

# Pump Up Your Prana

Your breath: It's the secret for how you can enhance your sport, your yoga practice, and your life

by Lorraine Shea

**W**hether we're paying attention to it or not, we're always breathing. Each inhalation draws in oxygen, supplying our bodies with nutrients; each exhalation releases carbon dioxide, the waste we no longer need. But when we do pay attention to this process, everything changes. We can create more energy, calm our minds, increase our focus, and find ourselves performing better in all areas of our lives.

"People get fooled by the simplicity of the breath, but it's your number-one tool," says Ed Harrold, owner of Comfort Zone Center for Whole Self Healing in Lewes, Delaware, associate director of Stephen Cope's Institute for Extraordinary Living at Kripalu, and originator of Flexibility for Athletes, a program that enhances performance in sports using various breath techniques, or pranayama. "Oxygen is the most powerful drug on the planet."

Pranayama, which literally means "extending the life force," offers techniques that heat up the belly without wearing out your joints. As the fourth of the eight limbs of yoga (right after asana), pranayama has been shown to help alleviate stress, focus the mind, create body awareness, and strengthen the will, to name but a few benefits. "If we could warm up the body using pranayama in a pre-workout routine, we could have a strong gastric fire in the belly, which is going to lead to a clearer upper respiratory system," says Harrold. "This means your bronchial trees will be clear of mucus, phlegm, toxins, and pollutants that have been formed there through improper diet, improper rest, and improper thinking."

And once you activate your digestive fire and open your upper respiratory system, your mind moves into the alpha state, where the brain-wave patterns slow down and the brain understands what your body is communicating. This, according to Harrold, saves time in your fitness routine because you are able to get "into the zone" more rapidly. "Pranayama brings your energy level up quickly," he says.

## The most important muscle

Your diaphragm, a thin muscle that separates your abdominal and chest cavities, is key to working with your breath. When you inhale, the diaphragm drops down behind and below your navel (like an umbrella opening upside-down) as your rib cage expands and lifts, creating space between your upper and lower torso. On your exhale, the diaphragm rises back to its original place. "The number-one muscle you need to train is your diaphragm," says Harrold. "Your life will change quickly when you become more aware of how this muscle operates, its effect on energy flow in the body, and its ability to transcend the beta mind [the 'doing' mind] and move into the alpha state [the 'being' mind]."

As your diaphragm becomes stronger, your brain will also send signals to your body to burn fat—the body's primary energy source—instead of sugar. This helps you retain your energy reserves. And neither sit-ups nor massage can get at that muscle. "The only way to get at your diaphragm muscle is through pranayama," says Harrold.

## Breathing fit

One popular pranayama technique Harrold highly endorses for any fitness routine is Alternate-Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana). This technique of inhaling and exhaling through only one nostril at a time helps balance the left and right sides of your brain (*see sidebar*). "The right nostril feeds your left cortex, which is the sympathetic response of the autonomic system," says Harrold. "The left nostril feeds the right brain, and that is the parasympathetic response of the autonomic system. So, the energy crosses like an 'X' as it goes from one nostril into the opposite cortex."

The masculine side of your brain is the left; it's solar, linear, cognitive, and rational. The feminine side of the brain is the right hemisphere, which is more creative, relaxed, receptive, intuitive, and passionate. "As you go through

## 4 steps to better breathing

Ed Harrold recommends these four ways to get in touch with your breath:

**1 Cleaning house:** Invest in a neti pot, sesame oil, and cotton swabs. Neti pots open nasal channels and clear sinuses, removing fat, phlegm, and mucus. Dip a cotton swab in sesame oil to lubricate nostril nerve receptors for warm humid, moist oxygen to enter respiratory glands of the brain. Do three times a week to dramatically change your energy levels and mental clarity.

**2 Breath awareness:** Sit, stand, or lie on the floor, and smooth out your nasal breath. Begin by closing your eyes and investigating your breath process, in and out your body, up and down your spine, and in the space between each rib. Don't let your mind wander away from the breathing process. Practice 10 rounds.

**3 Go slow:** Try slowing your breathing without losing any volume of taking in breath or letting out breath. Notice what happens when you invite your mind to watch the ventilation of belly first and then the lungs expanding. The inhale is for the mind (awareness) the exhale is for the body (energy). Practice 10 rounds.

**4 Practice Alternate-Nostril Breath (Nadi Shodhana):** This cross-pattern style of breathing balances and synchronizes the left and right cortexes of your brain. Don't let the simplicity of this technique fool you: First, it will change your intention process, then what manifests.

- With your right thumb, close off your right nasal channel, and inhale as slowly as possible through your left nostril.
- At the top of your inhalation, close off your left nostril with your right ring finger, release your thumb, and exhale through your right nostril.
- With your ring finger still in place on your left side, inhale through your right nostril.
- Then, close off your right nostril, release your ring finger, and exhale through the left nostril.

Practice 10 rounds, and notice how you feel.



