

A close-up photograph of a person's upper body. They are wearing a light blue tank top and have their hands pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) in front of their chest. The person's face is partially visible at the top, looking down. The background is dark and out of focus.

pranayama

beyond the fundamentals

AN IN-DEPTH GUIDE TO YOGIC BREATHING

richard rosen

“Richard has impressed me with his depth of knowledge in his new book. Not only are we treated to comprehensive knowledge of the tradition of pranayama but we receive minute detail of Richard’s own arduous study and exploration. I will treasure this book for years to come as a personal guide to discovering the subtleties of my breath. Thank you again, Richard.”

—Rodney Yee, author of *Moving Toward Balance*

“Rosen provides such valuable insights into a practice so often shrouded in mystery. He brings to light the classical teachings on pranayama while offering a fresh, contemporary perspective. I recommend this to all students of yoga interested in unraveling the mystery of a pranayama practice.”

—Tias Little, author of *The Thread of Breath*

“This is an exceptional guide into the labyrinth of inner yogas. Richard Rosen is impeccably thorough, and his presentation is accessible and often amusing. Reading this book, I felt as though I was in the presence of an ancient yogi-scholar who is masquerading as a close personal friend. I highly recommend this book.”

—Sarah Powers

ABOUT THE BOOK

For serious students of yoga who have an established pranayama practice, this book is a follow-up to Rosen’s previous book, *The Yoga of Breath*. Here he picks up where he left off, offering a selection of traditional yogic techniques for those who wish to deepen their practice of pranayama and their understanding of the ancient wisdom of yoga. Rosen skillfully puts forward an array of awareness disciplines, breathing practices, mudras, and seals, interspersed with anecdotes and quotes from ancient texts.

A free audio program available online offers a variety of guided practices so that listeners can create their own pranayama series, with guidance from the author. (Download instructions available in the book.)

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PRANAYAMA

BEYOND THE FUNDAMENTALS

An In-Depth Guide to Yogic Breathing

RICHARD ROSEN



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To Taleen:

Who wanted one all for herself

It is nothing but breath, the void.
And that green fulfillment
of blossoming trees: a breath.
We, who are still the breathed-upon,
today still the breathed-upon, count
this slow breathing of earth,
whose hurry we are.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *O Lacrimosa*

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Colloquy of the Vital Breaths

PRANA SAMVADA

ONCE UPON A TIME, Bhargava Vaidarbhi went to the sage Pippalada (whose name means “eater of the fruit of the sacred fig tree”), firewood in hand as a symbolic offering, and asked, “Good sir, how many powers are there that establish and maintain the universe and its creatures, and which one’s the best of all?” Pippalada thought a bit, then told this tale:

The powers—Space, Air, Fire, Water, Earth, Speech, Mind, the Eye, and the Ear—were talking among themselves, bragging really. They said: “We establish and maintain this universe and the body (*bana*, literally “reed” or “arrow”). Breath (*prana*), who was really the best of them all, happened to hear them and rejoined: “Friends, don’t fool yourselves. *I* establish and maintain the universe and the body.” The other powers pooh-poohed and didn’t believe her.

So Breath, rather miffed at not being believed, decided to teach them a lesson. She moved upward, and guess what? All the others moved upward too. Then Breath settled down and, yes, all the others settled down with her. It was just like a swarm of bees following their queen wherever she went.

Now the powers realized their dependence on Breath and, delighted, sang her praises:

As fire, she warms; she shines like the sun

She’s the bountiful rain; she’s the wind

She’s the earth, matter, she’s God

Both being and not-being

And what’s immortal.

Like spokes in a chariot’s wheel-hub

Everything is fixed in Breath

All the holy verses

The sacrifice, the royalty, even the priests!

As Lord of Creation, you move in the womb

And it’s also you who’s born

You live with all creatures, Breath,

And they pay tribute to you.

Your form pervades speech

And hearing and sight and mind,

Make them all gracious (*shiva*)

And don't leave us!

All that's in heaven and earth and in between

Is in the power of breath

Protect us, as a mother does her children

Grant us prosperity (*shri*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

—*Prashna-Upanishad*

(based on translations by Patrick Olivelle and Valerie Roebuck)

INTRODUCTION

I Take Refuge in the Breath

I take refuge in the breath. Breath is all this, whatever there is, and all that ever will be. I take refuge in the breath.

—Chandogya-Upanishad

THIS IS MY SECOND BOOK on pranayama. The first, *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama* (Shambhala Publications, 2002), covered the beginning ABCs of the practice along with a program that, in the best of all possible worlds, would take a diligent student about a year to eighteen months to complete. Now the wonderful folks at Shambhala have asked me to do a follow-up book—the DEFs, I suppose—that presses on bravely to more challenging material.

This new book is written for more experienced pranayama students, those who are relatively familiar with the material in the first book and follow a fairly regular, if not daily, practice. To spell this out more clearly, to benefit from this book I recommend that you have, at minimum, the following:

- A reasonably clear understanding of the “why” of breathing, the four traditional stages of practice, prana (and its five branches) and the two traditional pranayama models (classical and Hatha), pranayama benefits, obstacles and aids, and practice foundations (how often, when, where, and how long)
- A good working relationship with your Witness and the ability to quiet your sensory organs (especially the eyes, inner ears, and tongue) and watch your breath fairly consistently for at least ten to fifteen minutes (whether in Corpse Pose or during pranayama)
- A reasonably accurate “map” of the outer contours and inner spaces of your physical body (with the understanding that this cartography is an ongoing project that will never be completed definitively)
- Some familiarity with and appreciation of your unique breathing identity and the “qualities” of your breath, which you will remember from the first book we’re calling time, texture, space, and rest
- Regular practice of Conqueror and Against-the-Grain breaths in the reclining position for between six months and a year, and subsequently in the sitting position for at least six months
- A reasonably easy and balanced sitting position, even if you still need to sit on a chair, that you can sustain without too much fidgeting for at least ten to fifteen minutes
- A familiarity with basic pranayama “tools” (for example, Unspoken Hymn, Skull Brightener, and both equal and unequal ratio breathing)
- A comfortable relationship with short inner breath retention and its supporting

techniques (such as throat and belly bonds)

I won't be reviewing much of this earlier material; if I do repeat myself, it means that the subject has been altered or amplified in some significant way. Remember that although books are fixed in time, a practice isn't; in the past three years, I've come up with some new ideas as well as modified (and hopefully improved) others.

When and How Did Pranayama Originate?

Of course, any "new ideas" I may have stumbled across are probably new only to me. Since pranayama has been around for many centuries, there's a good chance that somebody somewhere thought of each one of them long before I did. In fact some scholars trace pranayama's origins back thirty-five hundred years (and possibly more) to the Vedic sacrifice. I wish we had the time and space to consider this fascinating ritual in detail, but alas, we don't. Mainstream Western scholars tell us these sacrifices, usually sponsored by powerful and wealthy royals, were originally attempts to symbolically "feed" and thus petition the favor of the gods, through their go-betweens, for some personal gain—sons and cattle (the Vedic equivalent of modern-day real estate holdings in California) being high on the list. But a number of Indian pundits and their Western supporters vigorously maintain that there was much more to the ancient sacrifice than meets the eye. They insist the outward motions and words were cloaked in mystical symbolism, and far from being a mere grab for material gain, the sacrifice was instead a highly charged spiritual performance.

Whatever the case, there's no argument that the presiding priests believed that for the sacrifice to be effective—to get what they were asking for—everything about it (for example, the construction of the altars or the preparation of the sacrificial libation) had to strictly adhere to a rigidly fixed script. Any deviation or alteration, however small, might not only offend the gods, but actually incur their wrath. This ritual propriety was so important that one of the four primary officiating priests was assigned to monitor the performances of the other three (and their assistants), and immediately intervene to correct any mistake. This close attention to detail included the proper order, pronunciation, and intonation of the sacrificial hymns sung to the gods.

So along with memorizing hundreds of hymns—in those days writing hadn't yet been invented in India (and even when it was, the priests continued to prefer oral transmission)—the singer-priest must have been trained like an opera diva to consciously and meticulously regulate his breath. Eventually somebody, or more likely some group of singer-priests, noticed something intriguing: when they altered their everyday breath in the way needed to sing the hymns accurately, they felt different somehow, though they couldn't quite put that feeling into words.

This must have occasioned some curiosity among the singer-priests, who then set out to investigate this strange phenomenon. Like modern scientists examining an aspect of nature, they constructed and conducted various breathing experiments, took notes, and exchanged information among themselves. These early experiments must have lasted several generations, and no doubt progress was not always straightforward: there must have been dead-end disappointments and an occasional disaster when somebody went too far too fast and blew a fuse.

Finally the singer-priests made an exciting discovery: they confirmed that breath is indeed related *to* and an influence *on* consciousness, but even more, that it's an expression *of* consciousness. Altering our breathing allows us not only to shape the contents of our consciousness in significant ways, it also allows us to penetrate through the levels of those contents to the very source of consciousness itself.

Early reports of these findings are scattered through a haphazard collection of books known as the Upanishads, or Secret Books. By the time of their composition, the external sacrifice of the kings and priests had been symbolically internalized by the forest hermits and other practitioners of yoga. The oldest (surviving) book, which may be upward of twenty-five hundred years old, equates our breath with the “supreme *brahman*” (*Brihad Aranyaka-Upanishad* 4.1.3). This word means “immensity” and signifies what we might call the “root self,” the “light” or consciousness that manifests both as the individual self (*atman*), which “shines out through all beings” (*Mundaka-Upanishad* 3.1.4), and its universal counterpart, the world self (*paramatman*).

Early on, pranayama was used to dampen the endless perturbations of our consciousness in order to prepare for intense meditation. This form of practice is actually what we know today as *kumbhaka*, or breath retention (we'll go into this more deeply in chapter 18). Later, during the great Hatha revolution, when the feminine principal reemerged from its thousand-year slumber in the masculine shadow, pranayama developed into a means of awakening our dormant spiritual identity. You might say we are the inheritors of this breathing tradition; our first responsibility is to understand its traditional lessons as fully as possible and then to respectfully assimilate these lessons to our own needs and goals.

Preview

The material in this book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is by far the shortest, with only two chapters. Here we'll look briefly at traditional Hatha pranayama and ask ourselves the big “Why pranayama?” question; cover three pranayama props; reaffirm our upright (“up and right”) sitting position; and reacquaint ourselves with our old friend, the Witness.

Part 2 material addresses the physical arena of practice. There are exercises for the head, eyes, and tongue; the hands; and the diaphragm, ribs, and spine. I've also come up with seven asana-based exercises (along with a few variations) that serve as preparations for both sitting and breathing. Finally, there are two chapters on the “bonds” (*bandha*, which I translated as “lock” in the first book).

In part 3, we arrive at the nitty-gritty of the practice. Here we'll first work with “sound” and imaginary breathing exercises; next with four little known traditional pranayamas (two straight up and two modified); then with what's currently called “digital pranayama,” the purposeful alteration of the breath using the fingertips to manipulate our nostrils; and finally with breath retention. Sound like fun?

An audio program is available online for free download for use in conjunction with the practices in this book. (See Appendix 1 for download instructions.) The appendixes include practice suggestions for using the audio instructions in the included audio program; a description (just for your edification) of a few traditional internal cleansing exercises, which are a central part of Hatha-Yoga; and a pair of traditional breathing

exercises that I dug out of the ancient books. All the way through this book, I've sprinkled a number of short Sidelights, which I hope will help illuminate yoga in general and pranayama in particular.

PART ONE

Background

ONCE UPON A TIME in the beginning, Prajapati, the Lord-of-Creation, was all alone. He wasn't happy being all alone, so he meditated on himself and thus gave birth to many children. But he saw they were as lifeless as stones, without intelligence or breath. This didn't make him happy. So he thought to himself, "Let me get inside them, so they'll wake up and come to life."

He turned himself into the wind and tried to get inside, but as a single thing, he couldn't do it. So he divided himself into five breaths, which nowadays are called the High Breath (prana), the Low Breath (*apana*), the Middle Breath (*samana*), the Up Breath (*udana*), and the Spread-Out Breath (*vyana*).

Now, the breath that breathes in is High; the one that breathes out is Low. These two keep the body warm and alive, just as a bellows keeps a fire burning. The one that takes in, cooks, and processes food, passing the coarser elements to Low for elimination and the subtler elements to each limb for nourishment, is Middle. The one that belches or swallows what is drunk or eaten is Up, and the one that saturates and strengthens the entire body is Spread-Out.

Now, High depends on Low, and Low depends on High. In the space between them, Prajapati generated heat (*agni*). This heat is the person (*purusha*), the universal fire (*agni vaishvanara*) in all people. So we're told, "If you cover your ears, you can hear the sound of that person. When you're about to leave this life, you can't hear that sound anymore."

After dividing into five breaths, Prajapati hid in secret: made of mind, his body is breath, his form is light, what he wills always comes true, his self is space. But he still wasn't happy. He thought in his heart one more thing was needed, so he said, "Let me enjoy the world."

—Maitri-Upanishad

CHAPTER 1

First Breath

Traditional Hatha Pranayama

To breathe is life. Without breath we die.

—Mabel Ellsworth Todd, *The Thinking Body*

Why Pranayama?

The traditional texts have lots to say about the benefits of pranayama, some of it reasonable, some of it pretty weird or unbelievable, at least to our Western minds. Just remember that these old books tend to exaggerate the practices' blessings, and we should take a good portion of what they say with a grain or two of salt.

They all agree that, at the very least, pranayama is good for physical health. Over and over, we read of how the practice—or various individual practices—destroys disease (specifically phlegm and nervous diseases, dysentery, cough, and fever) and so prolongs our life; palliates hunger and thirst, yet at the same time stimulates the gastric fire, which improves digestion (so the food we eat is fully assimilated) and the elimination of waste substances; purifies the blood and cleans the sinuses; and secures mental calmness.

Pranayama is also supposed to improve our looks. This may seem odd, accustomed as we are to thinking that the old yogis didn't much care about their material body and its appearance. The yoga fundamentalists among us like to point accusingly at American yoga as being “too physical,” too cosmetically oriented, and not “spiritual” enough. Yet the anonymous author of the three-hundred-year-old *Shiva Collection* (*Shiva-Samhita*, hereafter abbreviated SS) reports that the “body of the person practicing the regulation of breath becomes harmoniously developed, emits sweet scent, and looks beautiful and lovely” (SS 3.29). Svatmarama, in his *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (hereafter abbreviated HYP), seconds this: by performing the Seet-Sound-Making breath, “one becomes a second God of Love” (HYP 2.54). Ready to practice yet?

Of course, I don't mean to imply that the old yogis were chiefly concerned with looking lovely. No matter how well it works to firm our buns, all yoga practice has an ultimately spiritual intent and goal. But we can assume that an attractive exterior to some degree reflects a godly interior. The first-century C.E. teacher Tirumular wrote:

The breath within rises
And wanders where it lists;
Control that and purify within;
Then shall your limbs glow red
Your hair turn dark,
And God within shall leave you never.

—*Thirumandiram*

In the spiritual realm, pranayama is said to purify our subtle energy channels (*nadi*), which in turn contributes to the awakening and integration of our authentic self. Then there are the strange powers that the oldsters claim accrue to the practitioner, such as levitation, the “ability to move through space” (*Gheranda-Samhita* 5.58, hereafter abbreviated GS), and clairvoyance. We won’t, of course, be concerned with acquiring these powers, although it would be nice to be able to fly and avoid airports and coach seating.

What about the benefits of pranayama according to modern books? In addition to recounting the traditional benefits, modern teachers claim that pranayama strengthens the diaphragm; tones the belly and its organs (such as the liver and kidneys); increases lung capacity; strengthens the immune system; improves blood circulation and the removal of waste gases (such as carbon dioxide); calms the brain, which reduces stress and improves concentration (and is supposed to be good for insomnia); and generally increases our life energy.

What does modern science have to say about all this? Pranayama has been studied from several angles, including the practice’s effect on the autonomic nervous system, psychological stress, blood pressure and heart rate, metabolism and obesity, memory, and even handgrip strength. One of these studies, for example, assures us that regular pranayama practice “increases parasympathetic tone, decreases sympathetic activity, improves cardiovascular and respiratory functions, decreases the effect of stress and strain on the body and improves physical and mental health ... [It] improves autonomic and pulmonary functions in asthma patients ... [and] has also been advocated for the treatment of anxiety disorder as it attenuates cardiac autonomic responses in such patients.”¹

Traditional Hatha Pranayama

Before we begin our practice, let’s take a quick look back at traditional Hatha pranayama as it’s described in two old instructional manuals. You might think that such books are a twentieth-century innovation, but they’ve been around for at least six hundred years, maybe more.

The older manual, titled *Light on Forceful Yoga (Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika)*, was written in the mid-fourteenth century C.E. by Svātmanāma Yogendra; the former name means “one who takes pleasure in his own self (atman),” and the latter is an honorific title meaning “lord of yoga.” The 390 verses of the text are divided into four chapters—on posture (*asana*), conscious breathing (pranayama), seals (*mudra*) and bonds (*bandha*), and *samadhi*. This last Sanskrit word, which literally means “putting together,” is often left untranslated, or is rendered variously as “contemplation,” “concentration,” “absorption,” “trance,” or “ecstasy.” None of these English words, though, quite gets to the nitty-gritty of *samadhi*’s meaning. The word that comes closest is *enstasy*, coined by the great yoga scholar Mircea Eliade. A play on the word *ecstasy*, literally, “to stand outside” yourself, *enstasy* means “to stand *inside*” yourself, suggesting a “putting together” with your innermost being. Considering how *asana* practice dominates American Hatha-Yoga, it’s interesting to note that only about one-tenth of the HYP’s verses (about three dozen) are dedicated to *asana*, while the bulk of the teaching focuses on pranayama and the seals and bonds, both of which attract scant attention in this country.

The younger book is titled *Gheranda's Collection (Gheranda-Samhita)*, written near the end of the seventeenth century by someone whose name is now lost, if it was ever known. The name *Gheranda* refers to the teacher, whether historical or legendary, who delivers the teaching summarized in the book. It's shorter than the HYP by about forty verses, though it consists of seven chapters, one for each of the seven limbs (*sapta anga*) of the Hatha practice. The GS covers the four limbs of the HYP, along with six physical purifications (*karma*) (which have chapters of their own), sense withdrawal (*pratyahara*), and meditation (*dhyana*). According to Gheranda, each of these seven limbs (listed here in their hierarchical order) is said to bestow a different benefit on the practitioner:

- Cleanliness (*shodhana*) comes from purification exercises (the “six acts”).
- Strength or solidity (*dridhata*) comes from the postures.
- Stability (*sthairya*) results from the seals and bonds.
- Constancy or composure (*dhairya*, also translated as “calmness” or “courage”) comes from sense withdrawal.
- Lightness (*laghava*, also translated as “ease”) results from conscious breathing.
- Clear perception (*pratyaksha*) comes from meditation.
- Immaculateness (*nirliptata*) comes from ecstasy.

This is actually an outline of the process or course of traditional Hatha practice. Unlike classical practice, which begins with the restraints (*yama*) and observances (*niyama*), Hatha practice begins with rather extensive “housecleaning” of the physical body, including the intestines, stomach, throat and tongue, ears and eyes, and assorted other nooks and crannies. Then the body is further tempered with posture, which, just as in the classical practice, readies it for the rigorous demands of pranayama and meditation. Next come the seals and bonds, which are used to restrain the transformative energy generated by pranayama and channel it through the body. After a brief lesson in sense withdrawal, which helps gather and focus self-awareness, the process is completed with the three closely related practices of conscious breathing, meditation, and samadhi.

Last Word

Keep in mind that Hatha pranayama and the classical pranayama of Patanjali are similar in some respects and dissimilar in others. The latter is essentially what we call kumbhaka, which we loosely translate as “retention.” The classical practitioner is, as you know, intent on quieting the fluctuations (*vrutti*) of his consciousness, which is only possible after he has quieted the fluctuations of his physical body, from the gross but mostly unconscious fidgetings to the subtle expansions and contractions of everyday breathing. Stopping or at least greatly inhibiting these movements is a necessary prelude to sense withdrawal and meditation, the core of classical practice.

On the other hand, while retention is also a technique in her arsenal, the Hatha practitioner uses pranayama not only to subdue her *overactive* brain but to stimulate her *underactive* spiritual power. Both practitioners have self-realization as their goal, though the nature of their realization differs. Classical realization may be characterized as

transcendence (from the Latin *scandere*, “to climb”), in which the practitioner climbs beyond the everyday world to live alone in the spiritual (*kaivalya*). Conversely, the Hatha practitioner integrates or “makes whole” (from the Latin *integer*, “intact”) the material and her spiritual worlds and remains in the former in joyful play (*lila*) as a *jivan-mukti*, a “free” embodied self.

CHAPTER 2

When You Need a Helping Hand

Pranayama Props and Tips

Sopashraya [“sitting with support”] is squatting tying the back and the two legs with a piece of cloth called “Yoga-pattaka” (a strong piece of cloth by which the back and two legs are tied while squatting).

—Swami Hariharananda Aranya, commentary to *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*

Pranayama Props

You might think yoga props are a modern invention, but yogis have been using them in one form or another in their practice for many hundreds of years. For example, in the preceding quote, a contemporary yoga master is describing a yoga belt that yogis have used to stabilize their sitting position for more than a millennium. Props are like the training wheels on a kid’s bike; they help us stay upright and moving forward until we learn to pedal on our own.

But props are unwelcome guests in some yoga schools, and their detractors make a good case against them. Critics feel that we can become overly dependent on our props to the point where they slow our progress, just like a person who continues to lean on a crutch long after a broken leg has healed and thus inhibits recovery. So it’s important to use props judiciously and, as your practice develops over time, be willing to gradually diminish your need for them or at least find a way to gradually increase your self-reliance.

For many of the exercises in this book, I’ll recommend one or more of the usual prop suspects, which I covered in the first book, including the following:

- A cotton yoga belt or strap (six or eight feet long) with a metal or plastic buckle.
- A yoga block of either foam or wood (though foam is usually preferred). Do you remember our block terminology from *The Yoga of Breath*? The block has two ends, two sides, and two faces. For this book, let’s add the term *edges*, of which our block has a grand total of twelve, though for our purposes we only need to distinguish two. Look straight on at one end of the block, with its long axis and faces parallel to the floor. We’ll say that the edges along the top and bottom of the end, which angle with the block’s faces, are called the “end-face edges,” while the end’s other two edges are the “end-side edges.” Follow? This will come in handy in chapter 4.
- A couple of firm woolen, wool/synthetic-blend, or cotton blankets.
- A couple of sandbags (though they’re no longer filled with sand, as they were about twenty-five years ago), usually weighing ten pounds each. Yoga prop makers, by the way, are missing a golden opportunity to expand their business by not thinking outside the box. Why, I wonder, are all bags shaped like hot dogs, and why do they all weigh ten pounds? I’ve made some diamond-shaped, five-pound

bags that have all sorts of possible uses for pranayama.

- A bolster, either cylindrical or flat.
- A metal folding chair.
- An Ace bandage for wrapping the forehead and eyes (which can also be rolled up and used as a chin support in Net-Bearer Bond).
- A timer, preferably a digital watch with a countdown function (though an everyday kitchen timer will suffice). I won't mention the timer again; just assume you'll need it for any timed exercise.
- And last but not least, an eye bag. The standard bag measures about four inches by eight inches, weighs about eight ounces, and covers only the eyes. I own a larger bag, which I find more useful—it measures about five inches by ten inches and weighs about twenty ounces. This oversize bag also covers about half my forehead, which helps to quiet both my eyes and my busybody brain.

Although I recommend these props, you should understand that they're optional. If you feel that props just get in your way, then *don't use them*. Remember though that some exercises may almost demand a prop, depending on your capacities; for example, when sitting in Hero Pose (*virasana*), tight quadriceps may prevent your buttocks from resting comfortably on the floor, and tight front ankles may scream in protest. It's best in this case to sit on a block (or some other firm height, such as a folded blanket) until your quads and ankle muscles lengthen enough to allow you to sit with your buttocks on the floor.

We'll also be using three newfangled props (which are again optional) that you might not have sitting around your practice room.

ELASTIC BAND

Elastic bands are made from latex and come in different colors to indicate their degree of resistance (for example, the yellow band is relatively thin and offers less resistance, while the silver or black bands are relatively heavy and offer greater resistance). These bands are available at many sporting goods and back-care stores, as well as online. You'll need a band about four feet long, which will cost a few dollars. I favor either the red or blue bands, which offer medium to heavy resistance, but you may like less or more resistance. These bands are typically used as fitness or therapy devices, but we'll use ours (if you decide to get one) for a diaphragm exercise in part 2.

NOSE CLIPS

Rubber nose clips, the kind that swimmers wear to pinch their nostrils, are available in sporting goods stores. We won't be pinching our nostrils completely closed or going for a swim; rather, we'll be using our clips to partially close our nostrils for a breathing exercise in part 3.

EARPLUGS

There's one traditional pranayama, Bee breath (which we'll work with in part 3), in which we block our ear canals with our thumbs. It's a bit awkward to do this in the traditional way and difficult to pressure the ears evenly. I've discovered a modern alternative to

thumbs: foam earplugs, which are readily available and fairly cheap at drugstores and (because power tools make lots of noise) hardware stores. I recommend a pair for Bee, unless you're determined to adhere to traditional ways.

I've also discovered serendipitously that the plugs are useful for all the other breaths, so now I use them as a matter of course for my daily breathing practice. If you decide to get a pair, try the following exercise and see if they help you too.

Preliminary

Roll and squeeze one plug between your right thumb and index finger. Then reach across the top of your head with your left hand, gently pinch your right upper ear, and pull it up until you look like you're half-Vulcan. This will open the ear canal a bit more and allow you to slip the rolled plug carefully into the canal's opening. Release both your ear and the plug, and the foam will slowly expand and block the canal. Repeat with the other ear, reversing the hand-ear directions.

