper and increasingly subtle elements of the breath, we can begin to untie the knots of our habitual tendencies. Donna Farhi reminds us about taking a gentle approach to these practices / enquiries…

"In your eagerness to untie your breathing you may pull and tug on yourself, and in doing so unwittingly increase the tension in your breathing. If you can be patient during the enquiries, you will find that the breath will magically open to you in the same way that a knot falls open when you play with it patiently".

Principles of Practice

- Be sure that you have established steady foundations for pranayama with an effective asana practice and basic breathing practices (Subtle Breath Awareness / Full Yoga Breath). Don't be tempted to skip the foundational stuff – it prepares the way for sustained growth. Yoga is a lifelong practice – you can always add layers when the time is right.

- Be aware of your unique breathing patterns, for example do you habitually hold your breath without realising, is your breath is shallow or limited to the upper chest, or do you breath rapidly. Some of these unconscious breathing patterns may be deeply ingrained over time, and may not respond well to being forced to change. Instead, allow your practice to be a gentle exploration – taking time and gentle patience to reveal your natural breath and the full potential of your breath. You may discover with this nurturing, patient (and consistent) approach that some of the practices, particularly with ratios, will naturally and spontaneously occur.

- Ahimsa is at the heart of your practice – so never push or force the breath, body or mind.

- Let go of attachment to any outcomes – simply practice with curiosity and learn to befriend your breath.

- Pranayama is generally practiced seated. Use any props that support you in maintaining comfort and length / alignment through the spine.

- In your practice, pranayama is placed after asana and before meditation.

- Start with what feels do-able, for example 1 round of 10 or 12 breaths. You don't have to start with sitting for pranayama for 20 minutes.

- The breath should feel slow, subtle, continuous and unbroken. In Sutra 2.50 Patanjali tells us that the breath should be long (dirgha) and subtle (suksmah).

- Pay attention to the signals of the body – if you feel dizzy or lightheaded, or experience palpitations or nausea then stop the practice.

- Notice if tension is creeping in for example the jaw, eyes, hands, belly. This would indicate over-exertion or force. (Remember Donna Farhi's 'soft eyes, open diaphragm).

- In the same way that you prepare the body for asana, you may prepare the nasal passages for pranayama. You could simply clear your nose with gentle blowing into a tissue, or the nasal cavity may be regularly cleansed with jala neti (a nasal wash) – see the separate handout.

- If you're feeling ill, suspend your practice and prioritise rest until you feel better. When you restart your practice do so slowly, perhaps starting with the Subtle Breath Awareness or Full Yoga Breath, and gradually returning to your pranayama practice.

- A wonderful reminder… "It's not the breathing Olympics" – Kristine K Weber. As with your asana practice, there's no competition. Rolf Gates says of pranayama - "This is not a mountain to climb or a grade to get. It is a place within you that you are already experiencing. Your practice merely opens the door so that you can return to this sacred place".

Cautions:

- Some techniques and elements of practice are contraindicated in pregnancy and should be omitted. Ask an experienced pregnancy yoga teacher or yoga therapist for advice.

- Some conditions that require modification or omission include: heart conditions, conditions affecting the respiratory system, headaches, glaucoma, cervical disc problems, vertigo, stroke, high blood pressure, cardio-vascular or neurological conditions, schizophrenia, dissociative conditions, anxiety disorders. It would be advisable to seek advice from an experienced yoga teacher or Yoga Therapist.

- Cautions for specific pranayama techniques can be found in the relevant handouts.

"The root word of pranayama is prana, or life force. What we call a miracle is often simply the presence of a little extra prana… It is up to each of us to make proper use of the prana available to us. Most of us have been unconsciously minimising the amount of prana we channel into our lives because we are afraid of what we might do with all that life force if we had it. This is why surrender to God, or to goodness, is so important. Once we surrender, we can get on with the business of being magnificent, trusting that we will be guided by a higher power along the way. As we practice pranayama, we are learning to open up our energy channels. We're saying we are ready to be the "light of the world." –
Rolf Gates, Meditations from the Mat 2002 pgs 314-315

Honouring my Sources of Inspiration:

Kari Knight, BWY Teacher
Helena Del Pino, BWY & The Society of Yoga Practitioners
Kristine Weber, Subtle Yoga Resilience Society
Charlotte Prudhomme, BWY Diploma Course Tutor
Also…
The Heart of Yoga, TKV Desikachar
Prana & Pranayama, Swami Naranjanananda Saraswati
The Breathing Book, Donna Farhi

Yoga for Transformation, Gary Krafstow
Meditations from the Mat, Rolf Gates
Many translations of the Yoga Sutras