Ed Harrold demonstrates the Alternate-Nostril Breathing technique.

your day, one of your nostrils is more excessive than the other," says Harrold. "If you're going into an endurance athletic event and your left nostril is more open than your right, you're going to be too spacious, too windy, in your thoughts. Your energy levels will be extremely low for what you're going to be asking your body to do for the next three or four hours." This helps especially in endurance sports, such as bike-riding, when you've pedaled 10 miles but feel as if you've only gone two. It also heightens your endorphins and diminishes negative thoughts.

Harrold recommends using Alternate-Nostril Breathing for your cool-down, too. "Alternate-nostril breathing slows brain-wave function," he says. "It enables the core of the body to sustain a hard pace without exposing the joints of the body to repetitive motion injury."

Another energizing pranayama, Kapalabhati, involves taking a passive inhale and then pumping your belly as you exhale. "Pumping the belly is a very, very important way to keep us healthy," says Harrold. "It's a great way to temporarily raise energy levels in the organs of the abdomen without manipulating our prana."

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Heal Bodies,  
Awaken Minds,  
Connect Hearts,  
Serve the World

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## Ashes to ashes

As the fire of yoga, Agni burns away obscurations more convenient to overlook. The use of fire as the symbol of yogic transformation is ancient. As yoga matures over time, we'll find that it evolves from burning in the outer world, as a strategy for wheeling and dealing with the gods, to becoming the internal heat of self-expansion.

Agni acts as the raging forest fire that immolates our comfortable hiding places and draws us out into the open. In this story, Agni reminds us that, sometimes, the forest must burn. Lest we feel too bad about our foibles, as Agni reduces them to embers, we may find comfort in noticing our ashes look pretty much like everyone else's. There's nothing about us that's so awful it's unique. Be heartened, for at the essence of the human condition, which is what ash reduces to, we may not be exactly the same, but we're more similar than we are different.

## The illusionist

In the character of Maya, we see the much misunderstood and misaligned power of illusion. Certain schools of yoga view Maya as the obstacle between you and Reality (with a capital R). In that case, eliminating Maya as an obscuration would be a good thing. Why in the world then, we might ask, didn't Arjuna help Krishna get rid of Maya when given the chance?


Riddle me this: What if you thought illusion didn't stand between you and reality but, rather, you recognized it as the very way you experience reality? Look twice at illusion, and you just might realize that you're looking at the visionary power of imagination.

That power shapes your experience. A simple example would be the clothes you wear to work every day. Those garments are a guise that tells the world who you think you are—and the world responds accordingly. Change your guise, and you change your experience. Engaged in this way, Maya becomes a power to wield wisely rather than a problem to eliminate.

## Rising anew

Arjuna, who is, of course, the yogi in the story, understands that in the obscuration of a dark, overgrown forest, Maya hangs out with ruffians and tends to get into trouble. In that case, we experience him as self-delusion. Those scoundrels can't remain in the forest; they must be exposed into the light of day. Krishna and Arjuna have to burn it all down.

However, Arjuna sees that when Maya keeps good company, he needn't be obliterated. Quite the contrary, in the presence of the yogi, Maya becomes a powerful ally. In fact, he's sometimes called the architect of consciousness—Maya will later build the magical palace where Arjuna and his four brothers eventually live.

So, Maya survives the burning of the Kandava forest by the grace of the yogi, who must be, at times, courageous enough to burn down his or her own forest, but also wise enough to see that a world without imagination would be a dreary place to live. Recognize Maya, and you'll honor your own visionary capacity to rise from ash, re-envision your life, and create yourself anew. 

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## The Athletic Yogi


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By massaging the abdominal organs this way, energy rises up the spinal column and into the brain.

## Psychology today

Harrold calls his Flexibility for Athletes program a "body-centered psychology program," where we can undo habits that have lodged themselves in our minds. "Whatever imperfection you're holding in your mind has already lodged itself in the body because the mind is basically an empty vessel," says Harrold. "It doesn't do anything without checking in with the gut first. When you can begin to master the energies of your abdomen, it's so much easier to control your thoughts. So, you're using your body to discipline your mind."

And though a strong core is important to the process, never mind those six-pack abs. Not only are they the result of highly developed outer muscles (the *rectus abdominis*) as opposed to the actual core muscle (the *transversus abdominis*), they make it more difficult for your diaphragm to work properly. "You never want to cut off the life force energy of your belly," Harrold says. "Your belly is the key to the creative abundant force of the universe. It doesn't matter what your belly looks like, it matters what it *feels* like. The belly is far more intelligent than the mind. You want to keep that belly open."

So whether we're paying attention to it or not, our breath is our own inner grace that we can refine with awareness and love. 

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**Ed Harrold** is leading two upcoming workshops at Kripalu. **March 8-13:** Yoga and Cycling. **May 3-8:** Yoga and Fitness. Visit [mindandbodyworkout.net](http://mindandbodyworkout.net) or [comfortzoneyogacenter.com](http://comfortzoneyogacenter.com)