Practice

Lie on your back in Corpse Pose (*shavasana*), propped in any way you like. First find your imaginary yoga ear. Draw a line between the openings of your physical ears, which will pass right across the top of your spine (at the atlas). Now gently nod your head a few times, and notice how it seems to rock on the axis of that line. Next draw another line perpendicular to the first, from your upper lip (at the root of your nose) to that little bump on the base of your skull (the occipital protuberance). Your yoga ear is located at the intersection of these two lines (see [fig. 2.1](#)).

Now perform simple Conqueror (no ratio or retention) for a few minutes. Focus the sound of Unspoken Hymn in your yoga ear and listen carefully: notice, even at your relatively advanced stage of practice, how your breath's texture still quavers slightly. See if you can smooth over the fluctuations, so the Hymn sounds the same from beginning to end, on both the inhale and the exhale.



FIGURE 2.1

How It Helps

Blocking your ears helps internalize and amplify the sound of your breath, which makes it easier to monitor the nuances of its texture and make finer adjustments to its movement. This heightened sound is akin to white noise, which helps quiet the chattering brain.

Going Further

Like all sound, the Hymn sound is vibrating energy, which can be used to invigorate the body and soothe the brain. Try these three successive “radiations” of this sound-energy. First from its focus point in your yoga ear, radiate the sound outward and let it softly massage your brain. Then channel it down along your spinal cord to your tailbone, and feel it vibrate your spine, as if it were a lightly plucked guitar string. Finally, radiate the energy out from your spine into and through your entire body, so that eventually every cell is vibrating in harmony. I sometimes feel my skin tingling during this exercise, bubbling like carbonated water.

Pranayama Tips: Sitting and the Witness

By now I assume you don’t need as many pranayama tips as you did when you first started your practice way back when. But I’d like to remind you briefly of a few important points about the sitting position and the Witness.

Proper sitting is a prerequisite for any kind of pranayama; in fact, there’s little point in sitting for formal breathing until you can first sit in balance and relatively quietly for a minimum of ten to fifteen minutes. Imbalance and fidgeting are related, the former encourages the latter, and together they disturb the brain and prevent the diaphragm from pumping freely. Pranayama practice will then be a chore at best and at worst a painful experience you’ll not want to repeat. That’s why tradition emphasizes that a regular “balancing act,” an asana practice, is so important as a foundation for pranayama.

Balanced sitting depends primarily on two things. The first is the position of the pelvis: the top rim of this “bowl” (the Latin *pelvis* means “basin”) should be parallel to the floor, or put another way, the tip of the tailbone and bottom of the pubis should be equidistant from the floor. When the pelvis is so positioned, the spine then has the opportunity to lengthen upward to its full extent, freeing the diaphragm.

For this to happen, the body must be grounded or anchored, which requires two related actions (remember that actions are imaginary, not actual physical movements). The first involves the heads of the thighbones (femurs), the ball-shaped structures that snuggle deeply within the cup-shaped hip sockets. In any sitting position, you should imagine these heads sinking deeper into your pelvis and toward the floor. You’ll know you’re having some success if your belly softens and hollows slightly, and your breath drops to the bottom of your pelvis. The second action involves the tailbone, which you imagine uncurling (the coccyx curls slightly forward toward the pubis) and lengthening down into the floor like the taproot of a large tree, anchoring your back spine to the earth.

Together, the grounding of the femur heads and tailbone create a rebound effect along the front spine, which spontaneously lengthens upward through the crown of the head. You might once have been asked, when aligning your head with your torso, to imagine it being “pulled up” from above. But I feel it’s better to think of your head being “pushed up” from below by the anchoring action of the femur heads and tailbone. Then your head will seem to float lightly atop your spine.

Remember that just as this book had a first draft that needed a good deal of editing and refinement, your initial sitting position is similarly a kind of rough “first draft.” Despite the classical criteria that a successful pose be “steady and comfortable,” I believe that in order to achieve the latter, it’s necessary to make continual subtle adjustments to the sitting position as the practice session progresses. And just as my editor (thank goodness) perceptively remarked on how I might improve the content and organization of my material, so will your breath (if you listen attentively) make continual insightful “suggestions” on how you might improve your sitting position, which helps you breathe more fully and freely. There’s a constant interplay between body and breath, so that the former is never really rock-solid steady; rather, it’s in constant subtle motion, responding to and rhythmically pulsing with the breath.

Witnessing

Balanced sitting awakens and enlivens our old friend, the Witness. All practice is rooted *in* the Witness, since all practice (and every practice manual that ever has been or ever will be written) ultimately emerges *from* the Witness. Witnessing, in and of itself, is transformative: whatever’s being witnessed changes, and this change typically allows us to witness more clearly and closely, which produces further change in an endless feedback loop. Actually many people believe that Witnessing is all we really need to do, that the best breathing technique is *no* technique, or rather, the best technique is simply to witness the breath and allow it to follow its own natural rhythms.

Witnessing induces stillness. Initially we feel the stillness, when our body relaxes and then our brain, for once, quiets down. This in turn leads to surrender, “letting go.” Westerners—and particularly Americans—are inclined to be go-getter types and not very

good at surrendering. We tend to think of surrender as waving a white flag, of throwing in the towel, of giving up in disgrace. But in yoga we actually surrender things we no longer need, things that stand in the way of our own self-fulfillment.

Simple witnessing is the first stage of pranayama, what I call conscious breathing, where we surrender, to a greater or lesser extent, the breathing impediments we've acquired over the years, whether physical or mental. In return, we gain some degree of understanding of our authentic breath, which, once it's consciously established, allows us to move along to the next practice stage.

The second stage of practice, which I call formal breathing, is what we all think of as pranayama. Formal breathing is technique-driven, which means we're not just passively watching our breath anymore but influencing it in some way, say by purposely encouraging it to slow down or rest altogether. Some teachers mistrust technique, but if properly applied, technique is a catalyst that can speed up the transformative process. Remember though that technique isn't the same as control; rather, it involves a cooperative effort with the breath and should never be used to force the breath to do things it doesn't want to do.

Scientists estimate that air-breathing has been evolving on this planet for four hundred million years, and by now breath knows its job better than anybody, including our intellectually powerful but insightfully limited Western ego, which is only about twenty-five hundred years old. Breath doesn't mind if we try to work with it, as long as we show it suitable respect, but it reacts when we try to control it—sometimes irritably, other times violently.

As we continue to breathe and surrender, we slowly *become* the stillness, or maybe we realize our identity *with* the stillness. At this point we naturally enter the third stage of pranayama, what I call spontaneous breathing (the Latin origin of this word, *sua sponte*, means “of one's own accord”) in which all technique falls away and the authentic breath emerges and expresses itself fully “of its own accord.” Patanjali, compiler of the *Yoga-Sutra* (2.51, and hereafter abbreviated as YS), calls this stage the “fourth” (*chaturtha*), by which he means that it transcends the three everyday phases of inhale, exhale, and the in-between rest (YS 2.51). As a result, he says the veil is lifted off our “inner light” (YS 2.52), our awakened mind (*buddhi*). Naturally we can't make this stage happen—it's a gift given to us in return for the ultimate surrender of our false or mistaken attachment to self-alienation.

Let's reacquaint ourselves with our Witness through an exercise from *The Yoga of Breath*, which I call stop-and-wait breathing. The *stop* means that we pause—or to be more precise, we prolong the natural pause—after an exhale, usually somewhere between fifteen and thirty seconds (though a somewhat longer time is possible). The *wait* means that we wait for the next inhale to come to us, to let it happen, rather than actively taking a breath.

When I do this exercise, I'm usually aware of two things. First, I experience a kind of surface tension that I've fondly nicknamed the Grip—you remember the Gripper, don't you?—which I assume is the physical side of my small self, what we in the West call the ego. The Grip essentially serves both to protect me (or what's “inside” me) from what I

perceive to be the terrors of the outside world and, conversely, to protect the outside world from what I think of as the terrors inside me.

Now just to be clear, I've got nothing against my ego, though many yogis, both traditionalists and moderns, see it as an obstacle to self-realization. The ego is a vehicle by which we distinguish ourselves from the world and ideally through which we express our own uniqueness and appreciate that of others. The problem is that the ego tends to be "ego-tistical." It elbows its way into our psyche and takes over, blinding us to our authentic self and severing (or at least convincing us that it's severing) our relationship with the world. It goes without saying that this leads to fear, anxiety, alienation, and as Patanjali says, unremitting sorrow (*duhkha*). The solution isn't to rid ourselves of this structure but simply to adjust its position in our psyche, to balance our ego's sense of individuality with our innate union (*yoga*) with the world. Our practice should be designed to soften the Grip of the ego so that our authentic self can "breathe" and express itself more openly.

The other thing I'm aware of in the stop-and-wait exercise is that underneath the Grip, I can just barely sense an immense reservoir of calm, which I assume is the presence of my authentic self. According to traditional Yoga, this self has three qualities: in addition to calmness—or what I like to call presence (from the Latin *esse*, "to be") and what the yogis call being (*sat*, as opposed to the constant "becoming" of the ego)—it also possesses wisdom-awareness (*chit*) and joy (*ananda*).

Preliminary

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat or lie on a blanket support, eyes closed. Witness your breath for a few minutes, not only the inhales and exhales, but the rests between them as well.

Practice

Exhale and then stop; don't actually hold your breath out, just prolong the natural rest for fifteen to thirty seconds. Can you feel your Grip? I'm pretty sure you have one, though it may be more or less grippier than mine. How much of that Grip can you release? Try to let go of as much of it as possible. For me, accompanying the Grip is an urge to "do," to breathe, which at first I have to resist, though later in the exercise the urge is less urgent.

Now, can you penetrate underneath this surface tension and feel your own deeper calm? Notice what happens to your brain, or at least to your "front" brain, which is where the ego-becoming figuratively resides. The brain reacts to the rest-calm by calming down itself.

Soon you'll feel the faint stirring of the next inhale. I like to picture myself standing on a warm beach, looking out at the ocean, and seeing—way off in the distance—the growing swell of the next incoming wave. Don't respond right away, let the swell continue to grow, and watch it with interest but without any needfulness or avoidance; don't run out to it or away from it. Let the inhale come to you and receive it gracefully and gratefully, like a gift. Then exhale slowly. Repeat this for ten to fifteen cycles: exhale, stop-and-wait, receive. Finish with a few everyday breaths, witnessing both the constantly becoming-ego and the being-calm.

How It Helps

The initial advantage of this process of detachment is that one begins to understand one's own nature and all Nature. The detached Witness is able to see entirely without the least blinding by egoism the play of her modes of the Ignorance and to pursue it into all its ramifications, coverings, and subtleties—for it is full of camouflage and disguise and snare and treachery and ruse.

—Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*

Stop-and-wait breathing allows the calmness of the self to peek through the body's surface tension. This practice is the essence of conscious breathing, but it also prepares us for the next two breathing stages, formal and spontaneous. For me, the calm that I feel during the wait is actually a foretaste of what we'll purposely encourage in part 3 with the practice of breath retention, which is nothing more than a breathing spell. The wait also quiets the brain's chatter, and the subsequent inhale allows me to experience, however briefly, my authentic breath.

Last Word

Remember that watching the breath is like a full-time job, only full-time here means twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. But unlike a job, which I imagine could get rather tedious after a while, this watching is pure joy, a way to enliven your life naturally and make everything you do more meaningful. Remember what my favorite yogi, Yogi Berra, once said: "You can observe a lot just by watching."

PART TWO

Body

If the body perishes, Prana departs
Nor will the light of Truth be reached;
I learned the way of preserving my body
And so doing, my Prana too.
Time was when I despised my body;
But then I saw the God within
And the body, I realized, is the Lord's temple
And so I began preserving it
With infinite care.
If breath is used to flush the Ida and Pingala
By Pranayama, the heart gets purified
And the body becomes impervious
Even to fire.

—*Thirumandiram*, translated by B. Natarajan

CHAPTER 3

Channels and Circuits

Most Gracious, Comfort, and Tawny

In this body, the mount Meru—i.e., the vertebral column—is surrounded by seven islands; there are rivers, seas, mountains, fields; and lords of the fields too. There are seers and sages; all the stars and planets as well ... The Sun and Moon, agents of creation and destruction, also move in it ... All the beings that exist in the three worlds are also to be found in the body... .

—*Shiva-Samhita*

THE SANSKRIT WORD *nadi* literally means “tube” or “pipe,” but for our purposes, we’ll translate it as “channel.” According to yoga tradition, our body has two parallel networks of channels: one weaves through our gross (*sthula*) body and consists of the nerves, veins, and arteries of Western anatomy; the other, hidden from science and known only to the yogis (and thus sometimes called *yoga-nadis*), weaves similarly through our subtle (*sukshma*) body and carries equally subtle life energy (*prana*). Though both gross and subtle channels have the same name, we shouldn’t picture the latter in the same solid way we see the former. If we could see the *yoga-nadis*, as John Woodroffe writes, they would “present the appearance of those maps which delineate the various ocean currents.”¹

The yogis have mapped tens (maybe hundreds) of thousands of these subtle channels; the entire network is sometimes called the wheel of channels (*nadi-chakra*). In the average person—no one reading this book, of course—these channels are clogged, like silted rivers, so *prana* can’t flow freely through the body, leading to fatigue, disease, decay, and ultimately death. The yogis have developed various techniques to scour and clear the channels, such as *asana* and certain breathing techniques like Channel Cleaning breath (*nadi-shodhana pranayama*). According to Svatmarama, when the channels are purified, certain outer signs will show, like a lean and glowing body (HYP 2.19). The origin of the channels is in dispute. In some texts, they originate in the heart and branch out in all directions. Other texts locate the origin in an egg-shaped, fuzzy white bulb (*kanda*), sometimes situated at the base of the spine (in the *muladhara chakra*, or root foundation wheel) and other times in the middle of the body.

However many channels there actually are, only fourteen are generally considered important, and of these, three are chief:

- Most gracious channel (*sushumna-nadi*) is the main channel, following the course of the spine from its base (at the coccyx) to its apex at the first cervical vertebra (the atlas) and then continuing on through the hemispheres of the brain to the crown of the head. One old Tantric text (“The Investigation of the Six Wheels”) rhapsodizes that *sushumna* is “as subtle as a spider’s thread ... beautiful like a chain of lightning ... the awakener of pure knowledge; the embodiment of all Bliss” [v. 3].

- Comfort channel (*ida-nadi*) coils around sushumna from the bulb to the left nostril. Its symbol is the moon (*shashi*), or feminine principle, and so its energetic qualities include coolness, introversion, receptivity, and darkness or night.
- Tawny or reddish channel (*pingala-nadi*) coils around sushumna from the bulb to the right nostril. Its symbol, as you might expect, is the sun (*mihira*) or masculine principle, so its energetic qualities include fieriness, extroversion, expansion, and light or day.

The two coils of Comfort and Tawny form a double helix, much like a strand of DNA. They join together and cross sushumna at six points, beginning at the root chakra at the coccyx and ending at the level of the midbrow, where they form a knot called the triple braid of release (*mukta triveni*), or triple peak (*tri-kuta*). From here, ida and pingala pass to their respective nostrils, while sushumna continues to the crown.

In the nonyogi, the entrance to sushumna, the Brahma gate (*brahma-dvara*), is blocked by the slumbering snake (*kundalini*), so prana can flow only through ida and pingala. This, Svātmanā says mysteriously, is the cause of day and night (HYP 4.17).

It's an odd story to be sure, and hard to understand from a modern, rational Western perspective, which is exactly what we *shouldn't* do. The yogis are trying to describe what's essentially indescribable in everyday language; they're resorting to the same devices poets use, such as metaphor and symbolism. What we really have here is a parable that reveals something about our own spiritual "journey" of self-investigation and self-fulfillment.

To start, the kundalini (the dormant or potential aspect of the goddess Shakti) represents you and me. Her sleep stands for our own self-ignorance (*avidya*), which binds us to our small, limited self and separates and alienates us from our authentic identity. She lies at the foot of the spine and doorway to sushumna, the straight and narrow path, which is blocked not by any outside agency but unwittingly by the practitioner. The ultimate goal of Hatha-Yoga (as it is with all yoga schools in one way or another) is to figuratively wake up the slumbering self. But before that can happen, we first have to recognize that we are indeed asleep, and then care enough about our situation to resolve to do something about it.

Our spine has a pair of related associations. On the one hand, it's compared to Mount Meru, which is why it's sometimes called the staff of Meru (*meru-danda*). Meru is the mythical mountain at the hub of the Hindu universe, around which all the world rotates. Thus the spine is the *axis mundi*, the "hub" of our life and the link between the lower mundane world and the higher realms of the self. Our journey begins at the foot of Meru, and through our practice, we symbolically ready ourselves and then slowly climb to the summit, mapping out and assimilating all dimensions of existence.

But the spine also stands for the spectrum of consciousness, of which our everyday consciousness is just a small part, similar to the way visible light is just a small section of the vastly broader electromagnetic spectrum. By traversing from coccyx to crown we pass from the deepest depths of the collective and personal unconscious to the highest heights of the universal consciousness.

Pingala and ida then symbolize the “crooked” world of everyday life, which distracts and absorbs our energy in the pursuit of everyday things. This pursuit creates “time and death,” *death* here meaning the prolongation of self-ignorance, which to the yogi is far worse than physical death. So the goal is to devitalize ida and pingala, to cause them to “die off” (HYP 3.10) by withdrawing our attention (and prana, Shakti’s active aspect) from them and redirecting it to the foot of the mythic mountain and the door to sushumna.

Whew. I certainly don’t expect you—or myself—to contact and make practical use of these ethereal channels. I’m describing them, first, because they’re an integral part of the story of Hatha-Yoga, and second, to serve as a background for an account of what I consider to be their modern equivalents, energetic (or imaginative) channels we *can* contact and work with profitably in our practice—not only pranayama, but asana and meditation as well.

Our modern channels were discovered and refined not only by twentieth-century yogis but by intrepid somatic pioneers such as Mabel Todd and members of her school, including Lulu Sweigard, Barbara Clark, and Andre Bernard (who taught me about ideokinesis, or imaginary movement). Unlike their subtle counterparts, modern channels are, for the most part, relatively easy to trace along the surface of the body, though a few—including the main channel, the front spine—pass through the interior of the torso or head and can only be imagined.

Typically, modern channels run in one direction only, either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Every channel has its opposite, or more precisely, its complement; the inner leg channel, for example, which runs upward from the inner ankle to the inner groin, is complemented by the outer leg channel, which runs downward from the outer hip to the outer ankle. Every pair then forms a circuit that goes round and round—where she stops, nobody knows—and these circuits then combine to form a coordinated network, much like the wheel of subtle channels, for routing energy through the body.

We can trace about a dozen major circuits, all of them feeding and being fed by the central spine circuit, the core of our body-mind. We’ll take a look at the spine and head circuits in the next chapter, but for now, let’s take a moment to trace a few simple circuits, just to get warmed up.

Preliminary

You’ll need to have your yoga uniform on for this exercise, preferably shorts (so your legs are bare) and bare feet, but if the former’s not possible (or isn’t part of your usual yoga garb), then the latter will be good enough. Stand in Mountain Pose (*tadasana*) with your feet slightly apart and parallel to each other. Then bend forward from the groins with an exhale into Standing Forward Bend (*uttanasana*). Bend your knees if you need help getting your hands comfortably to the floor.

Practice

Now press your thumbs firmly against the mounds or bases of your big toes (but not the toes themselves). Continue pressing until you have a good feel for their contact with the floor, then slide your thumbs back along the inner arches to your heels. Repeat this several times until you have a feel for this action. (Here I distinguish between a movement and an

action: the former is the actual translation of some body part or the body itself through space; the latter is an imaginary movement.) This is what I call the inner foot channel. If you now slide your thumbs along the outer foot from the heels to the little toes, you'll begin to get a sense of the foot circuit.

Next, from your inner heels, slide your fingertips up along your inner legs to your inner groins (where the thighs meet the perineum). Repeat several times. This is the inner leg channel; its complement is the outer leg channel, which energetically descends from the outer hip to the outer heel to complete the leg circuit. Stay in your forward bend for a minute or two, focusing on the imaginary flow of energy from your big toe bases, back along your inner arches, up along your inner legs, to your groins.

Inhale, lift your torso back to Mountain, and close your eyes. We'll examine the front-spine channel formally in the next chapter, but for now, just imagine that your torso is shaped like a cylinder. Draw a vertical line through its exact center, then continue it up into your head to your crown—this is your front spine. See if you can feed the energy waiting at the inner groins up into the base of the front spine, then follow it as it flows up through your torso, neck, and head. Stand for a minute or two, watching the energy rise from floor to crown along your symbolic Mount Meru.

How It Helps

We can use our circuits in one of three ways: as preparations or rehearsals for movement (for example, at the start of an asana practice session); to route or harness energy and create strength, alignment, and spaciousness (not only physical but psychological) during practice; and as a focus for awareness (for example, during relaxation at the end of practice or as a meditation exercise).

Playing Around

If you'd like to experiment further with channels and circuits, try this. Assume Downward-Facing Dog Pose (*adho mukha shvanasana*). The bases of your index fingers are analogous to the bases of your big toe, your inner arms analogous to your inner legs, and your outer arms analogous to your outer legs. Begin by pressing the index mounds firmly to the floor, then draw the energy from those points up along your inner arms to your shoulders. Here the energy divides: half flows down your back spine and out through your tailbone, while half returns to the floor along your outer arms.

Hold for a couple of minutes. You can get a better feel for these actions if you ask a yoga friend to gently stroke along the channels, first up along your inner arms, then down along your outer arms.

Last Word

The Hatha story with its fantastic characters—sleeping serpents, nadis, chakras, and mythic mountains—and plot seems far beyond anything that relates to our workaday world and our humble practice. But it's truly a story that concerns us all, that is, in fact, *our* story, drawn from the same source that creates and sustains us all.

CHAPTER 4

Here We Go Round

The Spine and Head Circuits

It is the job of the spine to keep the brain alert. The moment the spine collapses, the brain collapses.

—B. K. S. Iyengar, “Wisdom of the Master,” *Iyengar—His Life and Work*

Living in a field of gravity, a human being must be able to counter, or neutralize, the effects of gravity; that is the function of the postural muscles. Because the head/torso relationship is crucial to the working of this system, reorganizing this relationship lengthens and stimulates habitually contracted muscles in the neck and spine, with the result that upright posture is experienced again as effortless, and the body regains a sense of lightness and buoyancy.

—Theodore Dimon, *The Undivided Self*

IN THIS CHAPTER we’ll look at two of the more central circuits, the spine and head circuits. Of course, since the separate circuits ultimately form a wheel, all circuits are central to a certain extent; take one away and the whole edifice collapses. Still, the alignment of head and spine—the former relative to the latter, and the latter relative to the earth and its gravity field—is especially important for sitting pranayama.

Up-the-Front, Down-the-Back

The Spine Circuit

When working with the spine circuit, we first need to distinguish between the front spine and the back spine, and then between the physical front spine and the imaginary front spine (which we can loosely compare to the most gracious channel). The back spine is a physical structure and, since it’s right on the surface of the back torso (or at least the spinous processes are), relatively easy to contact. The best way to go about feeling your back spine is to ask a yoga partner to stroke down (never up) the back of your neck and torso from the inion to the tailbone.

The physical front spine follows the sinuous path along the vertebral bodies from the coccygeal tip of the front sacrum to the atlas; since this path is buried deep inside the torso, it can’t be felt manually. But we’re more interested in its imaginary counterpart, a channel running upward through the core of the torso (when visualized as a cylinder) from the exact middle of the perineum to the exact middle of the crown, which we’ll refer to simply as the front spine (see [fig. 4.1](#)).

For convenience, we’ll mark the start (and the end) of the spine circuit in the middle of the perineum. This area has a kind of diamond shape, bordered by the pubis in front, the coccyx in back, and the inner groins (where the inner thighs meet the perineum) on either side. The root of the spine circuit is where the pitcher’s mound might be on a baseball diamond, if it were exactly midway between home plate and second base (the pitcher’s mound is actually slightly closer to home). We can manually trace only the back half of

this circuit, the back spine, and then only if we have a pair of helping hands.

Preliminary

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor, eyes closed. If you like, you can pad the floor with a sticky mat and support the curve of your neck on a rolled-up blanket or towel. Cross your arms over your chest, cupping each shoulder with the opposite hand. Rock slightly from side to side, using the floor to spread your back torso away from its midline (the back spine).

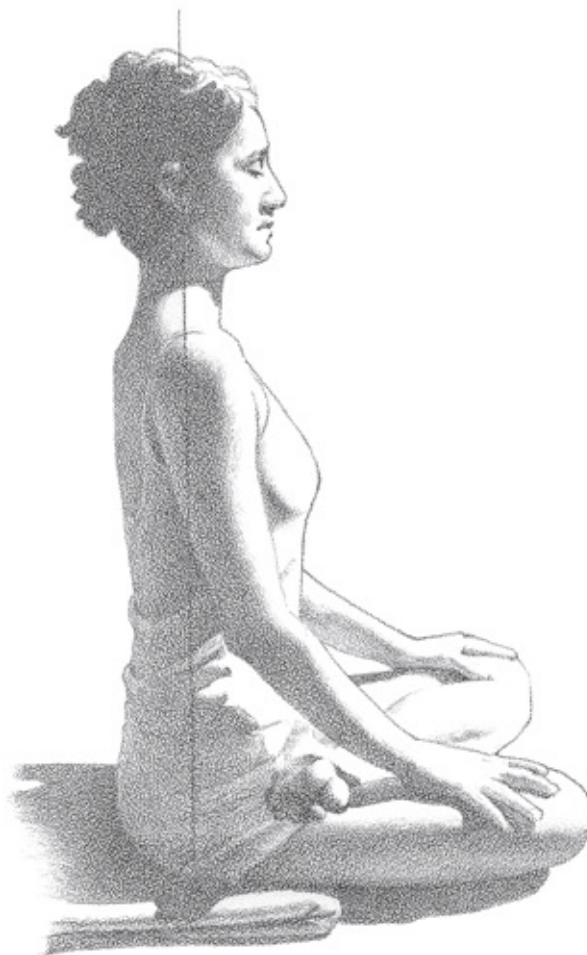


FIGURE 4.1

Practice

First let's find the back spine. Push your feet lightly against the floor, as if you were going to slide your torso in the direction of your head, but don't actually move. Feel how the pressure of your torso on the floor slides your back spine (and shoulder blades and sacrum) toward your tailbone. Be careful though—this movement may also pull down on the back of your head, closing the space between the inion and nape. As your back torso slides tailward, draw your inion away from your nape, and feed your nape into your back spine. Continue to push with your feet for a minute or two, until you get a feel for the action of your back spine.

Now for the front spine. With your arms still wrapped across your chest, feel the cylindrical shape of your torso (actually the torso is shaped more like a truncated cone, but pretend). Draw two imaginary planes through your torso-cylinder, one perpendicular to the floor that divides it into right and left halves, the other parallel to the floor that divides

it into front and back halves. The imaginary line created by the intersection of these planes, which runs vertically through your torso-cylinder from the midperineum to your crown, is your front spine.

Again rock slowly and gently from side to side, seesawing the imaginary parallel plane; the pivot or fulcrum for this movement is your front spine. Continue rocking for a minute or two, or as long as it takes you to get a feel for the action of your front spine. Then release your arms and hands to the floor on each side of your torso, and imagine retracing your front spine slowly up from your perineum to your crown two or three times.

Admittedly, the front spine is just as amorphous as the nadis. If you have difficulty (at least at first) defining your front spine, don't despair. For the time being, work with your front torso, which is much easier to find, as a stand-in. Put your fingertips on your pubis, then slowly trace up your front torso, across your navel, the vertical midline of your sternum, and up to the crook of your throat.

Finally, put the back and front channels together to complete the spine circuit. Start at your midperineum and run your awareness up your front spine to your atlas; from here, run down your back spine and return to your perineum. Repeat several times.

How It Helps

Awareness of the spine circuit helps to lengthen the (front) spine naturally, ground the torso (through the action of the back-spine channel), and center and balance the head on the spine. Mabel Todd writes, "Maintaining a balanced relationship of spinal parts to the long axis is an important aid to the primary rhythms of breathing. The vertical action of the diaphragm to its greatest depth along this axis is necessary if full dimension of the oxygen tank is to be established. A short spinal axis reverses this picture. It widens the curves and interferes with ligamentous and muscular functioning at the segments."¹

Going Further

Each of the two channels of the spine circuit has an imaginary "extension" into the space below and above the body. Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, preferably Hero Pose, eyes closed. First follow the back spine channel. Start from the base of your skull, and when the descending energy reaches your tailbone, continue on: burrow it into the floor, as if it were the taproot of a great tree. Imagine it reaching down to the very center of the earth, fixing you solidly to the planet's surface.

Next follow the front-spine channel. Start from the front of your tailbone, and when the ascending energy reaches the bottom of your skull at the atlas, imagine it continuing to rise between the hemispheres of your brain and out through your crown, through an opening the yogis call the Brahma gate. Traditionally the terminus of this imaginary channel is a point determined to be twelve finger-widths above your crown, and thus is called the end-of-twelve (*dvadashaanta*). Imagine yourself stretched like a spring between these two points, weighed down by the lower, raised up by the higher.

Up-the-Back, Down-the-Front

The Head Circuit

We'll begin (and end) the head circuit at the little bony knob at the base of the skull, just above the back of the neck (nape), called the occipital protuberance or inion. We can use our hands to trace nearly the entire course of this circuit.

Preliminary

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor, eyes closed. If you like, you can pad the floor with a sticky mat and support the curve of your neck on a rolled-up blanket or towel. Position the top of your head about one block-width (about four inches) away from a wall, and have a yoga block and an eye bag handy.

Lift your head slightly off the floor and poke around with your thumbs just above your nape until you find your inion. Then press your thumbs to either side of the knob, just where the skull base meets the nape, and splay your palms and fingertips out along the sides of your head. Pull your inion away from your nape, opening an imaginary space between your skull and neck, and slowly slide your thumbs up the back of your head; at the same time, slide your fingertips toward your forehead. As you lift the inion and slide the skin on the back of your head toward your crown, release the skin of your nape downward, toward your tailbone. Finally, with your hands still in place, lay your head back on the floor.

Practice

Now continue to slowly slide your fingertips toward, then down across, your forehead, so the skin moves from your hairline to your eyebrows. Slide your index fingertips down to and gently rest them on the inner corners of your eyes, right fingertip on the right eye, left fingertip on the left eye. Softly stroke down along the sides and wings of your nose, across the corners of your mouth, down to and over the tip of your chin, and along your chin's underside to the crease where it meets the front of your neck. Of necessity, you'll have to stop your tactile tracing of the circuit here, but mentally continue the movement through your throat, across the first cervical vertebra (atlas) at the top of your spine, and back to the starting point at the inion (see [fig. 4.2](#)).

Repeat this physical tracing of the head circuit two or three times. Then rest for a few minutes, arms and hands on the floor at your sides, retracing the head circuit in your mind.

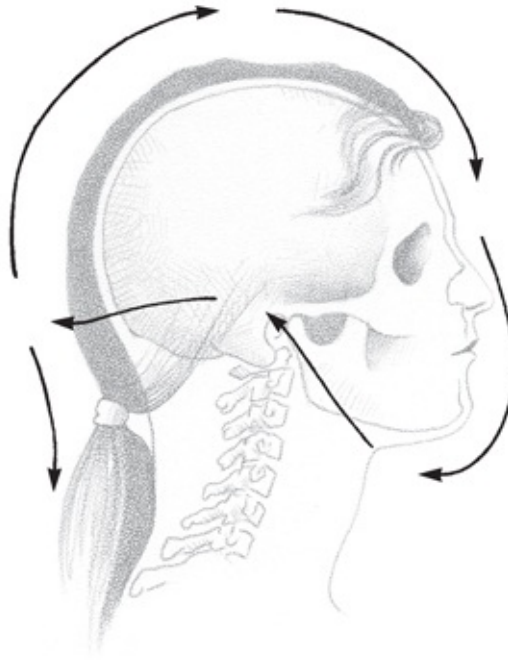


FIGURE 4.2

How It Helps

One of the most difficult things for many sitters to do is to align the head with the torso. Ideally your head should sit lightly on the top of your spine, so your neck is long and the nape muscles are relatively soft. But in reality, it's very common to see the sitter's head angled slightly ahead of the torso; instead of being a top load, as it should be, the head is a side load, a condition aptly called forward head.

How do you know if you're a forward header? The best way to find out is to have a yoga friend look at you from one side as you sit in your Sunday-best yoga seat. (See [figs. 4.3A](#) and [4.3B](#)) Try not to be on your best sitting behavior, just sit as normally as possible, considering you have someone staring at you. The two key landmarks are the opening to the ear canal and the center of the shoulder joint (or the seam along the shoulder of your shirt from the neck to the sleeve); the former should be aligned over the latter. Don't be surprised if the ear opening is, to a greater or lesser extent, forward of the shoulder.



FIGURE 4.3A

What's the problem with a forward head? The list seems to go on and on. Briefly though, for our purposes, forward head compresses the back of the neck (a common source of chronic headaches and jaw problems) and hardens the throat and tongue. Moreover, since the misalignment of the head throws the rest of the body out of whack, forward head contributes to a collapse of the upper torso (a common source of back problems) and compression of the lungs.

So the head circuit helps center the head on and lengthen the spine; release tension in the soft palate, throat, and tongue; and (in the upright position) lift the top of the sternum (manubrium) to open the upper chest and lungs. Since it also helps calm the brain, it's an excellent preparation for asana, pranayama, and meditation.



FIGURE 4.3B

Going Further

MIDBROW SEAL (*Bhru-madhya-mudra*)

The Midbrow Seal is a name I made up for this exercise. It focuses on the forehead muscle, the frontalis, which originates in the scalp above the hairline and runs down into the skin of the forehead near the eyebrows. It's also attached to the occipital muscle at the back of the head, and together they're called the occipitofrontalis.

The face is the only place on the body where the skin is attached to the underlying muscles. That's why, when we contract our facial muscles, the skin responds and we're able to make all kinds of funny faces. When we contract the frontalis, we lift our eyebrows as if in surprise and horizontally wrinkle our forehead skin.

Many people store a good deal of stress in their frontalis. As Alan Combs notes, the "frontalis muscle, like certain lower back muscles, tends to tighten up when we are under stress, and is thus a good rough gauge of the total stress level of the body, including the heart rate, blood pressure, and so on."² Given enough time and stress, a wrinkled forehead becomes a permanent feature, along with a tendency to experience unpleasant tension headaches. Like a bad neighbor who plays his stereo full blast, an habitually contracted frontalis disturbs the peace and quiet of the brain. Midbrow Seal is designed to help release and soothe the frontalis.

Preliminary

For this exercise you'll need your foam block and a wall. You'll also need a thinly rolled blanket if you want a support for your neck.

Practice

Lie on your back with your head pointed toward, and its crown a few inches away from, a wall (if desired, support your neck on the rolled-up blanket). You can bend your knees and rest your feet on the floor, or cross your shins and release your legs to the floor in a *sukhasana*-like (Easy Pose–like) position.

Remember the block-edge terminology from chapter 2? Set one end-face edge against your forehead, just above the bridge of your nose, then angle the block back so the opposite end-face edge rests on the wall (see [fig. 4.4](#)). The block should be slanted relative to the wall (and floor) so the edge in contact with your forehead skin pushes it down toward the bridge of your nose.

When the block is in position, you'll have to remain fairly still to keep it from tipping over. Be grateful for the invention of foam blocks; in the old days we had to use a wooden one for this exercise, risking the health of our nose for the experience. Stay in place for at least five minutes, progressively releasing and softening your forehead skin downward. To further encourage this release, turn your eyes down and gaze deep into your heart. At the end of your time, remove the block, lay it on the floor beside you, and then rest for a minute or two more, continuing to feel the release of the skin.

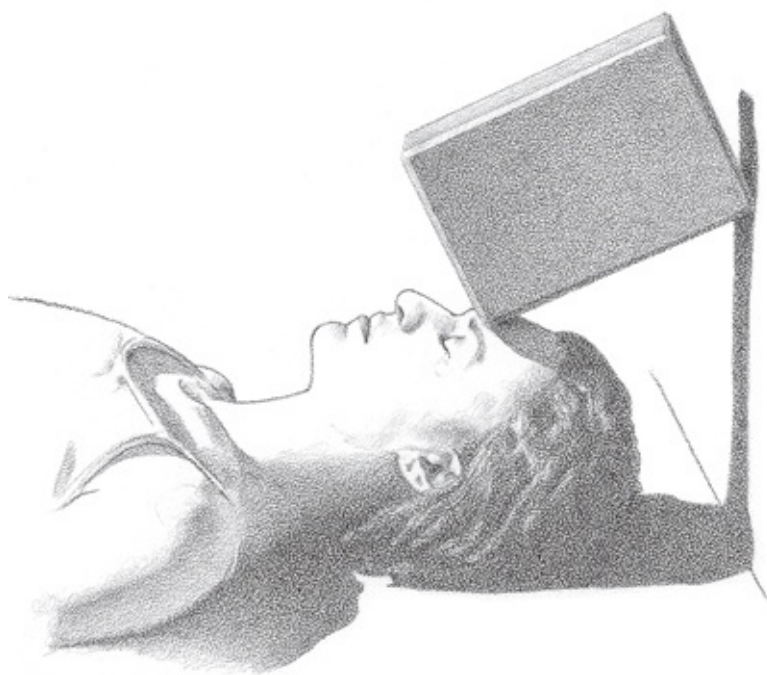


FIGURE 4.4

Going Further

Now sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. Spend a few minutes running through the circuit in your imagination. When you feel confident about your alignment, have your yoga friend take another look at the relative position of your ear opening and midshoulder. Is it the same, better, or worse? If you've found your head circuit, your head should feel somewhat lighter and higher than usual.

Last Word

The spine circuit is the principal circuit of the body. All the other channels and circuits

flow out of and then back into the spine circuit. Barbara Clark reminds us that this lengthening of the spine should be “combined with everything you do in movement—walking, sitting down, or going up and down the stairs... . Down into the roots—up into the sunlight, is the law for all axial bodies. It is the pattern for breath, communication and movement.”³ The spine circuit embodies our two most basic human urges: to move down and root ourselves in the physical body, and to move up and realize the immaterial self.

CHAPTER 5

The Eyes Have It

Trataka and Shiva's Seal

Stare at a small object without blinking until tears begin to fall. The wise call this trataka.

—*Gheranda-Samhita*

When the yogi remains with mind and breath dissolved in the internal object, seeing outside and below with motionless pupils, and even then not seeing, this is indeed Shambhavamudra.

—*Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*

HERE ARE TWO EXERCISES for your eyes. The first is one of the traditional cleansing practices, the six acts (*shat karma*), a sort of yoga for the eyes. We can also use it as a preparation for the second eye exercise, which is called Shiva's Seal (or more technically *shambhavi-mudra*, Shambhu being one of the many appellations of Shiva), Vishnu's Seal (*vaishnavi-mudra*) and Process Seal (*krama-mudra*). Practically speaking we could also call it the Paradox Seal, because it involves a seemingly impossible (or at least a very difficult) stunt, gazing in two directions—inward and outward—at the same time.

Trataka

Trataka is a Sanskrit word that has no exact English equivalent and so will remain untranslated. There are two general types of trataka: external (*bahya*) and internal (*antara*). As the names suggest, the former involves staring with open eyes at some external object or image, called a mark (*lakshya*); the latter refers to staring inward, with closed eyes, at some imagined object or image. It's also possible to combine both types in two ways: you can first stare outward at some object, then inward at the object's afterimage; or you can stare outward and inward at the same time, which is the practice called Shiva's Seal.

Traditional texts recommend that we stare at points on the body, especially the midbrow (*bhru-madhy*) or nose tip (*nasa-agra*) by crossing our eyes. Modern books give us other, less strenuous marks to stare at, often an object or symbol with some spiritually charged significance: the sun (*not* recommended here), the full moon, or a star; the tip of a needle hanging against a wall; a dot, a cross, or the mantra om drawn with black ink on a white background; a picture of a favorite deity; our own reflection in a mirror or pool of water; a crystal; complete darkness; or a *yantra* (literally an “instrument for holding, restraining, or fastening”), a geometric representation of either universal or human energy circuits that fastens our attention and prevents it from wandering away. Here we'll be using a lighted candle; the flame is a worldwide symbol representing both the self and the light of spiritual insight.

Preliminary

Your practice room should be relatively dark, which is why most books recommend

practicing *trataka* just before dawn or just after sunset; if you must practice during daylight hours, close your window blinds tight.

There doesn't seem to be any agreement on the candle's distance from you, so let's place it somewhere between eighteen inches and two feet away; however, feel free to experiment with the distance. Most instructions set the candle on the floor, which means your eyes are directed slightly downward (this direction has the added benefit of helping to release the forehead or *frontalis* muscle, which in turns soothes the brain). I also found a suggestion that the candle be positioned on a low table with the flame at eye level, so your gaze is directed straight ahead. If you want to experiment with the height of the flame, you might also set the candle on the seat of your metal folding chair.

Interestingly, different books recommend gazing at different parts of the flame. The tip seems to be the most popular focal point, but there are also directions that we stare at the tip of the wick or the body of the flame, midway between the wick and tip. Here we'll stare at the flame tip, but again, feel free to experiment.

Practice

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat for a minute or two, eyes closed. Then open your eyes and stare at the flame. Do your best not to blink or move your eyes off the flame, but at the same time, don't strain to hold them steady. If your eyes begin to water, don't rub away the tears (this injunction is similar to the one about perspiration; supposedly there are purifying, lubricating, and healing properties in these bodily waters). To start, stare for about a minute. Then close your eyes and stare inward at the flame's afterimage until it fades. Repeat once or twice more if you can. Gradually build up the time you stare at the candle to between three and five minutes.

How It Helps

Traditional texts make various claims for the benefits of *trataka*. Gheranda says that the practice cures eye diseases and leads to divine sight (*divya-drishti*), by which he probably means clairvoyance (GS 1.53). Svatmarama remarks that *trataka* is energizing and adds that we should "strive to keep it secret—as if it were a gold box" (HYP 2.32), though I guess that cat's out of the bag now.

Modern books claim that *trataka* strengthens and purifies the eyes and rests them when they're tired. Insomniacs are encouraged to practice *Trataka* just before bed as a sleep aid—just be sure to extinguish the candle before falling asleep. For our purposes, as a preparation for formal pranayama, the practice helps to quiet the eyes and, by soothing the brain, gather in a wandering mind.

Playing Around

There are minor circuits around the eyes. Touch an index finger to the outer corner of each eye. Gently stroke across the eyebrows toward the nose root, over the inner corners of the eyes, then back along the bottom lid to the outer corners again. Repeat several times. These circuits feed into the down-the-front part of the head circuit.

Shiva's Seal (Shambhavi-mudra)

Shiva literally means “auspicious,” “gracious,” “benevolent,” and “friendly.” This seal is also commonly called *shambavi-mudra*, from *Shambhu*, which means essentially the same thing, “granting or causing happiness.”

Practice

After performing external *trataka* on a candle, close your eyes for thirty seconds and hold the internal afterimage steady. Then, without losing sight of the inner candle, open your eyes about halfway and gaze at the space in front of you. Simultaneously hold both the inner and outer images in your awareness.

How It Helps

Shiva’s Seal is supposed to quiet the brain and lead to meditation. As Mark Dyczkowski explains:

Although the adept’s attention [may be] outwardly directed, he enjoys contemplative absorption through the introverted aspect of [Shiva’s Seal]. Initially he turns inward from the outside world and [then] from within [himself] he exits into the outer world under the influence of his absorption. Thus the sequence (*krama*) in this attitude (*mudra*) [ranges through] both inner and outer.¹

Last Word

The human eye, with its function of seeing, is often used as a symbol of spiritual insight; indeed one of the names Patanjali uses for the self is the seer (*drashtri*). You might have been asked at one time or another in a yoga class, in preparation for breathing or meditation, to “look inward toward the self.” This is something of a paradox, since the self is ultimately the “looker.” We quite naturally tend to imagine that our “I” is somewhere inside our body, peering at the world “out there.” This notion mistakenly separates our “I” from the world, strengthening our conditioned existential sense of self-limitation and alienation.

According to some schools of traditional yoga, “in here” and “out there” are simply two sides of the same coin, aspects of the same “I” that pervades everything everywhere. English mathematician George Spencer-Brown remarks that (at least on the physical plane) the observer and the observed are made of the same fundamental wavelike particles. “Thus,” he concludes, “we cannot escape the fact that the world we know is constructed in order (and thus in such a way as to be able) to see itself.”² Then Brown continues:

But *in order* to do so, evidently it [i.e., the world] must first cut itself up into at least one state which sees, and at least one other state which is seen. In this severed and mutilated condition, whatever it sees is *only partially* itself ... In this condition it will always partially elude itself.”³

The world is apparently playing a little game of hide-and-seek with itself. But our yogis might rephrase Mr. Brown’s last statement. “In this condition,” they’d say, “the world will partially elude itself until we realize who is observing and what is being observed.” The

goal of Shiva's Seal is to teach us that the seeming duality of looking in and looking out can in the end be merged into one, and the result is just looking.

CHAPTER 6

Watch Your Tongue

Tongue Corpse and Tongue Bond

By pressing together the palate and the tip of his tongue, by the cessation of speech, mind and breath, one sees *brahman* by investigating (*taraka*).

—*Maitri-Upanishad*

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS SEALS (*mudra*) of traditional Hatha-Yoga is the Space-Walking Seal (*khecari-mudra*). I'm about to describe it now, but like newscasters about to show grisly scenes of war or disaster, I'll caution you ahead of time that some of what I'm about to tell you may not be appropriate for very young children or people with queasy stomachs.

Space-Walking Seal involves turning the tongue back in the mouth and slipping the tip up into the skull cavity (*kapala-kuhara*). There it can massage an energetic center at the base of the brain and so stimulate the flow of the immortal fluid (*amrita*). According to Svātmanāma, the yogi can then expect the end of disease and old age, the “deflection of the onslaught of weapons” (HYP 4.50), and the acquisition of the great accomplishments (*siddhi*) or supernatural powers. Gheranda comments that with this seal, “fire does not burn the body, the winds do not dry it out, water does not wet it, and a snake cannot bite it. The body becomes beautiful” (GS 3.25–26).

You might already be trying to get your tongue up into your head—just out of curiosity, of course; you don't really want to live forever or be irresistibly attractive—but you'll soon discover there are a couple of problems: not only is your tongue too short, but it's also attached to the floor of your mouth with a small band of tissue, called the frenum (Latin for “bridle”), which restricts its movement. What can you do? Well, following traditional operating procedure, you should slowly, over a period of several months, cut the frenum (a process called *chedana*, “cutting asunder”) and milk (*dohana*) the tongue, gradually freeing it from the floor of the mouth and stretching its length. Here's how one old text (*Yoga-Kundalini-Upanishad* 29–30) describes it:

He [i.e., the yogi] should take a sharp, oiled and cleansed knife ... and should cut for the space of a hair, the frenum lingui. He should powder ... rock-salt ... or sea-salt and apply it to that place. On the seventh day, he should again cut for the space of a hair. Thus, with great care, he should continue it always, for the span of six months.

Eventually the yogi has this Gene Simmons-like tongue that can reach out of the mouth a disturbingly long way. Obviously this isn't a practice you'll encounter in your weekly asana class at the corner yoga school. There's actually an interesting account of this process by a twentieth-century American yogi, Theos Bernard, in his classic though little-known book, *Hatha Yoga*, first published in 1950:

I started by “milking” the tongue.... I pulled it straight out and then from side to side as far as it would go. This I did regularly twice a day for ten minutes. After

a couple of weeks I noticed that the frenum was beginning to give way because of being drawn over the incisor teeth; but I wanted to encourage the process, so I resorted to a razor blade. Each morning I delicately drew the blade across the frenum until blood appeared. There was no pain and the bleeding stopped before I finished milking the tongue.¹

There's more, but I think you get the idea; needless to say, we won't be working with Space-Walking Seal in this book. But there are two tongue exercises that are perfectly accessible to all and sundry and that don't require any kind of glossal torture.

Tongue Corpse Pose (*Jihva Shavasana*)

Generally during our pranayama practice, the tongue should rest serenely on the floor of the mouth as if it were in Corpse Pose (this vivid image comes courtesy of my good friend and teacher, Tias Little). This may seem easy enough to do, but for many of us, it's not.

Preliminary

Begin with a few repetitions of Lion Seal (see [fig. 9.5](#)). Once you've stretched your tongue out of your mouth, wiggle it around from side to side. Alternately you could cover your tongue with a clean cloth, grip it between your thumb and index finger, then pull it out of your mouth and wiggle it from side to side.

Practice

Lie in Corpse Pose. Your tongue, just like your torso and limbs, has a midline: it runs from the tip parallel to the root, deep inside your throat at the hyoid bone, dividing the muscle into right and left halves. Think of spreading your tongue away from this line, so that it widens across the floor of your mouth. The tip should rest lightly against your lower front teeth. Imagine a faint Mona Lisa smile on your face, which helps to release and lift the soft palate and increase the space of the oral cavity. Finally, allow the sides of your tongue to slide from the tip back into your throat.

How It Helps

A relaxed tongue softens the throat and deepens the breath. More importantly, the brain-tongue connection isn't a one-way street from the former to the latter; stilling any small fidgetings of the tongue helps in turn to still the fluctuations of the brain. We're usually not aware that our tongue holds lots of tension, especially in its root at the crook of the throat (technically, the hyoid bone). Moreover, because of the nearly constant chatter in our brain, our tongue tends to make barely perceptible movements, called subvocalizations, almost as if we were carrying on a running commentary about what we're experiencing in our head. This unconscious movement, like that of the eyes and fingers, is reflected back to the brain and feeds its fluctuations (which in turn disturbs the tongue in an endless feedback loop). It's important then, if we want to quiet our brain, to relax our tongue.

Tongue Bond (*Jihva Bandha*)

Tongue Bond is a lesser-known, modified version of Space-Walking Seal. Rather than turning the tip of the tongue back in the throat, the upper surface of the muscle is bonded,

or pressed, to the two palates, hard and soft, at the roof of the mouth.

SIDELIGHT

The Roof of the Mouth

The Palate and Its Subtle Center

The palate divides the mouth or oral cavity from the nasal cavity above. It's roughly divided into two parts: the bony, immobile front part—called the hard palate (with its central palatal arch)—and the muscular, movable back part—the soft palate, also known as the velum (Latin for “veil”). Hanging from the latter's free edge is a well-known landmark, which we all remember from the gaping-mouth cartoon screams of our childhood, the small cone-shaped flap called the uvula (from the Latin *uva*, “grape”).

This little scrap of tissue doesn't attract much attention, but for the yogis it's the locale of a significant energy center and a possible wellhead of the invaluable immortal fluid. The yogis call it the hanger (*lambika*), bell (*ghantika*), or royal tooth (*raja danta*), and it's supposed to house what's variously called the palate wheel (*taluchakra*) or lalana wheel (*lalana* is difficult to translate; it can mean “tongue,” with the added implication that it's “moving around”).

In one old text, the “nipple-like thing that hangs down between the two halves of the palate is the birthplace of Indra” (*Taittiriya-Upanishad* 1.6.1); in other words, it's the place where the Self (here named Indra, or “ruler”) enters the world or, according to another commentator, where the Self makes its home. Maybe that's why another text calls it the “wisdom-producing opening” (*Shandilya-Upanishad* 1.56). The eight-hundred-year-old “Goraksha's Tracks,” an important Hatha-Yoga text, notes that if the “tongue constantly kisses the tip of the ‘hanger’ [i.e., the uvula], causing the liquid to flow ... then diseases, old age, and death are removed ... and he will attain immortality.”²

Returning to earth from these otherworldly considerations, the soft palate is directly in front of the throat (or pharynx). One of the soft palate's main jobs is to close off the back of the nose whenever we swallow, so our milk (or chewed food) goes down our esophagus and into our stomach, not up into our nasal cavity and out through our nostrils. It also plays an important role in human speech (along with the vocal cords, tongue, teeth, and lips), and its fluttering motion is the source of that favorite nocturnal sound, snoring. We'll come back to the soft palate and snoring when we practice Bee breath (*bhramari pranayama*) in chapter 13.

Practice

Lightly press and spread the upper surface of your tongue against your palate. At first, you may find the soft palate is slightly more difficult to contact and maintain contact with than the hard palate. But with practice, you should be able to press and hold your tongue easily against the entire palate.

Be sure not to force your tongue against your palate, which will harden the muscle as well as your throat. The tip and sides of your tongue will snug into the curve of your upper teeth. As with Tongue Corpse Pose, widen your tongue away from its midline and feel the

sides slide away from the tip and down, deep into your throat.

How It Helps

Tongue Bond is supposed to exercise the neck muscles, though this seems like a minor benefit. Svatmarama offers it as an alternative to Net-Bearer Bond to obstruct the upward movement of the nadis and prevent the prana from seeping out of the body through the throat opening (HYP 3.22).

Going Further

You can approximate Space-Walking Seal by curling the tip of your tongue back toward your throat and then touching it as close to the soft palate as you can. Careful though: if you curl back too far for too long, you can actually overstretch your frenum. It's not a life-threatening situation, but as I can testify from personal experience, it's not a pleasant feeling either.

Playing Around

A good tongue exercise is to quickly alternate the modified Space-Walking Seal with the Lion Face, emphasizing the stretched tongue. Inhale during the former, exhale during the latter. Repeat the cycle three to five times.

Last Word

One of the most fascinating—and challenging—interpretations of Space-Walking Seal is found in *Words from the Soul*, by yoga teacher–psychologist Stuart Sovatsky. Sovatsky understands traditional yoga techniques as spontaneous expressions of tendencies that are innate (but typically unrealized) in every human being, which catalyze or accelerate our physical and spiritual evolution. To him, the yogis' seemingly strange, inhuman manipulation of the tongue in Space-Walking Seal has its origin in the developing fetus, when the “prototongue,” tasting secretions of sugar molecules, licks itself out of the cranial cavity into the oral cavity. As our spiritual intelligence increases, he continues, “other sweet-tasting brain secretions (*soma*, *amrita*) will again draw the tongue toward further bodily maturations in *khecari mudra*.” But this stretching back of the tongue wouldn't be possible without the tongue's “unusually complex hypoglossal nerve,” which allows it to move, figuratively and literally, toward its “inner calling, thus stimulating the brain/mind in its maturation beyond language knowing toward meditative gnosis.”³ *Khecari-mudra* then “spiritualizes the voice, alchemically distills mental energies to a quivering stillness, and revitalizes the body.”⁴

I warned you this stuff was challenging, and my own crude interpretation only skims the surface of Sovatsky's truly brilliant and subtle insights. But however limited our understanding is of his arguments, we can't help sensing and being reminded of the profound mysteries underlying all yoga teachings, waiting patiently for us to uncover their solutions.

CHAPTER 7

I Wanna Hold Your Hand

Two Hand Seals

Ritual postures of the hand provoke a subjective reaction in the mind of the adept. Mudras are symbolic archetypal signs, based on gestural finger patterns, taking the place, but retaining the efficacy, of the spoken word. They are used to evoke in the mind ideas symbolizing divine powers or deities themselves in order to intensify the adept's concentration.

—Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way*

THE SANSKRIT *mudra* is literally defined as “seal,” in the sense of any instrument used for sealing or stamping. Mudras then are used to seal prana in the body, to prevent it from leaking out and being wasted, as well as to stamp the mark or consciousness-state of a particular deity on our body (much like a signet ring was once used to stamp an engraved pattern on soft wax or clay). As Mark Dyczkowski writes, “Hand seals remind us that our world is a theophany, that every act is part of God's eternal cosmic liturgy, every movement of the body a ritual gesture (*mudra*), and every thought, God's thought.”¹

Like many words in the yoga lexicon, besides its literal exoteric meaning, *mudra* also has esoteric or symbolic meanings. Jaideva Singh lists three “hidden” interpretations of *mudra* based on interpretive etymologies of the word.² A *mudra* is that which gives the gods joy (*muda*); dissolves self-bondage (*mu*); and seals up the universe, that is, into the highest state of consciousness.

There are generally four different categories of seals, those made by the whole body (*kaya*); by the hands (*kara* or *hasta*); by speech (*vak*), or the mouth or tongue; and by awareness (*citta*), or the mind. Some hand seals may have originated as expressive gestures in ritual dance. Others may be related to finger exercises performed by priests while learning to recite sacred scriptures. Called hand chants (*sama hasta*), these formalized mnemonic exercises, in which the thumb taps out patterns on the twelve phalanges of the fingers, help the priest remember the stresses and accents of the chanted words and invoke intense concentration.

It's also claimed that knowledge of seals grants magical powers and produces stability and firmness (by giving control over nerves and muscles), contentment (by pacifying the mind and purifying the energy channels), and cures for diseases. Practically speaking, hand seals help prevent the hands and fingers from fidgeting, which (like relaxing the tongue and fixing the eyes) helps to quiet the fluctuations of the brain.

We'll be interested in only two of the many hand seals: the Heart Seal and modified versions of the Wisdom Seal.

Heart Seal (*Hrid-mudra*)

Heart Seal suggests a prayerlike gesture, performed by pressing the open palms and fingers together and resting the sides of the joined thumbs against the sternum or, as the

name of the seal suggests, the heart (*hri*) area. This seal goes by several other names, such as the Reverence Seal (*anjali mudra*), the Self Seal (*atman mudra*), and the Salutation Seal (*namaskara mudra*).

While Heart Seal has significant symbolic associations, we'll be interested primarily in its practical applications as a preparation for sitting. In the energetic ecology of the body, the hands and shoulder blades are closely related—right hand to the right scapula, left hand to the left scapula. We'll use the spreading and pressure of the palms to create similar actions in the scapulae.

Preliminary

First let's stretch the wrists (or more precisely, the wrist flexors). Sit in Frog Pose and lean your torso slightly forward and press your palms against the floor, fingers pointed back toward your pelvis, thumbs pointed out at your knees (see [fig. 7.1](#)). Keep your elbows straight at first, and comfortably stretch along the undersides of your forearms. After a while, bend your elbows and lean the weight of your torso on the backs of your upper arms.

Be careful not to support your entire weight on the bases of your palms and wrists. There's a little channel that runs between the mounds of your thumb and little finger; actively lift that channel on each hand away from the floor and shift your weight onto the bases of your fingers, especially the bases of index fingers. Hold for a minute or two, then lift your hands away from the floor and vigorously shake your wrists.



FIGURE 7.1

Exhale, lean forward again and spread and press your palms against the floor, this time with your fingers pointing forward and your thumbs pointing at each other. Focus on your dominant hand first—as you spread it, feel (or imagine you feel) a similar spreading of the dominant-side scapula. Then try the same with your nondominant hand and the same-side scapula. Press your hands more firmly against the floor, as if you were trying to push your

torso back to upright; the only thing preventing your torso from actually moving is the opposing firmness of the shoulder blades against your back. Continue spreading and pressing your palms and scapulae for two or three minutes. Then lift back to upright on an inhale.

Practice

Slide your knees together, and sit on your heels in [Thunderbolt Pose](#), eyes closed. Press and spread your palms and fingers together; position the mounds of your thumbs over the midsternum and press them against your chest. I'm told there's a pressure point there that generates compassion—well, it's worth a try (see [fig. 7.2](#)).

Be sure your dominant hand doesn't overpower its nondominant mate; if it seems to, don't increase the nondominant's pressure, but withdraw some dominant pressure until you feel (or at least imagine you feel) a relative pressure balance.

The spread and press of the palms are, ideally, reflected in your scapulae, which similarly spread across and press into your back torso. As you feel (or imagine you feel) this latter action, press the ball-shaped heads of your upper arm bones (humeri) back into the cup-shaped shoulder joints, but be careful not to squeeze the scapulae toward your spine as you do this. These actions combined—the spreading and pressing of the scapulae, and the resistance of the humeri—will encourage and sustain the lift of your chest, which is especially important in pranayama during exhale. To intensify this lift, lightly drag the sides of your thumbs down your sternum toward your navel.



FIGURE 7.2

The firm inward pressure of the palms is countered by the outward widening of your elbows, an action rooted in the broadening scapulae. Hold this seal for a couple of

minutes, then release your hands to your thighs or knees and sit a bit longer, breathing easily. Continue now, without the aid of the hand seal, to actively spread your scapulae across and press them against your back torso.

How It Helps

The physical components of Heart Seal help to sensitize the palms, enliven and open the upper back torso (an area that's often very dull), and lift the chest in preparation for pranayama and Net-Bearer Bond (*jalandhara-bandha*).

I'm also told that, since the right hand is wired to the brain's left hemisphere and the left hand to the right brain, the equal pressure of the two palms helps balance the two sides of the brain. This creates a feeling of calm, a natural precursor to pranayama and meditation. It's said that the calming effect of Heart Seal increases over time with repeated practice.

According to the German breathing pioneer Ilse Middendorf (b. 1910), spreading the palms also increases the fullness of the breath.³

Going Further

Just as the palms are energetically connected to the scapulae, the soles of the feet are connected to the sacrum, the right sole to the right side of the bone and the left sole to the left side. Sit in Bound Angle Pose. Press your soles together just as you did your palms. Feel (or imagine) how the spread and press is reflected in your sacrum. And just as you widened your elbows, do the same with your knees, opening them away from your broadening sacrum.

Modified Wisdom Seal (*Jnana-mudra*)

I assume that most experienced students are familiar with Wisdom Seal, possibly one of the best known and most widely used of the hand mudras, at least judging by the meditators forever pictured in magazine advertisements. It's typically performed by joining the tip of the thumb and index finger on each hand, and then extending the rest of the fingers straight out of the palms. The two touching fingers are customarily said to represent the union of the universal self (the thumb) and the embodied self (the index), while the rest of the fingers, separated from the holy pair, represent the three qualities (*guna*) of the material world: inertia or darkness (*tamas*), energy or passion (*rajas*), and beingness (*sattva*).

I first ran across the idea of a modified Wisdom Seal many years ago in *The Perceptible Breath*, a fascinating book by Ilse Middendorf. Supposedly, at the age of twelve, Middendorf heard an inner voice that told her, "*Du musst atmen*," which means "You have to breathe." As her breathing studies developed, she discovered that pressing her fingerpads together "creates a breathing movement in a very special, limited area of the body. Each pair of the fingers pressed together creates a breathing movement in a different space."⁴

It seems that touching the thumb pads to different finger pads on the same hand enlivens the breath in certain areas of the torso. The touch of the thumbs and index finger pads directs the breath into the upper torso, the thumbs and the middle finger pads into the midtorso. The touch of thumbs and ring or little finger pads takes the breath down into the

upper and lower belly, respectively, inducing a feeling of quietness conducive to sleep. Not surprisingly, the simultaneous pressure of the right finger pads against the left pads suffuses the entire “inner space” of the body with breath.

Middendorf adds that these finger pad exercises work exclusively with the inhale. For the exhale, she recommends interlocking the fingers and pressing the pads on the back of the opposite hand. This increases the length of the exhale and the subsequent breathing rest that precedes the inhale, which she claims is especially helpful for people afflicted with asthma and emphysema.

Later on I discovered (no doubt at the prompting of one of my teachers) that the breath can be influenced similarly by pressing various combinations of finger pads against the same-side thumb pad.

Practice

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. Start with your index finger pads: press the right pad against the right thumb pad, the left against the left—much like traditional Wisdom Seal (see [fig. 7.3](#)). You’ll find (or at least I have my fingers crossed that you’ll find) that this pressure focuses your breath in your upper chest. As you move your thumbs methodically from the index fingers to the little fingers, your breathing focus will correspondingly descend through your torso: middle finger pads will charge the lower chest (over the diaphragm) with breath; ring finger pads will affect the upper belly (just above the navel); and pinky finger pads will charge the lower belly (below the navel to the pubis).



FIGURE 7.3

Take a little time to investigate each pressure. Then perform Heart Seal, this time as a Middendorf-like breathing technique with each finger pad in contact with its opposite mate. Can you feel the breath filling your torso’s entire inner space?

How It Helps

Modified Wisdom Seal helps cultivate and refine the breath in specific torso areas, particularly in those that are somewhat or wholly inaccessible to our everyday awareness and breath.

Last Word

There are reputedly hundreds of hand mudras. As noted in this chapter's epigraph, many relate the performer to a particular god or goddess. But others represent living creatures; trees or flowers (there are said to be at least sixty different ways to hand-picture a lotus); various Hindu symbols such as the shell or conch, discus, thunderbolt, the sun and moon; and a wide range of emotions. Our Heart Seal, for example, in addition to its practical application is usually understood as a gesture of devotion or reverence. I've also been taught that each hand has its symbolic meaning: the dominant hand stands for our dynamic creative self (Shakti), and the nondominant hand stands for our passive witnessing self (Shiva). By consciously "sealing" our hands together, we symbolically close and so activate an energetic "self-circuit." This reminds us that everything that we do in our yoga practice—the words we use to describe it, the postures, the breaths, the seals and bonds—all of it always has a dual meaning and purpose, applying both to body *and* Self, which helps us to inhabit our lives more intelligently, more intensely, and—most important of all—more joyfully.

CHAPTER 8

Wrap and Lift

Two Diaphragm Exercises

Even today, the primitive body scheme of belly, breast, and head is used in ordinary psychology, where “belly” is an abbreviation for the instinctual world, “breast” and “heart” for the zone of feeling, and “head” and “brain” for the zone of spirit... . The scheme is most developed in Indian psychology; in Kundalini yoga the ascending consciousness rouses and activates different body-soul centers. The diaphragm is supposed to correspond to the earth’s surface, and development beyond this zone is coordinated with the “rising sun,” the state of consciousness that has begun to leave behind the unconscious and all ties with it.

—Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*

WHEN MOST OF US hear the word *diaphragm*, we immediately think of what’s officially known as the *respiratory* diaphragm, the double-dome-shaped muscle that divides our chest from our belly and provides the main force for everyday breathing. But *diaphragm* simply means “fence” or “barrier,” and there are actually several of these barriers in our body—in the perineum, for example, the throat, and even the brain.

The rim of the diaphragm (from now on I’ll be referring only to the respiratory diaphragm) is anchored to the lower rim of the rib case. This rim isn’t parallel to the top rim of the pelvis; it’s higher in the front torso and lower in back. So the diaphragm is also angled slightly downward from front to back. Its rim, if we could look down on it from above, is shaped something like a kidney bean, but for our purposes, we’ll imagine it’s shaped like a circle, its center marked by the point of intersection with the imaginary front spine.

The diaphragm is also attached to the lower (lumbar) spine through two long, thin muscles technically called the *crura*, from a Latin word meaning “legs”; I call these muscles the roots of the diaphragm.

Diaphragm Wrap

For this exercise you’ll need your elastic band. If you don’t have one, a yoga belt can substitute, though it probably won’t work as well as the band because it’s much stiffer and won’t expand and contract as readily with your breath.

Preliminary

Holding the ends of your elastic band in your hands, wrap it across your back torso, just over your floating ribs. Tie the band with a loose knot just in front of the bottom of your sternum. The band should be snug but not too tight (see [fig. 8.1](#)).

If you’re using a belt, first inhale and expand and hold your lower ribs out as much as you can, then snug the belt around the rim of your ribs, as described for the band. Slowly

release the breath. The belt may slip down a bit as your ribs drop, so you may have to readjust its snugness, but be sure not to make it too tight.

Once your band or belt is in place, sit in any comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. If you like you can block your ears with your ear plugs to amplify the sound (and better monitor the texture) of your breath.

Practice

For the first few minutes, just feel the pressure of the elastic band and how it outlines your diaphragm-circle. See if you can also find the center of this circle, where your front spine cuts through the diaphragm on its way from your perineum to your crown. Draw two imaginary lines across your diaphragm, perpendicular to each other and crossed at the circle's center, dividing the muscle into four sections: right and left front, right and left back.



FIGURE 8.1

When you have all this in your imagination, turn your attention to your breath. Watch how your inhale, against the resistance of the elastic band, expands the diaphragm-circle out from its center; and as you slightly resist against compression of the band, watch how the exhale contracts back toward the circle's center.

Notice too that this expansion and contraction of the band isn't even—unless of course you're in masterful control of your diaphragm. On the inhale, the diaphragm-circle quickly loses its circular shape as, for example, one of the four section-arcs expands faster (or slower) than its mates, then slows down while another speeds up. By the end of the inhale, the once-smooth imaginary diaphragm-circle is more or less distorted, looking less like a circle than a somewhat battered oval. A similarly distorted movement can (and

likely will at first) happen on the exhale. (When I watch my diaphragm on the inhale, it sometimes reminds me of an amoeba randomly sending out pseudopods front and back, right and left, as it creeps its way across a petri dish.)

Now slow your breathing, feel the resistance-compression of the elastic band, and try to even out the expansions and contractions. Fix your awareness at the circle's center, and smoothly expand the inhale out from this center like a circular wave to the circumference. Rest briefly at the end of the inhale, then smoothly contract the exhale in from the circumference, like the same wave in reverse, back to the center. Rest again briefly before the next inhale.

Continue breathing in this fashion for a few minutes until you can smooth out most or all of the hitches in your inhales and exhales. Then remove the wrap and repeat the exercise without the tactile aid for a few minutes more. Always remember, whether you're inhaling, exhaling, or resting or restraining the breath, to keep the center of your diaphragm-circle soft and relaxed.

How It Helps

Awareness of the diaphragm's rim helps refine your awareness of the breath, make the diaphragm a more effective breathing engine, and calm the brain.

Playing Around

Don't tell anybody, because it sounds strange, but I sometimes wear my elastic band as I go about my daily business, hidden under a loose-fitting shirt. It helps remind me to watch my breath even as I perform the most mundane tasks.

Diaphragm Lift

One of the more overlooked but nonetheless important techniques of inner breath retention is the correct firming of the diaphragm. We won't be getting to formal breath retention until part 3 of this book, but since we're talking about the diaphragm, now's a good time to work with a diaphragm-firming exercise.¹

Preliminary

Lie in Corpse Pose, with your knees bent and resting on a bolster or rolled-up blanket. For a few minutes, rock your pelvis in rhythm with your breath. On the inhale, rock it forward, arching your lower back away from the floor. Imagine you're inflating a large balloon in your belly. On the exhale, rock your pelvis back, flattening your lower back against the floor, and deflating the balloon.

Practice

When you're ready, inhale, rock your pelvis forward, and inflate the balloon. *Stop* and hold your breath throughout. Quickly flatten your back against the floor, and pretend that you're lifting the balloon up into your chest. Now reverse: arch your back and push the balloon back down into your belly. Continue rocking your pelvis and lifting and pushing the balloon vigorously between the two cavities for as long as you can hold your breath. Imagine that your diaphragm is pumping like a piston in a cylinder. When you can't

comfortably hold your breath any longer, release the hold and take a few everyday breaths. Repeat the exercise twice, resting for a half-minute or so and taking a few everyday breaths after each round.

Now move to a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. We won't do any formal breath retention quite yet, just a simple exercise to get a feel for how the diaphragm works during retention. Slowly inhale and fill the belly-balloon. As you near the end of the inhale, drop your head slightly (moving toward but not forcing Net-Bearer Bond); when the inhale is complete, lift the belly-balloon up into your chest. Hold the breath for a few seconds, then release the lift and slowly exhale. Raise your head back to neutral and repeat five to eight times.

How It Helps

In general the diaphragm lift helps strengthen the diaphragm; with practice, according to Thomas Hanna, “you will be taking in more and more air with less and less effort.”²

For pranayama, the diaphragm lift helps support inner retention, decreasing the pressure of the retained breath on the torso and throat.

Going Further

The diaphragm lift isn't the only supportive technique we need to safely contain the inner retention. We should also create a “rib case shell” around the lungs by firming the intercostal muscles.

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. Let's first get a feel for the lift of the rib case on the exhale. Recall that lungs are like passive sponges, they don't expand and contract under their own power; rather, they're essentially “stuck” to the inside of the rib case and are pulled open and squeezed out by the motion of the ribs. Next inhale and rest briefly. As you exhale, imagine that you're shrinking the lungs away from your ribs while, at the same time, you hold the ribs open as much as possible; in other words, on the exhale the lungs “peel away” from the inner rib case like a pair of deflating balloons, while the rib case itself stays (relatively) expanded. Continue for a few minutes.

Inhale, expand your ribs, and rest. Without actually exhaling, imagine that the skin covering your ribs is squeezing your lungs, but your lungs are resisting outward this time. Be sure to squeeze the skin covering the ribs under your armpits, but keep the armpits themselves soft.

Playing Around

The diaphragm lift can be performed lying on your belly or on your side. You can also reverse the inflation and movement of the balloon: on the inhale, expand the imaginary balloon in your chest while keeping your back flat, then push it into your belly while arching your lower back. Move the balloon back and forth several times between your chest and belly as you did before, then slowly release the breath. Repeat twice. Finally, you can divide your belly and chest into right and left halves. Yo-yo the balloon first between the right belly and left chest, and then between the left belly and right chest.

Last Word

Most folks have only the vaguest idea—if any at all—where their breathing diaphragm is located, and as a result, have only a distant relationship with this muscle. But for our pranayama purposes, and really for everything we do in life, it's extremely important to have a feel for the location and action of our diaphragm.

CHAPTER 9

Get On Your Mark, Get Set ...

Preparations for Sitting and Breathing

Success in Yoga is not achieved by merely reading books. Success is achieved neither by wearing the right clothes nor by talking about it. Practice alone brings success... . After mastering asanas, the yogi ... should practice pranayama as taught by his guru.

—Svatmarama, *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*

HERE ARE SEVEN MAIN EXERCISES and eleven variations that can be used as preparations for both sitting and breathing. The exercises are fairly benign; in other words, there's not much you can do wrong to hurt yourself. If you have a shoulder injury, then it's probably best to avoid Side-Lying Serpent. With a knee injury, depending on its severity, the bent-knee poses (meaning Thunderbolt, Lion, Frog, and Bound Angle) should either be done for the shortest recommended time or avoided altogether. When in doubt, always consult with an experienced yoga teacher.

Pond Seal (*Tadagi-mudra*)

Pond Seal is named after the hollow, pondlike shape the belly assumes when it's sucked back toward the spine and up toward the diaphragm (cf. GS 3.50). This hollowing is also reminiscent of a water tank, another possible translation of *tadagi*. Usually it's performed while sitting in Staff Pose (*dandasana*), but we will do it while reclining. A sandbag is optional, though highly recommended, for this exercise.

Preliminary

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor. Have the sandbag positioned on the floor above your head. Inhale while bringing your arms overhead, and slip your palms and wrists beneath the bag. Spread your palms, and in doing so, spread your shoulder blades across the back of your torso (remember the energetic connection between the palms and scapulae). Slide the bag away from the top of your head, straightening your elbows. Press your feet against the floor and slightly lift your pelvis off the floor. Push your tailbone toward your heels, lengthening (but not flattening) your lower spine, then lower your pelvis back to the floor.

Just as the palms are energetically connected to the scapulae, the soles of the feet are connected to the sacrum. Spread your soles to broaden your sacrum across the back of your pelvis. Inhale and extend your right leg, holding it suspended slightly above the floor. Slowly, with an exhale, lower your leg to the floor, touching the back of your thigh first, then your calf, and finally your heel. Actively press through your heel, continuing to spread your sole. Repeat with your left leg. Once both legs are on the floor, continue to press through your heels and spread your soles. Rotate your thighs slightly inward (medially), and imagine your two hip points (the anterior superior iliac spines) narrowing in toward your navel (see [fig. 9.1](#)).



FIGURE 9.1

Practice

Lift your rib case away from your pelvis. The tendency here is simply to shove the front ribs toward the ceiling, which hardens the belly and lower back. Instead, drop your front ribs down slightly, into your torso, and lift your back ribs (the floating ribs), feeding that movement into your arms and out through your hands. Counter this by pushing through your heels, then continue in this oscillatory fashion: lift the back ribs, reach the arms, push through the heels.

Your lower belly (between the pubis and navel) will flatten at first, then hollow slightly. But this hollowing isn't the result of a muscular contraction of your belly muscles; rather, it's an energetic response to the lengthening of your entire belly, front, sides, and back. Be sure not to "help" the hollowing by contracting your belly muscles.

As your lower belly hollows, it creates a suction effect on the fleshy base of your pelvis, which draws your perineum gently up into your torso. This is a preparation for the Root Bond, but again, the action is based on an energetic response, not a purposeful contraction of the perineal muscles.

Stay in this position for two to three minutes, then release your arms and hands with an exhale; at the same time, bend your knees and draw your thighs into your belly. Wrap your arms around your shins (or the backs of your thighs if that's easier), and squeeze your thighs against your belly.

How It Helps

Traditionally it's said that Pond Seal "destroys decrepitude and death" (GS 3.50). As a more down-to-earth benefit, it stretches the entire torso, including the diaphragm and shoulders, and stimulates the abdominal organs. It's an excellent warm-up for breathing as well as preparation for Flying-Up Bond and Root Bond.

Going Further

Perform the preliminary instructions up to the point just before you straighten your legs. With knees bent, stack your left knee on top of your right. Then exhale and lower your knees to the left (onto the inner edge of your right foot), keeping your right shoulder on the floor as much as possible. Don't force the twist; lower your knees until you feel a comfortable stretch along the right side of your torso. Reach actively through your right arm. Hold for a minute or so, then lift your legs with an inhale. Unstack, then restack your right knee on your left, and lower your legs to the right for the same length of time. Inhale your legs up, unstack your knees, and continue with the preliminary instructions.

Playing Around

Here are two variations of Pond Seal. The first might be called Side Pond Seal (*parshva*

tadagi-mudra). Lie first on your left side, then on your right, over a rolled-up blanket or small bolster. Where you stretch the upper side of your torso depends on where you position the bolster. Place it under your waist and you'll stretch the upper-side waist muscles (the obliques); place it below your ribs and you'll stretch the upper-side intercostals. Stay for three to five minutes on each side.

Then lie prone with the bolster (or a small ball) positioned under your belly for Downward-Facing Pond Seal (*adho mukha tadagi-mudra*). Position the roll between the upper rim of your pelvis and your lower front ribs. Careful though: we sometimes unconsciously hold a good deal of tension in our belly, and pushing too hard or too quickly on this tension can cause some unpleasant reactions. Again, stay on the roll for between two and three minutes.

Side-Lying Serpent Pose (*Parshva sarpasana*)

To the best of my knowledge, this exercise has no official name, but it turns out to be a side-lying variation of a traditional pose called Serpent (*sarpasana*). So with all due respect to yoga tradition, I've dubbed it Side-Lying Serpent. I learned this from a Shadow Yoga video hosted by Shandor Remete. Have a yoga block handy.

Preliminary

Serpent Pose is a variation of Locust Pose (*shalabhasana*) and serves as an excellent preparation for its side-lying variation. Lie on your belly, exhale your arms around behind your back, clasp your hands, and rest your thumbs on your sacrum. Inhale, stretch your arms back toward your feet, and lift your torso and head away from the floor. Then try to lift your arms away from your back torso. You can increase the stretch by pressing the bases of your palms together. Hold for thirty seconds to a minute, then release with an exhale. You can repeat once or twice more.

Practice

Stay on your belly. Stretch your nondominant arm (left arm for righties, right arm for lefties) straight out to your side, parallel to the line of your shoulders, palm on the floor. Rotate your arm medially: first turn your thumb to point toward the floor and your palm to face back toward your feet, then continue turning until the back of your hand is resting on the floor and your thumb is pointing toward your feet.

Exhale, and with your free hand push yourself carefully over onto your nondominant side, keeping your torso and legs in one straight line. You can bend your top knee and put your foot on the floor, either in front of or behind the bottom leg, to help stabilize your position (see [fig. 9.2](#)).

Although the bottom arm and torso should ideally remain at a right angle, the tendency is for the arm to slide closer to the back torso. If this has happened to you, slide your arm up as close to a right angle with your torso as you can. Then use the yoga block to support your head.

Now you can either keep your free hand on the floor or, with an inhale, swing your free arm behind your torso and clasp your hands. If you're stiffer in the shoulders and armpits, you might have some difficulty making this clasp with your bottom arm at a right angle to

your torso. If so, slide your bottom arm closer to your torso, clasp your hands, and then move both arms back toward 90 degrees.

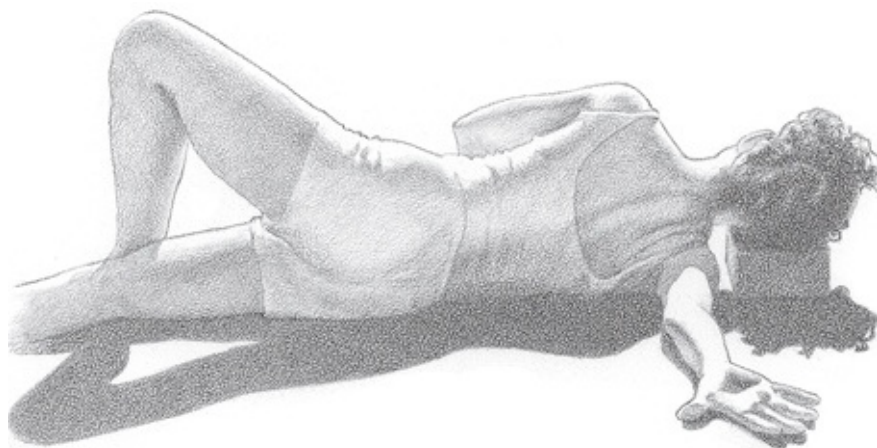


FIGURE 9.2

In this position your shoulder blades will, of course, squeeze toward your spine, but again, try to spread them apart as much as possible. To increase the stretch in your chest and armpits, try to press the bases of your palms together. Stay in this position for one to two minutes, then release the clasp, exhale back onto your belly, carefully derotate your nondominant arm, and let it rest on the floor for a few breaths. Then repeat with your dominant arm for the same length of time.

How It Helps

Side-Lying Serpent stretches your shoulders, chest, and armpits in preparation for breathing.

Thunderbolt Pose (*Vajrasana*)

The Sanskrit *vajra* is rooted in the verb *vaj*, “to be hard or strong,” and literally means “hard or mighty one.” It can be translated into English either as “thunderbolt” or “diamond,” so this exercise is alternately known as the Thunderbolt or the Diamond Pose. For this exercise, you’ll need a looped yoga belt.

Preliminary

Sit on the floor, knees bent, feet on the floor. Slip your feet through the belt loop, snug the loop around your ankles, then wrap the free length of the belt around your ankles as well. Make sure the balls of your big toes are touching, but leave a little space (maybe an inch or two) between your inner heels.

Getting your feet into position might be a bit awkward, since you’re all tied up. The best method is to swing your feet to one side of your torso (say the right side), then push your left hand against the floor and lift and swing your buttocks up onto your heels (with the tops of your feet on the floor).

Your heels will tend to spread apart below the weight of your torso, which might press the balls of your big toes together uncomfortably. So try to keep a small space—not more than a quarter-inch or so—between the balls of your toes.

Practice

Spread the tops of your feet on the floor. Cup your right knee with your right hand and lift your knee away from the floor—the higher you lift the greater the stretch—angling up onto the top of your foot, and stretch along your shin from your front ankle to your knee (see [fig. 9.3](#)). Imagine that your thigh bone is like a seesaw: when your knee is lifted off the floor, imagine the ball-shaped femur head at the other end of the thigh bone dropping down toward the floor. This should release your groin. Hold for a minute or so, then repeat for the same length of time on the left leg.

Rest your hands on your thighs, or continue to pull on your knees without actually lifting them off the floor. Use this pull to help press your shoulder blades against your back torso, which will support the lift of your chest.



FIGURE 9.3

Sit in this pose anywhere from three to five minutes. You can use Thunderbolt as a preparation for sitting in another pose or as a basic sitting pose for pranayama.

How It Helps

Thunderbolt stretches the front ankles, shins, and thighs.

Going Further

From Thunderbolt, lean slightly forward and turn your toes under. With your hands on the floor in front of your knees, push back into a squat. Spread the balls of your feet on the floor. Then, keeping your toes turned under, swing your knees lightly back to the floor and sit high on your raised heels. This is a pose I call Thunderbolt Plus, which provides a powerful stretch for your soles. Hold this position for a minute or two, smiling wide, then release your toes and sit back on your heels.

Playing Around

From either Thunderbolt or Thunderbolt Plus, lean your torso back slightly and place your hands on the floor just behind your feet, fingers pointing toward your toes. Bend your elbows and round your back, hollowing your chest, and spread your shoulder blades wide across your back torso. Then with an inhale, keeping your scapulae as wide as possible, straighten your elbows and lift your chest. Thunderbolt Backbend will stretch your chest, shoulders, and belly. If you want to increase the stretch in your front torso, inhale and lift your buttocks away from your heels, into a modified Camel Pose (*ushtrasana*).

There are three ways to position your head here. First, you can hold it upright, with your chin near your sternum, which is probably the safest position. Second, you can tilt it back slightly and look up at the ceiling; this is slightly more challenging. Be sure to keep the back of your neck long and your throat soft. Third, you can drop your head all the way back so your neck is fully extended. This position is challenging in the extreme and should be avoided if you have any neck problems.

Hold the pose for a minute or two, then lift your torso back to upright with an inhale. If your head is in position two or three, be sure to lift your heart first, then your head. Don't lift to upright leading with your head.

Lion Pose (*Simhasana*)

The Sanskrit *simha* generally means “powerful one,” “hero,” or “eminent person” and is usually translated into English as “lion.”

Preliminary

The sitting position recommended for Lion can be uncomfortable to a greater or lesser degree. From Thunderbolt Pose, lean forward and press your hands to the floor so that you're in a kind of hands-and-knees table position. (Be sure to remove the belt from the previous exercise.) Then cross your left ankle on top of your right and sit back slowly. Your perineum will come to rest on and snuggle over your raised left heel. Remember that in many of these traditional yoga seats, one or both heels are pressed against the perineum to stimulate the root foundation wheel (*muladhara-chakra*) and “plug” the bottom outlet of the torso. Usually the knee of the top leg lifts off the floor (while the shin of the bottom leg stays on the floor), though it's possible to sit with both knees more or less on the floor. Cup each palm over the same-side knee, elbows extended (see [fig. 9.4](#)).

Try this position and see how it feels. There's no need to suffer if it's excruciating; simply sit in Hero Pose or any suitable cross-leg position. You might practice this traditional sitting position every now and then; eventually you should be able to assume the pose fairly comfortably.

Practice

Breathe normally for a few breaths, softening your perineum over your heel. Then inhale deeply and pause at the top of the breath. The traditional texts say to perform this exercise with Net-Bearer Bond—lowering your chin onto, or close to, your sternum—but you can skip this part of the pose if you like. Now open your mouth as wide as you can, cross your eyes to gaze at the tip of your nose (or the center of your forehead), and stretch your tongue out of your mouth, curling it down toward your chin. I read in the newspaper once

about scientists finding a lizard whose tongue was rooted in its lower belly. Imagine you're this lizard: stretch your tongue not from its physical root in your throat but from its metaphysical root in your perineum. Let the stretch draw your perineum deeper into your torso.



FIGURE 9.4

Then roar—or at least huff—like a lion, pushing the breath slowly and steadily out of your lungs with a strong contraction of your belly muscles. Be sure to contract your platysma, the broad flat muscle on the front of your throat. Also, spread your palms and fingers like the paws and claws of a lion, and press them against your knees to help lift your shoulder blades into your back torso to open your heart (see [fig. 9.5](#)).

After the exhale, pull in and relax your tongue, close your mouth, uncross your eyes, relax your hands and throat, and breathe normally for a couple of breaths. Repeat another time or two if you like, then uncross and recross your ankles with the right on top, and repeat for an equal number of times.

The open-mouth, stretched-tongue exercise by itself is called the Lion Seal (*simha-mudra*).



FIGURE 9.5

How It Helps

Lion works primarily with the face, jaw, throat, and tongue—body parts we usually don’t attend to in other yoga poses. The pose obviously stretches tight jaw muscles, the tongue, the hands, and fingers, and it helps relax tense eyes. Gheranda says it gets rid of disease (GS 2.15)—at least it may help disturbances of the throat and tongue—while Svratmarama notes that it joins the three major bonds (HYP 1.52), a suggestion that Lion is a good preparation for these techniques.

Other sources maintain that the pose improves thyroid function; helps with stammering and “sweetens” the voice; prevents or cures colds and flu; and imparts a lion’s courage to the practitioner, a particular boon for shy people.

Going Further

Lion Pose has several variations. Try this one. Kneel on the floor with your big toes touching, then sit back on your heels in Thunderbolt Pose. Spread your knees to at least hip width or as much as you comfortably can. With your big toes touching, snuggle your buttocks down between the inner arches of your feet, as if you were resting in a hammock. This position is called Frog Pose.

Lean slightly forward and put your palms on the floor between your thighs. Turn your hands so your fingers point back at your torso and your thumbs point away from each other. Keep your elbows straight and lean your torso forward against the backs of your upper arms. Now perform Lion Seal, in other words, the aspect of Lion Pose involving the eyes, tongue, jaw, and throat as described earlier. Press your upper arms back into your torso as you exhale.

Playing Around

Lion Seal is a good way to let off a little steam at just about any time of the day; only make sure that you can look foolish and make a funny sound without alarming anyone near you.

Frog Pose (*Mandukasana*)

Preliminary

Sit in Thunderbolt Pose, but without the yoga belt around your ankles.

Practice

Slide your knees apart at least as wide as your hips, even wider if you can do so comfortably. Keeping the inner sides of your big toes in contact, open your heels, and wiggle your buttocks down between your inner arches; sit in your inner arches like a hammock. Rest your hands on your thighs (see [fig. 9.6](#)).



FIGURE 9.6

Stay in position for two to five minutes. When you're ready to release, lift your buttocks away from your feet, lean forward on your hands, and carefully slide your knees together. Then sit on the floor to one side and stretch your legs forward, in front of your torso, in Staff Pose.

How It Helps

Frog stretches the shins, inner thighs, and inner groins.

Going Further

Now for Extended Frog Pose (*uttana mandukasana*). While in Frog Pose, inhale and raise your left arm, bringing it perpendicular to the floor, then bend your elbow and spread your palm against your left shoulder blade. Reach across the top of your head with your right

arm, grip your left elbow with your right hand, and pull it up (toward the ceiling) and slightly back (toward the wall behind you). Hold for thirty seconds to a minute, stretching the muscles in the back of your left arm (the triceps) and your armpit. Then reverse your arms for the same length of time.

With an inhale, raise both arms together, bend your elbows, and press your palms against your shoulder blades; you can press the same-side scapulae or cross your arms at the wrists and press the opposite-side scapulae. Either way, firmly press the sides of your head with your inner forearms (see [fig. 9.7](#)). This arm position is called the Most Excellent Body Seal (*jyeshtha sharira-mudra*); it's supposed to open the upper lobes of your lungs.

Playing Around

From Frog Pose, reach back and slip your fingers underneath your toes (so that your toe tips are cupped in your palms), and press your thumbs into the soles of your feet. Then pull up on your toes, and use this leverage to help lift and stretch your chest. Gheranda calls this Auspicious Pose (*bhadrāsana*), though Svatmarama uses the same name for an entirely different position (see the next exercise).

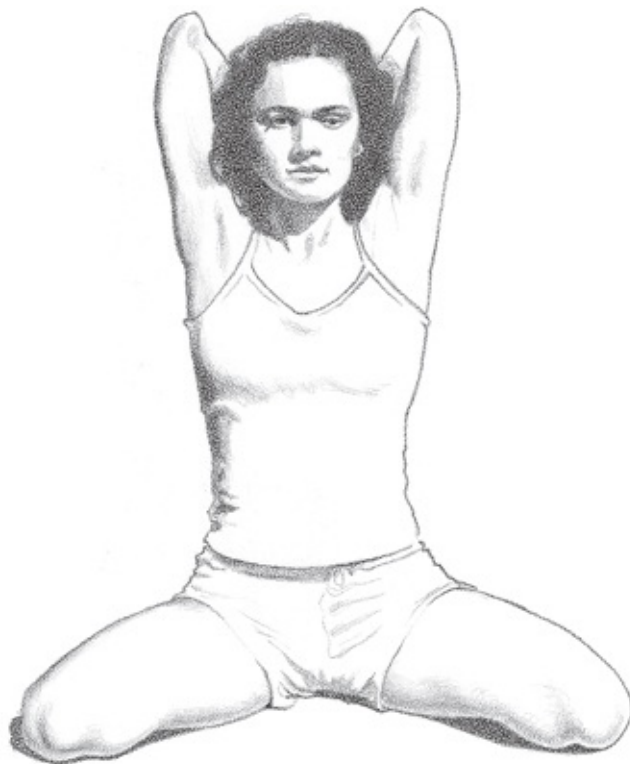


FIGURE 9.7

Bound Angle Pose (*Baddha Konasana*)

While we know this pose today as Bound Angle, Svatmarama calls it Auspicious Pose (*bhadrāsana*), though he offhandedly comments at the end of his description that some yogis call it the Cowherder Pose (*gorakshāsana*), in honor of the second great teacher in the Hatha-Yoga lineage, Goraksha. We need to remember that, once upon a time, there was no standardization of asana names; the same pose might be called different names by different teachers, or different poses could go by the same name. Be alert for these little confusions along the way.

For this exercise, you'll need a thickly folded blanket.

Preliminary

Sit on the front edge of the blanket, bend your knees, bring your soles together, and draw your heels toward your perineum. It may not be possible, nor is it absolutely necessary, to touch your heels to the base of your pelvis. Check to see that your perineum is relatively parallel to the floor. If you're tighter in the hips and groins, your pelvis may tilt backward slightly, so your tailbone is closer to the floor than your pubis. This isn't a healthy position, especially if you intend to lean your torso forward. If your pelvis is in a backward tilt, increase the height of your blanket support until you can sit in a pelvis-neutral position.

Open your soles like the covers of a book, keeping the outer edges of your feet in contact. Massage the inner arches with your thumbs for a minute or two. Start from the ball of each big toe and work back to the inner heel. Go from ball to heel only; this traces the energy channel of the inner foot. (To feel the complementary channel of the outer foot, pull your feet slightly along the floor toward your pelvis; you'll feel the outer edges sliding from your heels to your little toes). Press your soles firmly together.

Practice

Lace your fingers together and grasp either your ankles or the top four pairs of toes. Your little toes should always remain pressed to the floor. Pull against your ankles or feet and, by firming your shoulder blades against your back torso, lift your chest (see [fig. 9.8](#)). There's a strong urge in this pose to push your knees toward the floor—resist it. Instead, let your knees float lightly above the floor, as if filled with helium, and release your inner groins downward; when your groins descend, your knees will follow.

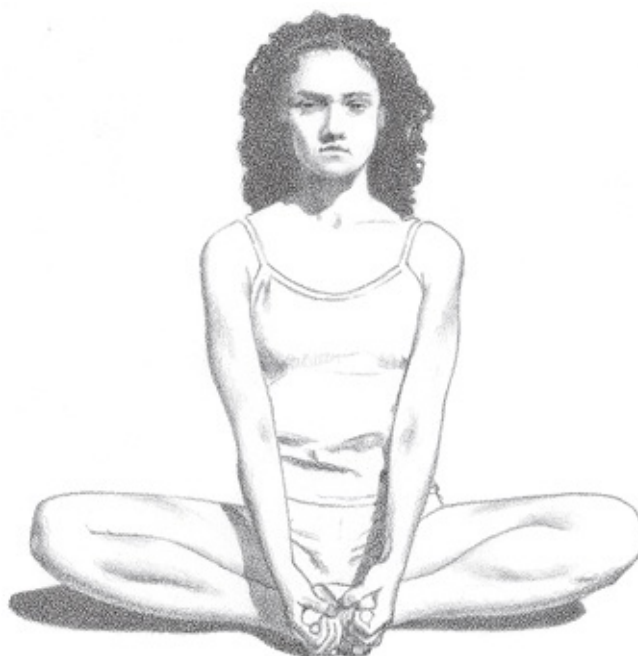


FIGURE 9.8

Keep your soles pressed firmly together. If you need to, you can bind your feet with your yoga belt. I call this Foot Seal (*pada-mudra*), which works on the sacrum in much the same way the Heart Seal works on the shoulder blades. Your right sole is energetically in tune with the right side of your sacrum, your left sole with the left side. Spreading your soles will spread your sacrum, pressing your soles together will firm the bone against the

back of your pelvis.

The press of the soles should also be mimicked by the pubic bone. This bone actually consists of two “arms” (rami), joined at what’s called the pubic symphysis. In Bound Angle, these arms should press together as firmly as your soles, narrowing your front belly. In response, think of pushing your knees away from your pelvis.

Stay in position for two to five minutes. When you’re ready to exit, press your hands against your outer thighs and gently push them together. Then extend your legs into Staff Pose.

How It Helps

Svatmarama says Bound Angle destroys disease (HYP 2.54), including—as Pattabhi Jois notes—constipation and indigestion. At the least, it stimulates the belly and stretches the inner groins and thighs.

Going Further

From the upright position, bend your elbows and tip your torso slightly forward. Make sure you don’t bend from your belly; rather, come forward from your groins, continuously lengthening the space between your pubis and navel.

If you intend to stay forward for a while, you might want something to rest your forehead on. If you can bend fairly low, a yoga brick or two will work; if you can’t get very far into the forward bend, use the front edge of a chair seat.

Playing Around

You can increase the challenge of Bound Angle by using a yoga block. There are three stages to this exercise: press your soles firmly against the faces, sides, and ends of the block in turn. Each time hold for a minute or two. Then remove the block and slide your soles back together.

Inverse Action Seal (*Viparita Karani-mudra*)

The old texts are rather vague about—or at least don’t agree on—exactly how this asana-like seal is performed, whether it looks like our modern-day Headstand (*shirshasana*) or Shoulderstand (*sarvangasana*). Nowadays we perform Inverse Action Seal mostly as a restorative or resting pose. Gheranda seems to suggest it’s equivalent to our Headstand, but all Svratmarama says is “navel above, palate below” (HYP 3.79), which could be either Headstand or Shoulderstand (or even Hand Stand or Forearm Stand).

Whatever it looked like traditionally, Inverse Action served to prevent the soma (the elixir of immortality), which is exuded by the “moon,” a subtle center in the skull, from dripping into the “sun,” the solar plexus, and burning up. The yogi simply turned himself upside down, bringing the source of the fluid—in the moon—below the belly.

SIDELIGHT

Immortal (Amrita)

The sage Parasara told his disciple, Maitreya, the following story. Once upon a time, the

thirty gods and their world were abandoned and cursed by the bad-tempered and slightly crazy sage Durvasas, who was an aspect of the god Shiva. Everything withered like plants in a drought, and the people became greedy and weak. The demons saw their chance and attacked the gods, who, in their vulnerability, ran for help to their beloved grandfather, Brahma. He told them, “Go to Vishnu, the All-Pervader, who destroys demons and dispels suffering.” So off they went to find him on the shore of the Milk Ocean.

When they reached Vishnu, who had his conch, discus, and mace in hand, the gods prostrated themselves at his feet and praised him profusely. Pleased, Vishnu explained what to do: “Take these herbs and toss them into the Milk Ocean to make the nectar called Immortal (amrita), which is the essence of life. Using Slow Mountain (Mandara) as a churning stick and the serpent-king Vasuki as a churning rope, churn the ocean. Tell the demons that, if they help with the churning, they’ll be rewarded just like you. But I’ll fix it so that only the gods, and not the demons, receive the Immortal.”

So the gods tossed the herbs into the Milk Ocean, whose glow, it’s said, “was as clear as the sky in autumn.” The gods then grabbed Vasuki’s tail, while the demons took the snake’s head. The fiery-hot hissing of the snake’s mouth sapped the demons’ energy, while the rainclouds at his tail refreshed the gods. Thus began the epic event known as the ocean stirring (*samudra mathana*).

In the middle of the Milk Ocean, Vishnu assumed one of his avatars, Kurma the Tortoise, and supported the great churning-stick mountain on his back. Marvelous things, known as the Fourteen Jewels (*chaturdasha ratnam*, though different versions of this story list different items), began to rise out of the ocean. There was Surabhi (or Kamadhenu), the sacred cow, that could feed countless people with her milk; Airavata, the elephant with four tusks; the white horse Uchchhaisi Shravas; Varuni (or Mada), goddess of wine; sweet-smelling Parijata, the tree of paradise; Kalpa Vriksha, the wish-fulfilling tree; the Apsarases, the celestial nymphs, “matchless in grace, perfect in loveliness”; Shankha, the victory conch; Gada, the mace of sovereignty; and Dhanus, a magic bow—all of these went to Vishnu. There also arose Chandra, the “cool-rayed” moon; virulent poison (*halahala*), which the serpent-kings took for themselves; Shri (also called Lakshmi), the goddess of love, beauty, and prosperity (who was to become Vishnu’s wife); and finally Dhanvantari, the god’s physician, carrying the most precious gift of all—the jar (*kumbha*) of Immortal.

The demons stole the jar from Dhanvantari, but Vishnu immediately tricked them with an illusion: he turned himself into a beautiful woman named Mohini, which distracted the demons’ attention, then stole back the jar and gave it to the gods. They drank, and with their newfound power, defeated the demons, who scattered to the winds and scurried to the netherworld. The gods rejoiced and thanked Vishnu with all their heart, and the world and all its people were gloriously restored.

Immortal doesn’t belong only to the gods. Each of us has a supply that can be accessed through certain yoga practices. Different texts say it’s stored in different places, usually the palate wheel (*taluchakra*), associated with the uvula at the back of the throat, or the thousand-spoked (*sahasrara*) center at the crown. In any case, in the average person, Immortal drips into the abdomen, where it’s incinerated in the fires of the solar plexus, or jeweled city wheel (*manipura-chakra*), located at the navel. Because we waste our supply

of Immortal, we slowly age and eventually die.

The *Shiva-Samhita* suggests there are two kinds of Immortal:

In this body ... there is the nectar-rayed moon ... on the top of the spinal cord ... This has its face downwards, and rains nectar day and night. The ambrosia further subdivides itself into two subtle parts: One of these, through the channel named Ida, goes over the body to nourish it, like the waters of the heavenly Ganges ... This milk-ray (moon) is on the left side. The other ray, brilliant as the purest milk and fountain of great joy, enters through the middle path (called Sushumna) into the spinal cord, in order to create this moon. At the bottom of Meru [the spine] there is the sun ... In the right side path (Pingala) the lord of creatures carries (the fluid) through its rays upwards. It [i.e., the sun] certainly swallows the vital secretions. (SS 2.6–11).

Immortal is also called juice or extract (soma); ease or comfort (*sudha*); immortal liquor (*amara varuni*); milk or nectar (*piyusha*, the drink of immortality produced at the churning of the ocean of milk); and not aging (*nirjara*).

Though he's vague on the performance details, Svatmarama is very specific about how long you're supposed to stay in Inverse Action Seal—a mere three hours every day. Now, devoting three hours a day to this one exercise is possible only if you don't have a real life and are sequestered in some ashram where there's nothing much to do *except* practice yoga. Actually Theos Bernard (who interpreted this seal as Headstand) took this three-hour standard of perfection literally; in his *Hatha Yoga*, he recounts how he slowly increased his time to three hours a day:

To accomplish this goal ... my teacher advised me to start with ten seconds for the first week and then to add thirty seconds each week until I brought the time up to fifteen minutes. This required several months. At this point I was advised to repeat the practice twice a day, which gave me a total of thirty minutes. After one month I added a midday practice period and increased the duration to twenty minutes, which gave me one hour for the day. Thereafter I added five minutes each week until I brought up the time to a single practice period, which amounted to three hours for the day. In order to further increase the time for each period, I was advised to stop the midday practice and increase the duration of the other two periods. Eventually I abandoned the evening turn and held the posture for three hours at one time.¹

We'll perform it as a supported Half-Shoulderstand. For this exercise, you'll need a yoga block, preferably foam, and a bare wall.

Preliminary

You might want to stretch your chest for a few minutes before performing this seal. If so, lie supine over the block, shoulder blades fully supported. Support the back of your head on a thickly folded blanket to keep the back of your neck long. You can keep your knees bent, with your feet on the floor, or straighten your legs and keep them active by pushing through the backs of your heels.

Rest your arms on the floor, angled away from the sides of your torso, palms up; or cross your forearms, hold each elbow with the opposite hand, and swing your arms overhead with an inhale. Be sure not to force your forearms to the floor. Keep your front torso soft. Stay in place three to five minutes. Then roll gently to one side with an exhale.

Practice

Lie on your back with your buttocks, back legs, and heels pressed lightly against the wall. Bend your knees and slide your feet a foot or so down the wall. Then inhale, push your soles against the wall, and lift your pelvis away from the floor. Set the yoga block just under your sacrum. Decide whether you want the ends or the sides of the block as support; the former will obviously give you a greater lift and stretch, but if you have back problems, the latter might be more appropriate. Make sure the block is below your sacrum and tailbone, not high up under your lower back.

Exhale and lower your pelvis onto the block. Slide your heels back up the wall and restraighten your knees. Your legs will now be slightly angled relative to the wall. Lay your arms on the floor, angled slightly away from your torso, palms up. Draw the base of your skull away from the back of your neck. Close your eyes (see [fig. 9.9](#)).

Press lightly through your heels. In your imagination, watch the energetic channels on your inner thighs: they descend, helped by the pull of gravity, from your inner ankles to your inner groins, then continue down into the back of your pelvis. From here the energy cascades out of your pelvis along your front spine, through your torso, neck, and head, and emerges through the Brahma hole, spilling out onto the floor.

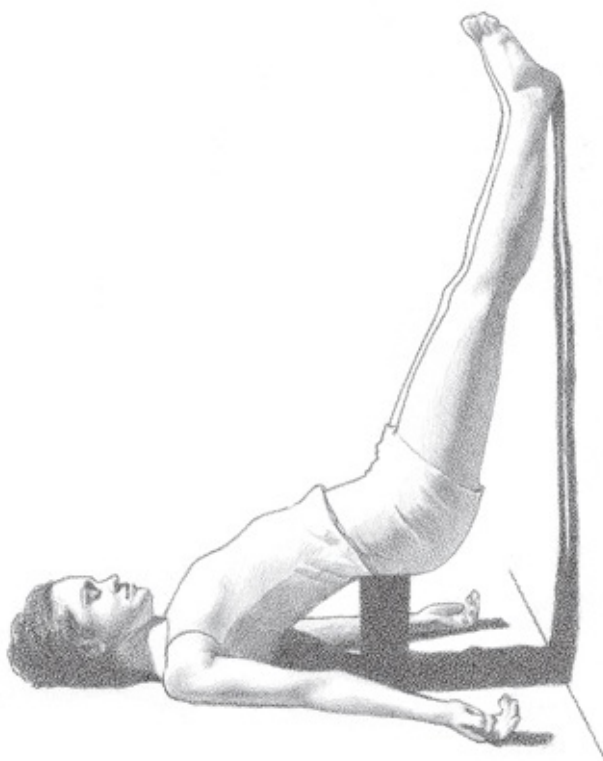


FIGURE 9.9

Stay in place from five to ten minutes. To exit, slide your feet slightly down the wall, inhale your pelvis off the block, move the block to one side, and with an exhale, release your pelvis to the floor. Take a few breaths, then roll to your side with another exhale.

How It Helps

Gheranda reports that whoever “regularly practices this mudra destroys decrepitude and death, is an adept in all the worlds, and does not perish even at the great dissolution” (GS 3.32)—that is, at the end of the current world cycle, though it’s not clear why we’d want to be around when there isn’t any world. Svatmarama cautions that daily practice increases the “stomach’s fire, so the practitioner should have plenty of food. If he eats too little food, the fire burns him instantly” (HYP 3.80). He adds that wrinkles and gray hair disappear after only six months—throw away that hair dye!—and that “he who practices it for three hours every day surely conquers death” (HYP 3.82).

I wouldn’t get too excited about living forever—remember the misery of the eternal Struldbrugs encountered by Lemuel Gulliver—and I’m still waiting for my gray hair to disappear. For our purposes, Inverse Action serves as an excellent preparation for both sitting and breathing; moreover, because the perineum hollows slightly (becomes concave relative to the floor), an action encouraged by the pull of gravity, this seal also prepares us for the practice of Root Bond.

Playing Around

If your legs tend to fall apart, you can bind your thighs loosely with a yoga belt. You can also lay a sandbag across your feet to give yourself something to push against. This will help you keep your legs active, and the added weight on your soles will help release your lower back into the floor.

Last Word

How many of these exercises you do depends on your inclination and the time you have available. If you’re pressed for time, choose one or two, preferably Pond Seal and/or Inverse Action Seal; if you’re not rushed, you might consider running through all seven (including or omitting some or all of the variations) in the order listed here. Depending on how long you hold each pose or seal (and how many variations you include), the full sequence should take between thirty and fifty minutes.

CHAPTER 10

Root and Belly

Two Pranayama Bonds

The hathayogic texts recommend a combination of postures, together with a number of respiratory and “hydraulic” techniques, for the immobilization of the breaths and the diaphragmatic retentions that trigger the rise of the *kundalini* and all that follows. The body of ... techniques is generally divided into “hermetic seals” (*mudras* ...) and contractions or “locks” (*bandhas*). These sources describe three principal locks which, effected at the levels of the abdomen, thorax, and head, work hydraulically to effect internal changes in pressure, such that the breath ... become[s] immobilized ...

—David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body*

THE BONDS (*bandha*) and seals (*mudra*) are closely related, just like brothers and sisters, and are commonly listed together in the old books. Gheranda covers twenty; Svatmarama, only ten. They’re said to awaken the *kundalini*, confer great powers, and generally make us wildly successful (GS 3.3). Presumably to keep them away from ignorant or nefarious persons who might abuse or misuse these practices, Svatmarama urges us to “keep them secret, as if they were a box of jewels” (HYP 3.9).

The three major bonds of Hatha-Yoga are Net-Bearer Bond (*jalandhara-bandha*), Root Bond (*mula-bandha*), and Flying-Up Bond (*uddiyana-bandha*). I’ve already written extensively on Net-Bearer Bond in *The Yoga of Breath*, so I won’t repeat those instructions here. I’ve also written some material on modified versions of Root Bond and Flying-Up Bond, so now we’ll look at more sophisticated versions of these two practices.

Root Bond (*Mula-bandha*)

Often when you read about Root Bond in contemporary books and magazines, its performance is described in terms of a muscular contraction of the base of the pelvis. Even 350 years ago, Svatmarama had his students contracting their anal sphincters. I want to emphasize that, for our purposes, we *won’t* be doing any gross perineal contractions, and we’ll be using our heel pressure only as a tactile aid. I look at Root Bond more as an energetic response to a whole chain of peripheral movements and actions: the grounding of the femur heads, the downward press of the pubis and lengthening of the tailbone, the narrowing of the hip points, the firming of the lower belly, the deepening of the sacrum, and even the upward tug of the rising inhale.

You might need a sandbag or two for this exercise.

Preliminary

Use Pond Seal and Inverse Action Seal as preparations for Root Bond. You can also stretch and open your groins with Frog Pose and Bound Angle Pose.

Then sit in any comfortable yoga seat, preferably Thunderbolt Pose. Imagine there’s an

energetic ball in your belly, warm and glowing. Lift this ball up away from your perineum and back toward your sacrum, where it will nestle snugly in the concave face of the bone. Feel how this image draws your lower belly slightly in and lifts your perineum slightly up.

Practice

If you have a sandbag (or two), lay it across the tops of your thighs, right where they crease with your front pelvis (see [fig. 10.1](#)). Drop the heads of your femurs away from this weight, as if they were sinking deeper into your hip sockets, and turn your femurs slightly inward (medially), an action that will push down on your pubis. Firm your sacrum against the back of your pelvis, and mentally lengthen your tailbone into the floor. Narrow your hip points, using your hands to push them toward your navel if needed, and feel your lower belly firm in response.

How It Helps

Root Bond provides a stable base for the support of the torso and front spine. It forms the “base hollow” onto which the successive hollows of the diaphragm, soft palate, and cranial vault are stacked. In my experience, Root Bond energetically charges the front spine.



FIGURE 10.1

Flying-Up Bond (Uddiyana-bandha)

The Sanskrit prefix *ud* means “up, upward” (and implies superiority in place, rank, station, or power); *di* (with a long *i*) means “to soar, fly”; and *yana* means “going, moving,” as well as a vehicle of any kind. This bond is also called *uddana*, which is translated as “act of binding on, fastening together,” as well as “middle, waist.”

Though some teachers recommended to start your practice with Flying Up Seal in a standing position, I prefer Hero Pose (*virasana*), which is how I’ll ask you to practice here.

Preliminary

Pond Seal or Inverse Action Seal are good preparations for Flying Up Bond.

Practice

Sit in Hero (with a lift below your buttocks if needed), reach out with your hands and firmly cup your knees. Pretend you're trying to pull your knees up off the floor (but don't actually lift them). Use the pull on your knees as leverage to press your scapulae against your back torso. Inhale slowly, fully through your nose, then exhale quickly, forcefully either through your nose or pursed lips. Strongly contract your belly muscles to push as much air as possible out of your lungs. Then relax your belly muscles and lower your chin into Net Bearer's Bond.

Now perform what's called a "mock inhalation": expand your rib case, as if you were inhaling, but don't actually take in any air. This "nonbreathing" rib expansion will suck your belly (and diaphragm) up into your thorax, pulling your navel in toward your spine. Be sure not to "help" the concavity of the belly by contracting your belly muscles; keep them relaxed (see [fig. 10.2](#)).

Hold the bond lift for five to fifteen seconds. Be extremely vigilant: keep the throat, eyes, and inner ears soft, and the brain quite soft; be ready to release your belly sooner if you feel any strain. When you're ready, slowly release your belly and take an everyday breath. If you have to gasp for air, you know you held the bond too long, and for the time being need to shorten your holding time accordingly.

At first perform three rounds, gradually increasing over time to ten rounds.

How It Helps

Svatmarama assures us that Flying-Up is the best of all three major bonds (HYP 3.60) and that liberation will come spontaneously once it's mastered (HYP 3.60). Both he and Gheranda mention it's a "lion against the elephant of death" (GS 3.8), suggesting that the practice helps extend life. The bond is called Flying-Up because it's supposed to lift the prana, the "great bird," up through the most gracious channel.



FIGURE 10.2

Practically, the bond tones the belly muscles; massages the abdominal organs, diaphragm, heart, and lungs; and stimulates blood circulation. It stokes the “fire in the belly” (what the yogis call the *samana-vayu*), improving digestion and elimination.

Be sure to practice Flying-Up only on an empty stomach and only after you exhale. The *Varaha-Upanishad* cautions that the bond “should not be practised by one who is hungry or who has urgency to make water or void excrement” (5.9). Also avoid it if you have stomach or intestinal ulcers, a hernia, high blood pressure, heart disease, or glaucoma.

Going Further

After you gain some experience, work with Flying-Up in an appropriate yoga seat.

Last Word

You may have noticed that I’ve changed the way I translate *bandha*. I used “lock” in *The Yoga of Breath*, but I’ve always been a bit leery about this word, because it suggests a kind of rigid closure that certainly should be avoided. So I decided to try “bond” as a translation this time, even though it still makes me nervous, being so uncomfortably close to “bondage.”

The word I’d prefer to use is *valve*, which my dictionary defines generally as any of “various devices that regulate the flow of gases, liquids, or loose materials through piping or through apertures by opening, closing, or obstructing ports or passageways,” and more specifically the “movable control element of such a device.” The etymological root of *valve*, the Latin *valva*, means “to turn or roll,” and its derivatives refer to “curved enclosing objects.” For me, this word neatly sums up what these and related practices are all about.

CHAPTER 11

The Three Greats

Seal, Bond, and Piercer

These three should be kept a great secret.

—Svatmarama, *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*

THE THREE GREAT (*maha*) practices are Great Seal (*mahamudra*), Great Bond (*mahabandha*), and the oddly named, and even odder looking Great Piercer (*mahavedha*). Even though only the first is called a seal, both Svatmarama and Gheranda group all three in their mudra chapters. While they can be practiced individually—and it’s probably best that you do, until you get the hang of each and feel confident that you can combine them without strain—the Greats are usually considered to be a matched set; like the horse-and-carriage from the old song, with a barn tossed in, you can’t have one without the other two.

Each Great practice begins in Staff Pose (*dandasana*), a sitting position with the torso upright and legs extended forward. You may need a folded blanket to support your buttocks and a yoga belt for the first practice.

Great Seal (Mahamudra)

Preliminary

Bend your left knee, draw your heel into your perineum, and lay the outside of your leg on the floor. If your leg doesn’t rest comfortably on the floor, support it with another folded blanket or a block. Your left shin should be approximately perpendicular to your right leg. Be sure your left heel is pressing firmly against your perineum, but don’t allow your foot to slide under your right thigh.

Reach out with your hands and grasp the sides of your right foot, keeping your front torso lengthened. If you can’t do this comfortably, or if you have to round your torso forward to hold your foot, use a yoga belt. When you use a belt, be sure to keep your arms fully extended; reach along the belt until your elbows are straight, but hold the belt lightly.

Press through both heels and keep your soles lively. Actively press your front right and inner left thighs into the floor, and lengthen your tailbone out along the floor behind your torso.

Practice

Though Great Seal has the same outward beginning shape as Head-to-Knee Pose (*janu shirshasana*), it’s not performed as a forward bend. Your torso should be lifted strongly throughout and even bent slightly backward. Hold the preliminary position for a few everyday breaths.

Inhale slowly and, near the end of the breath, lower your chin into Net-Bearer Bond. According to one source, you should gaze at the center of your forehead (*bhru-madhyā*), at

a spot called the triple peak (tri-kuta) where the three principal channels (nadi) knot together (see [fig. 11.1](#)). Initially hold for only a few seconds, then slowly exhale the breath and raise your head back to neutral. Repeat three to five times, then reverse your legs and repeat for the same number of times.

When you've completed both sides for an equal number of times, return to Staff Pose. Gradually increase the time you stay in this pose over a few weeks or months.

Traditionally, as you might discover or already know, the inner retention is accompanied by the Flying-Up Bond. I strongly recommend you only attempt this bond after an inhale under the supervision of an experienced teacher.



FIGURE 11.1

How It Helps

Svatmarama waxes poetic about Great Seal: “As a snake hit with a stick assumes the shape of a stick, so the kundalini power will immediately straighten.” If you’re not sure what this image suggests, he’s indicating that Great Seal helps awaken your sleeping kundalini. He continues, “Great troubles, defects, death ... are eliminated... . There is neither prescribed nor prohibited food. All drinks are digested like nectar, even if foul or a horrible poison” (HYP 3, 12, 14, 16).

Gheranda notes that Great Seal not only gets rid of disease and death, but reverses the usual signs of aging such as wrinkles and gray hair (GS 3.6). The anonymous author of the *Shiva-Samhita* reports that “all the vessels of the body are roused and stirred into activity; the life is increased and its decay is checked, and all sins are destroyed. All diseases are healed, and the gastric fire is increased. It gives faultless beauty ... All fruits of desires and pleasures are obtained ... the Yogi crosses the ocean of the world” (SS 4.18–19).

Modern sources are also high on Great Seal: it’s supposed to tone the abdominal organs and kidneys; cure indigestion, consumption, hemorrhoids, and chronic gastritis; relieve headaches; and in women, correct displacement of the uterus.

Going Further

You might try this seal with both legs extended in Staff Pose. Instead of retaining the inhale, try retaining the exhale.

Great Bond (Mahabandha)

Great Bond is traditionally performed in Lotus Pose (*padmasana*). I urge you *not* to practice the full version of this pose unless you’ve learned it directly from a living, breathing, experienced teacher. Half-Lotus (*ardha padmasana*) is a viable alternative, but again, only work with this sitting position if you have been trained by a teacher. If neither of these two poses is possible for you, then sit in either Thunderbolt or Hero, with a support below your buttocks if needed.

Practice

Take a few everyday breaths. Then inhale slowly and, near the end of the breath, lower your chin into Net-Bearer Bond (see [fig. 11.2](#)). Initially hold for only a few seconds, then slowly exhale the breath and raise your head back to neutral. Repeat three to five times, then return to Staff Pose. Over a few weeks or even months, gradually increase the time you retain the breath to ten to fifteen seconds.



FIGURE 11.2

How It Helps

Svatmarama calls Great Bond a “giver of great powers, clever in loosening the great noose of the rope of time. It creates the confluence of the three streams [i.e., the three principal energy channels, ida, pingala, and sushumna]. It causes the mind to reach Kedara [a mountain in the Himalayas, home to Shiva; also the spot between the eyebrows]” (HYP 3.23–24). Gheranda is a bit more succinct: this bond again gets rid of old age and death and gives us the power to do anything we want (GS 3.16), presumably within yogic reason. The *Shiva-Samhita* chimes in that the “body is invigorated ... the bones are firmly knitted, the heart of the yogi becomes full (of cheerfulness)” (SS 4.22).

Great Piercer (Mahavedha)

Svatmarama says that without Great Piercer, Great Seal and Great Bond are pointless, like a “beautiful and charming woman without a man” (HYP 3.25). Yes, I know, he’s being distinctly non-PC by modern standards. But he’s trying to emphasize that the three Greats go together in sequence and lose some (or all) of their effectiveness if practiced alone. Gheranda calls the practitioner who practices the three Greats every day the “best of Yoga experts” (GS 3.19).

The Sanskrit *vedha* also means “breaking through.”

Preliminary

Sit in the same position for this pose that you used for Great Bond.

Practice

Take a few everyday breaths, then inhale slowly and, near the end of the breath, lower your chin into Net-Bearer Bond. During the retention, press your hands against the floor and lift your buttocks slightly off your support (whether it’s the floor, a yoga block, or your heels). Quickly but *gently* tap them against the support three to four times, then lower your buttocks back to the support. Slowly exhale and raise your head back to neutral. Repeat two or three times, then sit back into Staff Pose and bounce your knees on the floor a few times.

How It Helps

According to Svatomarama, Great Piercer fuses “moon, sun, and fire [i.e., ida, pingala, and sushumna nadis] [and] surely results in immortality ... [It] gives great powers ... kills wrinkles, gray hair, and trembling” (HYP 3.28–29). The bond, says Gheranda, brings the practitioner success (GS 3.18), though as usual he doesn’t specify just what he means by success—possibly liberation or a long life free of disease.

Going Further

Great Piercer can be done while sitting in Staff Pose or in a simple cross-shin position.

Last Word

The Three Greats are traditional practices that aren’t often practiced nowadays, especially Great Piercer. Great Seal and Great Bond are wonderful warm-ups for pranayama, though the jury’s still out on Great Piercer. Most of my students perform it only because I ask them to try, and it seems to them more of a novelty act than a serious practice. But a few students actually report that the practice stimulates the base of their spine and their breath. Since both Svatomarama and Gheranda are adamant that all three practices should be performed together, it’s probably best to keep on practicing it, even if only out of curiosity about where it may one day lead.

PART THREE

Breath

ONCE UPON A TIME, Kausalya Ashvalayana (whose name means “clever”) asked Pippalada, “Where is breath born? How does it get into the body? How does it divide itself up and become established? How does it support what’s outside, all the creatures and gods, and what’s inside?”

Pippalada was impressed. He said, “These are very difficult questions, but since I believe you’re a sincere student, I’ll answer you.

“Breath is born from the self. Just like your body has a shadow, the self’s shadow is breath, and so the self casts its breath-shadow on your body. Just as a king appoints various officials, saying, ‘You take charge of this village, you take charge of that one,’ the self appoints the five breaths to their various different places, while the self itself makes its home in the heart.

“The Sun rises outside as the high breath, and supports the breath in the eye, since without the Sun we couldn’t see. The god in the Earth supports the low breath, the space between the Sun and the Earth is the middle breath, wind is the spread-out breath, and heat is the up breath. So when your heat dies, you go on to rebirth. Now whatever you’re thinking about when you die determines your next life, and breath together with heat and the self leads you to whatever world you deserve.

“If you know this, you know the breath, and you’ll become immortal. There’s even this little poem about it:

The source, the entrance, the place,
The five extensions,
And the connection of the self to the breath—
If you know these, you’ll live forever!
Yes, if you know these, you’ll live forever!”

—*Prashna-Upanishad*

CHAPTER 12

Keep Your Nose Clean

Pranayama and the Nasal Wash

It should be abundantly clear how indispensable is a healthy nose to our physical well-being. The cleansing of the nostrils has for suchlike reasons been considered most essential by the practical yogins. To keep this organ in a healthy state, the one condition which is absolutely necessary is that the nostrils must be fully open for the passage of air. For this purpose, the method suggested by the yoga hygiene is very simple and is known as the process of *neti* or nasal cleansing.

—Shri Yogendra, *Yoga Hygiene Simplified*

YOGIS HAVE BEEN sluicing out their noses with salt water (*jala*) for ages, mostly for reasons of physical health, but also as a preparation for pranayama. Though salt water is most common, other fluids have been used for this washing, or *neti*, practice (*neti* has no exact English translation, and so will remain untranslated), such as milk (*dugdha*) and clarified butter or ghee (*ghrita*). There's also a practice called string (*sutra*) *neti*, in which a long string or catheter—are you ready for this?—is tunneled through each nostril in turn, pulled out of the mouth, then slipped back and forth like a kind of sinus flossing. Svatmarama says this practice gives “divine sight” and “destroys the flood of diseases originating above the collarbone” (HYP 2.31).

Preliminary

First you need a *neti* pot, a small watering can–like vessel with a long, tapering snout. You can find pots made of ceramic, plastic, and stainless steel (usually the most expensive) at your local yoga school or health food emporium or through an online dealer. They usually cost somewhere between twenty and thirty dollars.

Fill the pot to the brim with warm water (usually tap water is fine), ideally around body temperature (about 90°F). Be careful about the temperature; while it won't feel very good if the water is too cold, it'll feel a lot worse if it's too hot. Add about a quarter-teaspoon of pure sea salt and mix in thoroughly. Over time you'll be able to figure out if you want more or less salt. You'll definitely want more salt if the water stings your nostrils. And *don't forget* the salt; believe me, pouring plain water through your nose is an unpleasant experience.

Practice

Lean over a sink or bathtub. Tilt your head sideways (one ear down, the other up), and insert the pot's snout snugly in the upper nostril (see [fig. 12.1](#)). Take a deep breath first. Press the base of your tongue to the back of your throat to block your esophagus; don't worry if a little water trickles down your throat. You don't really need to do anything else; gravity will take over and, unless your sinuses are thickly plugged with mucus, the water should immediately begin to stream out of the lower nostril. If you're plugged up, wriggle

your nostrils like a yoga bunny sniffing the air to encourage the water to penetrate through your sinuses.

Cleanse both nostrils, using either a half-pot or a full pot on each side. Then hold your head over the sink and let any remaining water dribble out. Make sure you're by yourself when you do this—or at least with someone who'll love you no matter what. Finish with eight to ten rounds of Skull Brightener (see chapter 13). I like to wash out my nose daily; it's also good to do after dusty work in the garden or with power tools.



FIGURE 12.1

How It Helps

Nasal wash is without doubt an excellent preparation for pranayama, since it drains, cleans, and moistens the nostrils and sinuses. There's been some medical research conducted on the benefits of nasal washing. One study, among forty-six volunteer woodworkers with high exposure to wood dust, concluded that after eight weeks most experienced "clearer nostrils, clearer head, better breathing, improved sense of smell, better sleep ... fewer nosebleeds, no colds, better thinking ... less sneezing, better sleep, more relaxed, peace of mind, and well-being."¹ Another study reported that "daily nasal irrigation with hypertonic saline [i.e., saltwater] offers patients an inexpensive treatment protocol that improves chronic sinusitis symptoms."²

The nonmedical literature on the practice's benefits is fairly extensive and highly enthusiastic, sometimes right up to and one toe over the line of believability. We can reasonably assume that, in addition to what's already been stated in the study results, nasal washing may be useful in alleviating headaches and migraines, as well as the symptoms of hay fever, allergies, asthma, and bronchitis.

Nasal Dominance

Once your nose and sinuses are irrigated, you may notice something unusual about your breathing. Try this experiment. With the tip of your left index finger, press on the side of and gently block your left nostril; take a few breaths through your right nostril. As you do, notice the quality of the airflow. Reverse, blocking your right nostril and taking a few breath through your left, while again attending to the airflow. Do you feel any difference

between the two nostrils? You should, if you're among the 80 percent of the population that experiences what's variously called the nasal or infradian (from the Latin *infra deum*, "within the day") rhythm or alternate rhinitis.

We're told that our nostrils are lined with tissues that alternately swell and shrink, a process scientists believe is controlled by an area of the brain called the hypothalamus. Moreover, the swelling and shrinking alternates between the nostrils every hour or two (though with some people it takes longer). When the right nostril's tissues shrink, for example, the left nostril's (tend to) swell, so that breathing is relatively easier through the former; the nostril with shrunken tissue is called dominant, and the one with swollen tissue is nondominant. Studies seem to demonstrate that nasal dominance goes hand-in-hand with opposite-side hemispheric dominance; in other words, right-nostril dominance activates the brain's left hemisphere, and left-nostril dominance triggers the right hemisphere.

As far as I can discover, the first Westerner to mention nasal dominance was a German rhinologist (nose doctor), R. Kayser, in 1895. You might be thinking, Who cares about the alternation, as long as I can breathe? Well, it appears our yogi rhinologists knew about this rhythmic phenomenon a few centuries before Herr Kayser and postulated that nasal (and thus hemispheric) dominance has an enormous effect on our thinking and behavior. For example, when our left nostril (and right hemisphere) is dominant, it's supposed to be a good time to perform calm and silent work, charitably help others, treat diseases, settle disagreements, and sing or listen to music; when the right nostril (and left hemisphere) is dominant, we're advised to perform hard work, go to war (but only with congressional approval), study intellectual subjects such as mathematics, and ride a motorcycle like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. The yogis also believe that many diseases, such as asthma, are caused when our nasal rhythm goes haywire and one nostril stays dominant for weeks or months without change.

There may be times when it's necessary to prepare for digital pranayama by shifting our dominant nostril from left to right or from right to left; for example, when we're getting ready to practice Sun Piercing breath (see chapter 17) and want the right nostril dominant.

Preliminary

There are several fairly simple ways to figure out which nostril is dominant; probably the most straightforward method is what we did at the beginning of this section—simply block one nostril and breathe a bit through the open one. Then open the closed nostril, close the open one, and breathe again. You may have to repeat this procedure a few times, but eventually you should be able to feel which of the two nostrils is letting through more air and is dominant.

Practice

Yogis traditionally use a short staff (*yoga danda*; also called a swan staff, *hamsa danda*), which looks something like a pint-sized crutch, to change nasal dominance. In a sitting position, they squeeze it under the armpit on the same side as the nondominant nostril, and after a few minutes that nostril usually becomes dominant. Of course, you don't need a staff—though I've always wanted one—because any relatively firm object will work; you

can squeeze a tennis ball or even a fist made from the opposite hand.

How It Helps

Believe it or not, somebody by the name of S. Mohan actually did a scientific study proving—for all you skeptics out there—that the squeezed-armpit method really does work. He reported that, in his subjects, dominance shift began after the first minute; by four minutes, the flow of air through the nostrils was equal; and the peak change was reached after seventeen minutes.³

Playing Around

There's also a way to shift nasal dominance without squeezing anything: just lie on your side with the dominant nostril *down* and eventually dominance will shift to the upper nostril. And guess what? Mr. Mohan also studied the effect of side-lying on what he called the “reflex reversal of differential air flow through nostrils,” or the DAFTN. He reported that after four minutes of side-lying, the airflow through the nostrils was equalized, and after eleven minutes, the DAFTN was reversed. In case you're interested, the effect was “due to the pressure stimuli to the lower lateral side of the body particularly around the shoulder region ... mediated through the sympathetic innervation to mucosal venous sinuses of the nostrils.”⁴

Last Word

Many students react negatively to the thought of pouring water through their nose. It does seem off-putting at first, but it's actually a bracing experience—it always reminds me of smelling the salt water down by the Berkeley Marina—and well worth the slight initial discomfort, which is quickly forgotten.

CHAPTER 13

Three “Sounding” Breaths

Hissing, Bee, and Skull Brightener

In our bodies also, there are infinite sound vibrations on the different layers of consciousness, the permutations and combinations of which go to form this body. The ... yogis say that in the beginning there was only one sound and that sound was the sacred *Om*, and that later on, through its sound vibrations, the universe came into being.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *The Dynamics of Yoga*

OUR EVERYDAY BREATHING makes a faint hissing or sighing sound, though we’re hardly ever aware of it. Even if we do pay attention, it surely doesn’t seem very important to us. But to the yogis, *everything* we humans do has some transformative value, including our breathing sound. So it’s been duly integrated, purposely amplified, and regulated into their daily practice as the Unspoken Hymn (*ajapamantra*), a sound that’s very similar to what we now call white noise.

I’m sure you’ve heard of loud noise, but maybe you didn’t know that in addition to volume, noise or sound can also have “color.” Our ears can only hear sounds that fall within a certain frequency range of 20 to 15,000 hertz (or oscillations per second); sounds above or below that range are inaudible to us, though not to our canine companions. If you take all the different sounds (or tones) that fall within our range and mix them together equally, you’ll have white noise. Actually, white noise isn’t noise at all, since technically noise is a random combination of sounds, something like my teenage daughter’s favorite music. But the sound is called white because it’s reminiscent of the way white light is made, by mixing all the colors of the visible spectrum together equally.

Are there any other sound colors? A bunch, though it’s hard to understand just what several of them might sound like. There’s red (oceanic ambient noise), pink (flicker noise), and orange noises. The latter is noise that eliminates all in-tune musical notes, so that the remaining spectrum consists of sour, or “citrus,” notes. Then there’s green noise, described as the “background noise of the world,” and blue and purple (or violet) noises.

Brown noise takes its name from a corruption of Brownian motion (so it’s also known as random walk or drunkard’s walk noise). Gray (or bit-flip) noise is described as a “low, rumble, grainy noise,” something like the way I sound when I teach an early-morning class. Last but not least, we can’t ignore black or silent noise, which cancels out all existing noise, leaving the world soundless.

While researching noise, I ran across the interesting fact that the cosmos itself makes a kind of breathing or hissing sound—something like its own Unspoken Hymn—a remnant of the big bang still echoing through space 14 billion or so years later. Known to scientists as cosmic microwave background radiation (CMBR), it was first discovered in 1964 by two Bell Telephone lab scientists who were eventually awarded a Nobel Prize for physics.

How It Helps

White noise absorbs and masks other sounds. I own a little fanlike white-noise device that's helped preserve my sanity many times, such as at two o'clock in the morning when the neighbor's dog is clamoring for my attention. In the same way, if we diligently attend to our breathing's white noise, after a while it will mask that barking dog in our brain, which will help us relax and prepare for pranayama or meditation.

Here are three noise-making breathing exercises, each in its own way a preparation for pranayama.

Hissing

I first read *The Thinking Body* by Mabel Ellsworth Todd many years ago and since then have thumbed through this remarkable book countless times. Subtitled "A Study of the Balancing Forces of Dynamic Man" and first published in 1937, it started life in the mid-1920s as a syllabus for Todd's physical education students at Columbia University. She called the system of physical education she developed and taught "structural hygiene." It was based on the revolutionary (for the time) and controversial idea that postural change and improvement could be initiated by "thinking continuously of a familiar motivating picture,"¹ that is, by visualizing images.

Todd used hissing as a preparation for movement and breathing. She wrote, "In movements taught for the reestablishment of bone balance at joints, hissing is a valuable adjunct ... it aims to reestablish a tie between the long rhythms of locomotion and the deep respiration of the unconditioned animal."²

Preliminary

Lie on your back with your knees bent and resting on a bolster or thickly rolled blanket. Lay your arms on the floor, each at an angle of about 45 degrees to your torso, palms up. Take a couple of minutes to investigate how your torso contacts the floor; pay particular attention to the two sides of your sacrum, your shoulder blades, and the back of your head.

Practice

There are three steps in the hissing exercise; or put another way, there are two preliminary steps before the actual hissing exercise. At the end of each step, rest briefly, breath easily, and watch how or if your torso's contact with the floor has changed.

1. First exhale slowly and forcefully through your nose. Don't inhale immediately. Notice which part of your belly tenses the most. (Hint: look at the area just below your sternum.) Repeat this step three times.

2. Now exhale slowly and forcefully through pursed lips, as if you were blowing through a straw. Where is the tense spot in your belly now? (Hint: look at your lower belly.) Repeat this step three times.

Todd explains that the nasal exhale hardens the front diaphragm and the muscles at the sides of the belly; the pursed-lip exhale has the same effect on the side diaphragm and the muscles at the sides of the belly and lower back. Neither method engages the deep spinal muscles to depress the ribs and lengthen the spine.

3. Finally pull in the sides of your ribs just below your armpits (that is, narrow the

lateral diameter of your upper rib case). Now hiss through your teeth like a snake, with your tongue and lips relaxed, prolonging the hiss as long as possible. Make sure that there's no explosive burst of air at the outset of your hiss. Can you find any tense spot in your belly now?

How It Helps

Hissing saves my life at least three times a day, more if I have to venture out in my car on the freeway. You can hiss just about any time—just before or after your asana or pranayama practice or anytime during the day, whenever you feel the need to blow off steam.

Todd notes that hissing (among other things) assists the “centering muscles” in narrowing the lateral or side-to-side diameter of the rib case; this, in turn, pushes the top of the sternum up, creating more space in the upper chest below the top three pairs of ribs. Hissing also lengthens the spine (and as you may find, balances the contact of the vertebrae with the floor); frees the diaphragm from the upper accessory breathing muscles; and activates the lower accessory muscles, which Todd calls the “power apparatus.” Finally hissing deepens the breathing rhythms (which are restricted by nervous and muscular tensions), because extending the exhale encourages a fuller inhale; lowers the center of gravity; relieves strain; and promotes relaxation.

According to Lulu Sweigard, the “value of hissing lies in the muscle work of closing the rib-case downward and inward by contraction of the muscles which are opponents to those which are active in maintaining a high, tense, and inflexible rib-case. This technique of expiration will finally engage the abdominal muscles in an ideal way.”³

Bee Here Now: Bee Breath (Bhramari Pranayama)

Bee breath is a traditional pranayama. As its name suggests, the practice involves creating a beelike buzzing sound with the breath. Traditionally the sound is made on both the inhale and the exhale, but the former (made by vibrating the edge of the soft palette) is difficult to produce at first, so we'll start by focusing on the buzzing exhale.

In order to internalize and intensify the buzzing sound, the openings to the ear canals must be blocked. There are two ways to do this: the modern way is with foam earplugs; the old-fashioned way is by pressing your thumbs against the small fleshy projections, called *tragi* (the singular is *tragus*, a Latin word meaning “goat”), just in front of the ear canals. This latter method goes by several different names: the Six Openings Seal (*shanmukhi-mudra*), because three pairs of openings—the ears, eyes, and the nostrils—are all blocked to some extent; the Turned-Inward Seal (*parangmukhi-mudra*); Shiva's Seal (*shambhavi-mudra*), and Womb Seal (*yoni-mudra*). To simplify matters, we'll call it the Ear Seal (*karna-mudra*).

Ear Seal is an effective blocking method, but it can be tiring. You're required to hold your arms up, elbows akimbo, which is okay for a minute or two but increasingly difficult if your breathing exercise needs more time. You'll also need to apply a steady pressure to the *tragi*, which may divert your attention from the breath.

Preliminary

Sit in a comfortable asana, eyes closed. Touch your thumbs just in front of the tragi, then slide them onto the projections and press firmly. Someone designed the tragi to fit quite neatly over the openings to the ear canals.

Practice

Inhale slowly, pause briefly at the top of the breath, then exhale slowly and steadily with a soft-pitched *eee* sound, like that of a bee buzzing around a flower. Make the sound as steady as possible, without wavering. Keep your lips soft and your jaw relaxed.

First concentrate the sound at the center of your skull, right at the top of your spine. Let the sound radiate out from this point, like waves from a radio transmitter, so your entire inner skull starts to vibrate. Then send the sound down along your spine to your tailbone, so your spine vibrates too, like a plucked guitar string. Finally let the sound spread through your entire body, so that every cell buzzes in unison with the bee in your head.

Start with five rounds, and gradually increase your practice over time to eight to ten rounds. When you've finished your rounds, release your hands into your lap (if you've used your thumbs to block your ears) and sit quietly for a minute or two, feeling the echos of the bee sound.

How It Helps

Bee breath is said to soothe tension and anxiety, alleviate anger and insomnia, reduce blood pressure, strengthen your voice, eliminate throat ailments, and naturally induce a joyful state of meditation. As Gheranda describes it, “In the resonance is a light and in the light is the mind. In it the mind attains absorption. That is the ultimate seat of Vishnu. Thus there is success in Bhramari and the yogi may achieve success in samadhi” (GS 5.77).

You can practice Bee breath just before a pranayama session to quiet your brain and attune your ears to your breath. Actually, as long as you're not in a place where you'll call attention to yourself or doing something that requires both hands or open ears—like driving a car—you can practice Bee anytime you're feeling a bit tense.

Going Further

As I mentioned earlier, traditional Bee is performed on both the inhale and the exhale. It took me a long while before I could successfully produce the sound on the inhale, and even after some practice, my buzzing sounds like it's made by an aged bee on its last six legs. The inhale sound (like the exhale) is made by vibrating the free edge of the soft palate and is traditionally said to have a higher pitch than the exhale sound.

To try it, exhale fully. Pretend you're asleep—by yourself, so there's no one to prod you—and take a kind of snoring inhale. You'll feel (or at least I hope you'll feel) the edge of your soft palate vibrate. Repeat several times.

Bright as a Button: Skull Brightener (*Kapalabhati*)

Skull Brightener is traditionally categorized as a purification exercise, not a pranayama. There are two significant differences between Skull Brightener and everyday breathing. In the latter, the inhale is the relatively active phase (because the diaphragm, the main

breathing muscle, contracts), while the exhale is relatively passive (as the diaphragm relaxes); moreover, the inhale tends to be slightly shorter than the exhale for most people. Skull Brightener reverses these two breathing characteristics: the short exhale is primarily generated by a sharp contraction of the lower belly muscle (rectus abdominis), while the relatively longer inhale results from a relaxation of this contraction.

Remember that Skull Brightener isn't the same as Bellows, which is a traditional pranayama.

SIDELIGHT

Bellows (Bhastrika)

Bellows is a traditional pranayama. As I understand it—and correct me if I'm wrong—it's a more vigorous version of Skull Brightener in which both the exhales and the inhales are actively generated by the belly muscles. There's also a variation of the breath, described by Svatmarama, which he recommends for when the body is tired:

Inhale through the sun [i.e., pingala] and quickly fill the belly with air. Hold the nose firmly without the middle and index fingers. Do kumbhaka [i.e., breath retention] in the prescribed manner. Exhale the air through the Ida [i.e., the comfort channel] (HYP 2.63).

Bellows has always seemed too ... blustery to me, and since I don't practice it, I can't teach it properly here. I only mention it to acknowledge its position as a traditional pranayama. From what I see in the videos of various Kundalini-Yoga teachers, Bellows plays a central role in that practice—though they call it Breath of Fire—so if you want to learn it, an experienced practitioner from this school should be able to help.

How It Helps

As Svatmarama describes it, Bellows cures diseases, stokes the fire in the belly, and stimulates the slumbering kundalini. It “purifies, gives pleasure, and is beneficial... . It splits the three strong knots that form in the body” (HYP 2.67). The three strong knots (*granthi*) referred to here are called the Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra knots, located in the heart, throat, and forehead energy centers (though some texts shift them to the pelvic, heart, and throat centers), respectively. They're thought to be obstacles to the passage of the awakened kundalini through the most gracious channel.

Skull Brightener is also called Brow Brightener (*bhalabhati*), Head Brightener (*mastakabhati*), and Skull Purifier (*kapala shodhana*). Incidentally, the Skull Brightener practice described here is technically known as air process (*vatakrma*). There are two other techniques: inversion process (*vyutkrma*) and cooling process (*sitkrma*). The former involves sniffing salt water through the nose and spitting it out the mouth, which is said to cure diseases of phlegm; the latter involves taking a mouthful of salt water and pushing it up and out through the nose. This practice is said to make you as beautiful as Kama, the Hindu god of love, though not, of course, while you're actually spewing water out of your nose.

Preliminary

Nasal wash is always a good preliminary for Skull Brightener.

Practice

There are two ways to practice Skull Brightener, which I call Assisted (slightly easier) and Freestyle (more challenging).

For Assisted Skull Brightener, make a single fist with your hands by cupping one in the other and then balling them up. Touch your fist to your lower belly, just above your pubis. To start, press your fist sharply but *lightly* up and into your lower belly (aim diagonally toward your kidneys). This movement will push a measure of air out of your lungs, depending on its force. Release your fist away from your belly quickly, and air is more or less passively drawn into your lungs by the belly's rebound. Repeat this process five to ten times, working slowly and gently at first. Gradually over a few weeks build up the force of your pressure and the speed and number of your repetitions. *Stop* immediately if you feel light-headed or irritated; when you resume, breathe with more awareness and less force.

A good starting speed for your exhales is about one per second. You can gradually build up the speed over a few weeks or months of regular practice to about two exhales per second. A reasonable goal is possibly two or three rounds of twenty-five to fifty repetitions each; when you reach this goal, let your common sense guide you on how far to go after that.

Freestyle Skull Brightener is performed in the traditional manner, by contracting the lower belly muscles, without the assistance of the fisted hands. Be sure to keep your face soft and your body relaxed. Also, you don't need to broadcast the sound of the exhale into the next county; keep it soft. Always end each round with a few Conqueror or everyday breaths, or if you prefer, the Lion Seal. I like to practice Skull Brightener before an asana or pranayama session.

How It Helps

Traditional texts enumerate various benefits of Skull Brightener. It's supposed to clean out the lungs; stimulate the brain (and counter sleepiness); balance and strengthen the nervous system (making it a good preparation for pranayama and meditation); strengthen the abdominal muscles and diaphragm; and massage and tone the abdominal organs and heart, the latter improving circulation.

Technically, Skull Brightener is a kind of hyperventilation, which increases the oxygen and decreases the carbon dioxide content of the blood (which then becomes more alkaline) and inhibits the respiratory centers in the brain stem. This causes your breathing rate to decrease. While this may be a useful start to a pranayama practice, there's also a definite downside you should be aware of: too much oxygen can result in anxiety, muscle spasms, a feeling of suffocation, irregular heartbeats, irritability, dizziness, breathlessness, tightness in the chest, numbness, tingling in the hands and feet, palpitations, and nausea. Needless to say, if you experience any of these effects from Skull Brightener, either back off a little or stop altogether until you can consult an experienced teacher.

Andre van Lysbeth lists numerous benefits for Skull Brightener. According to him, the practice purges the lungs of stale air; improves venous blood circulation by turning the diaphragm into a "heavy-duty pump"; massages the diaphragm to keep it supple;

strengthens the abdominal muscles, massages and tones the abdominal organs, and improves digestion; calms the nervous system; irrigates the brain and pituitary and pineal glands with oxygenated blood to purify, massage, and rejuvenate; cleanses the sinuses and respiratory passages; and removes bronchial congestion.⁴

Medical researchers have come to rather different conclusions regarding Skull Brightener—at least if I’m reading their studies correctly. One European team reported that the practice resulted in “relaxation on a subjective level”⁵; but an Indian group found that Skull Brightener increased sympathetic activity, which suggests that it has a stimulating effect.⁶ Be sure not to practice Skull Brightener after eating, when your stomach is occupied with digestion. Avoid this practice if you have high blood pressure or heart problems. Some books suggest that Skull Brightener can be practiced during pregnancy, but please don’t do this unless you’re being monitored by an experienced teacher.

Going Further

Skull Brightener can be practiced through one nostril only, while the other is blocked with a thumb. Perform, say, twenty-five to fifty repetitions through the right nostril (with the left one blocked), then open the left and close the right, and perform the same number of repetitions.

Playing Around

When you become more experienced with this breath, you might also try engaging your perineum, your abdominal obliques (along the sides of your torso between your pelvis and ribs), and even the muscles on your back belly between your pelvis and floating ribs (quadratus lumborum). I like to think of my belly as akin to the bulb on an eyedropper, with the tube end of the dropper pointing up and exiting through my nostrils. To exhale, I quickly squeeze the bulb, which means contracting the entire circumference of my belly as well as its base.

Last Word

While we in the West study the physical manifestations of sound, the yogis have, through their meditation techniques, tapped into the metaphysical source of all sound, which they call the supreme sound (*shabda-brahman*) or supreme voice (*paravac*). There they discovered a vibratory power that shapes, pervades, and ultimately reabsorbs the whole universe.

We can’t, of course, hear this source-sound, which the yogis call unstruck (*anahata*), with our everyday ears. Nonetheless it’s the foundation of a practice called Nada-Yoga, the Yoga of [Subtle] Sound. We don’t hear much about Nada-Yoga nowadays, but it’s described in some detail by Svatmarama near the end of the HYP. Though it may seem very esoteric at first glance, he says it’s suitable even for the ignorant—an offhand reference, I have a sneaking suspicion, to you and me. But he certainly makes it sound like a valuable practice: of the one and a quarter crore of ways to liberation—a crore, in case you’re wondering, equals ten million—Svatmarama claims that Nada-Yoga is the best.

So how do we practice Nada-Yoga? Pretty simple. First we have to purify our nadis

with asana and pranayama, which should only take, oh, a few years. Next we sit in a yoga seat and perform what Svatmarama calls Shiva's Seal, though in our terminology it's the Kamamudra, the one in which our thumbs block the openings to our ear canals. Finally we listen for and meditate on the subtle source-sound picked up in our *right* ear. The sound supposedly transforms the mind by masking and ultimately dissolving all its internal chatter (just like white noise), at which point our self-identity with the actual source of the sound, Brahman, is revealed.

The unstruck sound is apparently picked up in your body, just like a radio picks up transmissions from a station, by the most gracious channel. As you penetrate into its subtleties, the benefits of the practice become increasingly appealing. First you just experience bliss—not a bad start, but only a taste of what's to come. Next you acquire a “divine body, radiance, divine fragrance, freedom from disease, and a full heart,” then freedom from “defects, misery, old age, disease, hunger, and sleep,” and finally—ready?—liberation, in which you become the “maker of creation and destruction” (HYP 4.71, 77).

Naturally since the sound is subtle, it's hard to describe concretely what it sounds like. But just in case you decide to give the nada practice a shot, the yogis suggest you listen for several sounds, which I assume are approximations of what they actually experience: various kinds of drums, a flute, a vina (a kind of string instrument), the ocean, a conch, various bells, a bee, and—if you can imagine this—a cloud.

In an essay titled “Micromotion of the Body as a Factor in the Development of the Nervous System,” Itzhak Bentov proposes what he calls a physio-kundalini model that accounts for, among other things, these curious subtle sounds. The model is much too complex to detail here, but essentially Bentov theorizes that, in meditation, the practitioner's brain begins to oscillate rhythmically. This pendulum-like movement generates standing waves that surround the brain and are “conducted to the middle ear and converted into sound,”⁷ where they're perceived as whistling, hissing, chirping, or roaring.

CHAPTER 14

Imagine That!

Four “Imaginary Breathing” Exercises

Imagery ... is the communication mechanism between perception, emotion, and bodily change... . The stuff of imagination, [it] affects the body intimately on both seemingly mundane and profound levels... . Because of this pronounced effect the image has on the body, it yields power over life and death, and plays a key role in the less dramatic aspects of living as well.

—Jeanne Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing*

BREATHING IS A PHYSICAL PROCESS, but we can powerfully influence our breath, and so indirectly our consciousness, with our imagination. The first two imaginary breathing exercises, breath-nostril contact and breath direction, can be applied in any of the pranayamas taught in this book or others. When practiced together, they provide a simple means of channeling the breath consciously into, through, and out of the body.

The second pair of exercises are full-blown practices in their own right. The first, Wind Withdrawal, is taken from the *Yoga Collection of Yajnavalkya* (*Yoga-Yajnavalkya-Samhita*), a Hatha-Yoga manual written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century C.E. The second is described in the *Consciousness of Shiva* (*Vijnana Bhairava*), a thousand-year-old Tantric text that includes 112 concentration (*dharana*) exercises.

For the first two practices you can sit in a comfortable yoga seat or lie in Corpse Pose. As there are advantages and disadvantages to both positions, you might work with each of the practices individually and then in tandem, first in Corpse, and then when you feel more confident about your imaginative abilities, in a sitting position. As with any exercise based on imagination, you might need more than one practice session to find what you’re looking for or to realize what you’re trying to accomplish. Be patient and persistent.

Breath-Nostril Contact

We don’t pay much attention to where our inhales and exhales touch the linings of our nostrils, nor do we much care which way the exhale stream angles away from the nostrils. Not surprisingly though, being the obsessively observant bunch they are, the yogis pay lots of attention to where the inhales contact their nostrils; whether the exhale stream angles up, down, or sideways; and how far it seems to flow away from the nose.

According to some texts, the breath’s touch on the nostril’s inner linings has the capacity to alter our consciousness state and influence our behavior. In the *Rising Sound of Shiva* (*Shiva Svarodaya*), a rather fantastical Hatha-Yoga text of uncertain date, the anonymous author details how the body’s five traditional elemental forces—earth, water, fire, air, and ether—have contact points on the nostril’s lining that can be activated and influenced by the touch of the breath. This, according to one commentator, “affects the thought pattern, physical movements and capacities, interactions with other people, and all the situations and circumstances of life.”¹

We won't be going quite that far. Instead we'll first visualize the inner linings of the nostrils, imagining they're shaped like a pair of truncated cones. Second, we'll feel where the everyday inhales and exhales touch the linings; and third, we'll imaginatively influence where the breath touches the linings.

Here's some nose terminology. The opening of the nostril is called the naris (rhymes with *Maris*; the plural is *nares*, which rhymes with *carries*). We'll call the septum-side of the lining the inner nostril, and the opposite side below the outermost curve of the wing, the outer nostril. The highest point of the nostril (its uppermost curve) is the roof, and the lowest point (just above the upper lip) is the floor.

Preliminary

Turn your awareness to the linings of your nostrils, and for a few minutes feel the touch of the cool inhales and warm exhales. There's no telling where you'll feel the greatest point of contact in each nostril. The points won't necessarily be the same; for example, the inhale may touch the outer left and inner right linings.

Practice

Now try this. For a minute or so use your imagination to direct your inhales over the inner nostrils, feeling how the airstream narrows as it passes in through the nares. Next, for another minute or so, direct your exhales over your outer nostrils, feeling how the airstream widens as it passes out through the nares; imagine that the wings of your nose "billow" like a pair of sails on a ship. Finally, combine the two images: narrow your inhales over the inner nostrils, and widen your exhales under the billowing wings.

At first you may have to think very hard about what you're doing, but eventually you'll fall into a rhythm that will feel almost natural and effortless.

How It Helps

In my experience, the narrowing of the inhale helps move the breath deeper into my torso, and the widening of the exhale reminds me to keep my nose relaxed as I breathe.

Going Further

I favor the inhale-inner nostril, exhale-outer nostril pattern, since it helps lengthen and widen my nose, which seems to make my breathing easier. But there are many other possible combinations that may have equally beneficial results. So try reversing the pattern already described: inhale over the outer nostrils and exhale over the inner. Be creative with your patterns. I was taught, many years ago, to contact the entire inner surface of the linings with both my inhales and my exhales. The teacher believed this contact would influence the breath to suffuse the lungs completely.

Remember also that the point of contact doesn't have to be the same in each nostril; you could, for example, inhale across the right roof and the left floor, while exhaling across the right floor and the left roof.

Breath Direction

Now let's look at and imaginatively influence the breath's direction as it moves into and

out of our torso. We all know rationally that the inhale moves down from the nose into the trachea, then out through the bifurcating bronchi into the lungs. The exhale then moves in the opposite direction—up from the lungs, through the tubes, and out through the nose. But when we breathe imaginatively through our torso’s inner space, we can move the inhales and exhales any way we like.

Preliminary

Attend to your torso’s inner space. In pranayama practice, our breath yo-yos between two (ideal) imaginary points: point A, at the front tip of the tailbone, is the root of the inhale (and terminus of the exhale); point B, the dome-shaped area just above the clavicles, is the root of the exhale (and terminus of the inhale). Look for and establish these two points in your imagination. Of course, if you can’t find these two ideal points quite yet, you’ll have to establish your own imaginary low and high points for the time being.

Practice

Now exhale, and initiate the next (slow) inhale from point A. Restrict your breath to the back of your pelvis until it reaches the level of your navel; this will help hold your lower belly firm. Once the breath reaches your navel though, allow it to expand forward and puff your upper belly, then finish the inhale at point B. Along the way, be sure to expand the ascending breath, filling the rib spaces under your armpits; at the same time, be sure to keep your armpits soft and hollow.

The end of your inhale will fill and lift point B. After a brief rest to feel the relative fullness of your torso, slowly exhale from point B back down to point A. Remember that both the inhale and the exhale should be conducted as smoothly as possible. Think of an elevator running up from the lobby at point A to the penthouse at point B without stopping in between; after letting out all the passengers on the top floor, the elevator runs back down to the lobby, again without stopping. Then begin the next inhale. Continue for five to eight minutes.

Remember that each inhale and exhale contains its own complement. This means that while the inhale is ascending, it’s also pushing down against the tailbone and groins, helping to ground the torso and assist its own ascent. I like to think of a 1960s-era Apollo rocket blasting off its launch pad on a trip to the moon; the powerful downward thrust of its engines propels it up into space. We can continue this image with the exhale: the descending breath is like the returning capsule, parachuting slowly back to earth, the crew safely snuggled inside; as your capsule-exhale descends, your upper chest floats above it, puffed up like the parachute, resisting its natural tendency to collapse over your emptying lungs for as long as possible.

How It Helps

The movement of the inhale up-the-front and the exhale down-the-back supports both balanced posture and movement. The former breath creates a lifting action, the latter a grounding action. As Barbara Clark writes, “Exhalation is associated with weight. Inhalation is related to lightness. Think of the flight of the bird, swooping and soaring... . Breath lies at the heart of all movement.”²

Going Further

As usual, the up-inhale and down-exhale instruction is a preference of a particular yoga school, not an absolute moral imperative. Other schools prefer just the opposite pattern, which you should feel free to experiment with. It's even possible to breathe circularly, spreading the inhales out in ever-widening concentric circles from the imaginary front spine, then returning the exhales in ever-narrowing circles back to the core.

Playing Around

For this exercise you'll need to sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. Breathe up-inhale and down-exhale for a few minutes. Eventually (I hope) you'll notice that your spine is physically reacting to your breath, lengthening up on the inhale, shortening down on the exhale. This, unlike some of the other movements we've been working with in this chapter, isn't imaginary—your spine actually does (and should) subtly oscillate with your breath.

Imagine that your breath is “playing” your spine like an accordion or that your spine is akin to a long spring; while one end is attached to the floor, the other end is being gently pulled and pushed in rhythm with your breath. Encourage the lift of your spine during inhale, and as you exhale, maintain as much of that lift as you can without strain. The overall effect of this breathing exercise (which we'll call Accordion Spine) over time is to grow your torso longer and longer.

Wind Withdrawal (*Vayu Pratyahara*)

Most experienced students are familiar, at least theoretically, with sensory withdrawal (*pratyahara*), the fifth stage of Patanjali's classical eight-stage system. It's performed by first “uncoupling” awareness from the world of objects and directing it inward toward the self. Next, when awareness withdraws, the senses are supposed to follow.³ This process is usually compared to a tortoise (*kurma*) retracting its head and limbs into its shell. Vyasa, Patanjali's oldest known commentator, aptly compares our senses to a swarm of bees, or awareness to a queen bee. He writes, “Just as bees follow the course of the queen bee and rest when the latter rests, so when the mind [i.e., awareness] stops the senses also stop their activity.”⁴

This effectively cuts the practitioner off from sensory distractions and focuses her awareness in preparation for the sixth and seventh limbs of classical practice, concentration and meditation. Needless to say, Patanjali's sensory withdrawal isn't a piece of cake, demanding as it does an extraordinary degree of sensory self-control.

But there's a form of *pratyahara*, described in several old texts, that makes the practice a bit more accessible. In the *Yoga-Yajnavalkya-Samhita*, for example, certain vital or energy points on the body, called *marma* (joint), are used as props for sequentially focusing and so withdrawing both the breath and consciousness.

This exercise traditionally involves eighteen points, eighteen being a number with several symbolic associations. According to Georg Feuerstein, eighteen “involves the idea of ‘completeness’ or ‘wholeness’—not as a static, uniform condition, but as a homogeneous yet multiform process. As such it may be taken to represent the cosmos as a

continuous process of becoming.”⁵

These 18 are part of a larger network of 107 points that can be compared loosely to acupuncture points, each one therapeutically linked to different physical or subtle organs or systems. The practice then consists of imaginatively directing our awareness and breath into each vital point and holding them there for a time. Different texts have slightly different lists of points, but generally they include the following (I’ve included two not found in traditional lists):

Big toe

Ankle

Midcalf

Knee

Midthigh

Groin (not traditional)

Perineum Low belly (just above the pubis)

Navel

Heart

Armpit (not traditional)

Jugular notch (just above the top of the sternum)

Palate (or the root of the tongue)

Tip of the nose

Center of the eye

Glabella (the bare space between the eyebrows)

Center of the forehead

Crown

Of course, in order to do this practice, you first have to be able to consciously inhabit each (or at least most) of these points and then be able to imagine breathing into them in turn. Whenever there’s two of anything—big toes, ankles, calves, thighs, groins, armpits, eyes—you have to direct your breath into both points simultaneously.

Wind Withdrawal is also known as *pranayama pratyahara* or *prana pratyahara*.

Preliminary

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. It might be useful to break this practice down into two stages. In the first stage, simply try to contact each point consciously. If you need some help, you might physically touch each one with a finger for a tactile stimulus. This is actually similar to a traditional practice called casting (*nyasa*), a ritualized, meditative touching that sanctifies various body parts or areas by investing them with a favorite deity.

Once you’re able to inhabit each point, you can move on to stage two, breathing into

each point. Some of the points may be easier to “breathe” than others; for example, it might be easier to breathe into your heart (which is hugged between your lungs) than your big toes. Don’t worry too much about getting all the points at first; just be satisfied with the ones you can reach, even if it’s only two or three.

Practice

Begin the breathing sequence at your big toes and climb up the marma-ladder, directing your awareness and breath into each vital point in turn. To me, each point expands and contracts, just like my lungs, as I inhale into and exhale out of it. Depending on how much time you have for the practice, you can spend less or more time at each point, say, a few seconds or a minute. You can also go up the marma-ladder just once, or repeat the process several times, not only climbing up, but climbing down too, from your crown to your big toes.

How It Helps

According to Yajnavalkya, Wind Withdrawal frees the practitioner from disease and all bondage, and he or she “will live as long as the moon and the stars exist... . Among the Pratyaharas, this one is considered as the best by yogis” (*Yoga-Yajnavalkya-Samhita* 7.30–31).

Modern commentators assure us that this practice relaxes and revitalizes the body and brain. When performed from toes to crown, it symbolizes the ascent of awareness from the gross earth at the feet to the spiritual space at the crown; when performed in the opposite direction, it symbolizes the descent of awareness from its source in the self into embodiment.

Playing Around

You might substitute a few of your own vital points for the traditional ones listed earlier. For example, it seems odd that the shoulders, arms, and hands aren’t included in the sequence. You might drop points like the lower belly or the center of the eye and switch to the elbows (analogous to the knees) and the thumbs (analogous to the big toes). Since this practice is supposed to “revitalize” the body, it seems to me that the whole body, including the arms, should be involved in the breathing sequence. There’s also a focus on the *front* of the body that omits the *back*: so you can also breathe into the *backs* of your knees, your tailbone, the space between your shoulder blades, or the bump (inion) at the base of your skull.

End-of-Twelve Breathing

Wind Withdrawal breathes into imaginary (or subtle) points on or in the physical body, but it’s also possible to breathe into an imaginary point that’s outside the body, called the end-of-twelve (dvadashaanta). Actually there are several of these points in the body too, all so named because they’re twelve finger-widths away from some significant reference point. In the body, the base point is the perineum (or root wheel): starting here, the twelve-finger-widths measurements take us first to the navel, then to the heart, the throat, the forehead, and finally the crown (of course, all these measurements are approximate—this isn’t rocket science). Outside the body are two more end-of-twelve points: one above the

head and one in front of the nose tip. The latter point is also where the outflow of an average exhale is supposed to come to an end.

We'll be interested in the heart point, called the inner (*antara*) end-of-twelve, and the point in front of the nose, the outer (*bahya*) end-of-twelve. To do this exercise, you have to imagine that the inhale starts in the outer point and is drawn from there into the inner point; similarly, the exhale starts in the inner point and returns from there to the outer point. I like to think of the breath as a yo-yo or pendulum, swinging back and forth between these two points.

Preliminary

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes open. First let's locate the outer point (also known as the end point, or *anta koti*; that is, where the exhale ends). You don't have to be exact in locating the point. Since it's supposed to be twelve finger-widths from the tip of your nose, you can imagine it about a foot away. Stare at this imaginary point for a few seconds, fix it in your awareness, then close your eyes.

Now look for the inner point (also known as the beginning point, or *adi koti*; i.e., where the exhale begins) at the heart. You can touch a finger lightly to your sternum, although remember that the heart we're working with isn't the physical one but the yoga heart, which is in the center of your chest, a little closer to the back than to the front.

Practice

Settle your awareness in the outer point to begin, and imagine initiating an inhale from that point. Draw the breath into your nostrils and down into the inner point, where the inhale comes to an end. Then initiate the exhale from the inner point, and slowly breathe the air back out to the outer point. Continue in this fashion for two to five minutes.

How It Helps

It sometimes seems to me that my practice is too internalized, too self-absorbed, which creates a false split or dualism between the external world and what I imagine is inside me. With this exercise I can project my imagination outside myself and then engage in a continuous exchange between my inner world and the world that surrounds me, which integrates the two into their original unity.

Going Further

The traditional teaching on this practice tells us to pay very close attention to the moment when the breath "turns around"; that is, when the inhale becomes the exhale and when the exhale becomes the inhale. That moment is an effortless stopping of the breath, a prelude to purposeful retention (*kumbhaka*), which induces a pleasing sense of calm.

Playing Around

The two points noted here, in front of the nose and inside the heart, are traditional, but you can make up your own imaginary points. One of my students suggested establishing a point *behind* the head, which is a really interesting idea. You inhale through your real nose, then imagine exhaling through your imaginary nose at the base of your skull, and

vice versa. Or you could establish an inner point somewhere other than your heart; for example, the ever-popular point between the eyebrows or your navel.

Last Word

Wind Withdrawal helps us to internalize our awareness and reminds us that, in the end, the whole body breathes, not just the lungs. End-of-twelve helps us to externalize our awareness and reminds us that, in the end, the world breathes along with us.

As you move into digital pranayama, remember that several of these breaths—Sun and Moon Piercing and Channel Cleaning—can be performed in your mind. Instead of physically closing and opening your nostrils, you can simply *imagine* them open or closed; imaginary digital pranayama is a good way to prepare yourself for the real thing.

CHAPTER 15

Four Traditional Pranayamas

Cooling, Seet-Sound-Making, Floating, and Walking

The student swallows air through the mouth ... so that the stomach distends like a balloon and sounds hollow when tapped. The student can then float indefinitely in water, hence its name—the float. In the West it is difficult to imagine a practical or pranic use for this exercise.

—Andre van Lysbeth, *Pranayama*

THERE ARE EIGHT OR TEN traditional pranayamas, and several—such as Conqueror and Bellows—are more widely practiced than their companions. In this chapter we'll look at four lesser-known traditional pranayamas: the first two are presented in their original form, and the last two with variations on the original theme.

Cooling Breath (*Shitali Pranayama*)

Cooling breath is a traditional pranayama. Its inhale, unlike those of most other types of pranayama, is taken through the mouth, with the tongue shaped into what's called the Crow Seal (*kaki-mudra*). There's some speculation, which hasn't been proved or disproved conclusively by medical studies, that the ability to curl the tongue is genetically based. It's estimated that about 15 percent of the population, no matter how hard they try, can't curl their tongue. Until some enterprising yogi invents and markets a tongue-curler prop, noncurlers should practice Seet-Sound-Making Breath instead.

Preliminary

A good preliminary stretch for your tongue is Lion Seal.

Now for Crow Seal, so-named because the curled, protruding tongue and pursed, kiss-me lips look something like a bird's beak. Simply shape your tongue into a long tube by rolling up the sides, and extend it out of your mouth through pursed lips (see [fig. 15.1](#)).



FIGURE 15.1

Practice

Imagine you're about to sip a drink through a straw. Inhale through your tongue-tube, "swallowing" the cool air deep into your lungs. When you're finished, withdraw your tongue, release and lightly close your lips, and if you like, hold the breath for a few seconds (either with or without Net-Bearer Bond). Then exhale slowly through your nose.

This is one round. Some books suggest some pretty extreme practice times, up to a half hour. I think three to eight repetitions should do the trick, ten to twelve if you're really overheated.

It's possible that your tongue may dry out as you inhale. So, during the exhale, when you've drawn your tongue back into your mouth, gently rub it back and forth against your palette to moisten it.

How It Helps

As we know, inhaling through the nostrils naturally warms the breath. But by inhaling through Crow Seal, the breath is supposedly cooled by the wet tongue and in turn supposedly cools the body.

According to Svatmarama, Cooling breath "destroys enlargement of the glands or spleen, other diseases, fever, bile, hunger, thirst, and poisons" (HYP 2.58). Gheranda notes that it cures indigestion, while the *Shiva-Samhita* crows, "When the skillful Yogi ... can drink the cold air through the contraction of the mouth, in the form of a crow-bill, then he becomes entitled to liberation. The wise Yogi, who daily drinks the ambrosial air ... destroys fatigue, burning (fever), decay and old age, and injuries" (SS 3.70–71).

Modern books claim that Cooling breath, in addition to cooling the body and brain, relaxes the muscles and helps control hunger and thirst. I like to do a few rounds of Cooling breath after a vigorous Sun Salute practice.

Notice the mention of "cold air" by the *Shiva-Samhita*. Cooling breath isn't effective,

and isn't recommended, when the outside air is hotter than normal body temperature. So if you happen to be in Phoenix in August and practicing in your backyard at three in the afternoon, Cooling breath is contraindicated.

Seet-Sound-Making Breath (*Sitkari Pranayama*)

Please excuse the awkward-sounding interpretation of the Sanskrit, but that's how it literally translates into English. Seet-Sound-Making breath is, like its cool companion, a traditional pranayama. It can be practiced in lieu of Cooling breath, either as an alternative or because you're unable to form Crow Seal with your tongue. If you have sensitive teeth, it's probably best to avoid this breath and stick with Cooling if possible.

Sit (spelled in Sanskrit with a long *i*, and so pronounced "seet") is onomatopoeic and is literally defined as a "sound made by drawing in the breath," for example, to express any sudden thrill of pleasure or pain.

Practice

For this practice the upper and lower teeth are lightly set, the jaw muscles relaxed, and the lips slightly parted. Some books suggest relaxing your tongue on the floor of your mouth (with its tip against your lower teeth), others say that it should be pressed lightly against the roof of your mouth (with its tip against your upper teeth). I actually like to position my tongue smack-dab in the middle of my mouth, neither resting below nor pressed above. As usual you should experiment with different tongue positions to find the one that suits you best. In any case, broaden your tongue out from its midline.

The inhale is hissed in through your teeth, which makes the distinct sound that gives this breath its name. After you finish the inhale, relax and lightly close your lips, hold the breath briefly (either with or without Net-Bearer Bond), then exhale slowly through your nose.

How It Helps

Svatmarama really likes this breath. Through this practice, he writes, "one becomes a second God of Love. Respected by all yoginis, maker of creation and destruction, neither hunger or thirst, nor sleep, nor even lethargy will appear. This Sitkari will develop the body's vitality. The Lord of Yogis will be completely free of all disabilities on earth" (HYP 2.54–56). Seems like a pretty big payoff for so little effort.

Like Cooling breath, Seet-Sound-Making cools the body and brain and is supposed to relieve hunger and thirst.

Floating Breath (*Plavini Pranayama*)

Floating (*plavini* is from the Sanskrit *plava*, "swimming, floating") is a traditional pranayama, one of those strange yoga practices that make you think the old teachers should have gotten out of the ashram a little more often. It seems to go hand in hand with another traditional breath, the curiously named Fainting. These pranayamas aren't taught much nowadays, if at all, since nobody seems to know much about them. Mr. Iyengar notes offhandedly that they "are no longer in vogue."¹

Fainting Breath (Murccha Pranayama)

Svatmarama dedicates just one verse to Fainting breath, instructing us to simply hold Jalandhara tightly at the end of the inhale and then exhale slowly. He says the practice clears out the brain clutter and makes us happy (HYP 2.69). The usual translation for *murccha* is “fainting,” which is slightly misleading, since the practice is actually supposed to induce (in Gheranda’s words) an “agreeable trance” (GS 5.78), a state akin to meditation. Swami Kuvalayananda notes that a single round of Fainting probably won’t do the trick. But, he continues,

when a large number ... is undertaken at every sitting and the practice is continued from day to day, it will lead to a mental condition which amounts to loss of awareness. This condition of mind is said by Hatha-Yogins to be not only pleasant but also helpful in concentration as it excludes all sensory disturbances and leaves the mind free from associating ideas.²

Some commentators speculate on how the trance-state is induced. The pressure of Net-Bearer Bond on the carotid artery, the brain’s main blood vessel, is a prime candidate, along with the oxygen starvation of the brain during a long retention. Needless to say, this breath should not be attempted without expert guidance.

Gheranda’s instructions are slightly more helpful than Svatomarama’s. He adds that, along with breath-holding, we should fix our awareness “between the eyebrows” and “abandon all objects”—easier said than done—after which, he confidently asserts, “bliss is sure to arise” (GS 5.78).

Most teachers take Svatomarama’s instruction literally, telling us to gulp mouthfuls of air and then swallow them into our belly. Swami Kuvalayananda notes that with practice “this eating of air becomes so easy that one can get his stomach inflated enormously with the result that the abdomen bulges out and its muscles become so much stretched that a little tapping gives out a sonorous sound!”³ I don’t imagine that most of us began a yoga practice with the idea of getting a *bigger* belly, but there are apparently some advantages. For example, Swami Sivananda reports that a certain yoga student, whom he calls Mr. S, can “float on water for twelve hours at a stretch,”⁴ no doubt a huge advantage each time he swims across the English Channel.

You might wonder: Can we really swallow air? The answer is yes, we do it all the time; as a matter of fact, whenever we swallow food or drink, especially if we’re in a hurry, some air leaks into the belly, and if we take in enough air and avoid burping, the belly will indeed inflate like a balloon. This condition greatly increases our volume while only slightly increasing our mass (air doesn’t weigh all that much). As a consequence, our density decreases to the point where our body is a good deal less dense than water, and so—mirabile dictu—we can happily float like a lotus.

A few teachers speculate that the Sanskrit word *udara*, typically translated as “stomach” or “belly,” should instead be understood in one of its alternate senses as “cavity” or “hollow.” The implication is that Svatomarama actually meant we should fill our lungs (in the chest cavity) with air in order to do our floating.

Modern teachers suggest that Floating helps in the treatment of gastritis and stomach acidity and to ward off hunger pangs during a fast. I *don't* recommend that you try to swallow air, unless you're being supervised firsthand by an experienced teacher or happen to find yourself stranded in the ocean without a boat like that unfortunate couple in the movie *Open Water*. But we can take the *idea* of floating and profitably apply it to pranayama. For this exercise you'll need a bathtub filled with water.

Preliminary

I'm told that the ideal water temperature, if you have a way to measure it, is 93.5°F, which is your skin (rather than internal body) temperature. Darken the bathroom as much as possible and, once in the tub, close your eyes.

Practice

First let yourself relax and float as much as the depth of your water allows. Begin, as you do your dry-land practice, by simply observing your everyday breath. Notice what effect the buoyancy of the water has on your breathing, and see if you can discover previously uncharted areas of your torso's inner space. Then experiment with different nondigital pranayama breaths, such as Conqueror or Against-the-Grain, or any of the imaginary breaths.

How It Helps

Hydrostatic pressure (the pressure exerted on the surface of a resting body immersed in water) increases blood circulation, helping to lower blood pressure. Along with the water's warmth, it relaxes tense muscles and promotes deep breathing.

Going Further

When most of us get into the bathtub, all we usually think about is relaxing and getting cleaned off. But bathing can also be a spiritual practice, whether you do it literally in a tub or pool or symbolically in your imagination. There's a practice in traditional yoga called mental bathing (*manasa snana*), performed at the junction of three inner "rivers," represented by the three principal subtle channels called the triple braid (triveni) or triple peak (tri-kuta) located at the middle of the forehead. As you soak and breathe, focus your awareness at this holy "place of pilgrimage" (*tirtha*) imagining yourself afloat on the waters of truth.

Walking Conqueror

We normally practice pranayama while reclining or sitting, but Svatmarama notes, almost in passing, that Conqueror can also be done while walking or standing (HYP 2.53). Walking Conqueror is a moving meditation practice of which there are no doubt many different forms.

Preliminary

Go to an area where you can walk relatively undisturbed, like a large park or open space with trails; even a city street will do, providing it's relatively quiet and free of traffic. You might practice a few rounds of Skull Brightener as a warm-up for your walk.

Practice

For Walking Conqueror, you'll need to count and coordinate your breaths and your steps. To begin, I like to take four steps for each inhale and four for each exhale. Then, depending on how I'm feeling and whether I'm walking on flat or hilly ground, I can lengthen both the inhale and the exhale (so I continue with an equal ratio) or just the latter (so I switch to an unequal ratio). It's also possible to work with one of the imaginary breathing exercises (such as Wind Withdrawal or imaginary Sun Piercing breath). You can practice this breath for short periods during your walk (if, for example, you're running errands), or for the duration of a long walk (like a morning hike in the park).

How It Helps

Walking Conqueror gets us off our rears and out into the world, challenging our breath and concentration in new and interesting ways. It shows us that yoga practice needn't necessarily be restricted to a certain place or position and that it can be applied handily to everyday events in our lives. Students report that with Walking Conqueror, their longer walks become much easier and stronger, even if they practice it only for a few minutes at the outset of the walk.

Going Further

Walking Conqueror can be practiced in a number of different ways, such as Running Conqueror, Biking Conqueror, Swimming Conqueror, or even, I suppose, Pushing-the-Stroller-Down-the-Street Conqueror.

Last Word

These pranayamas are fairly limited in their application, which is why they're probably so little known nowadays. In the next two chapters we'll move into the digital pranayamas, the practice's heavy hitters, which are widely known in the West.

CHAPTER 16

At Your Fingertips

Introduction to Digital Pranayama

The philosopher Immanuel Kant ... called the hand the human outer brain, and the psychologist G. Revesz noted that the hand is frequently more intelligent and endowed with greater creative energy than the head... . As the instrument of touch, the hand is by far the most informative of all our organs, with the possible exception, *on occasion*, of the brain.

—Ashley Montague, *Touching*

TRADITIONAL PRANAYAMA uses two basic techniques to regulate the flow of breath into and out of the lungs. The first, which we’ve presumably been practicing for some time now in Conqueror and Against-the-Grain, is to narrow the throat (or more precisely, the glottis), which brakes the airflow and produces the characteristic hissing sound of these breaths. The second technique is again based on narrowing and braking, but this time the fingertips are used to press on and alter the shape of the nostrils, either by closing one or both halfway, or by blocking one entirely and breathing only through its open mate.

Digital pranayama, as it’s called, is a very old breathing technique, going back at least to the time of Svatmarama in the mid-fourteenth century C.E. Two of the eight pranayamas listed by Svatmarama (HYP 2.44) are digital, the Sun Piercing breath and Conqueror breath, though the latter isn’t usually taught nowadays as a digital practice. Although he doesn’t provide detailed instructions on how to use the fingers—remember these old texts were mostly practice outlines that were fleshed out by the teacher—Svatmarama does note briefly that we’re supposed to hold the nose “firmly without the middle and index finger” (HYP 2.64); in other words, with only the thumb and ring and little fingers (traditionally of the right hand).

There are three ways we can change (or not change) the nostril opening with our fingers, whether on the inhale or the exhale. We can leave it completely open (so there’s no fingering at all), close it partially, or close it completely. Of course, since we have two nostrils, these three possibilities have four basic combinations for each digital inhale or exhale (one of the combinations, leaving both nostrils open for both the inhale and exhale, isn’t digital pranayama). We can open one nostril and partially close the other; open one nostril and completely close the other; partially close both nostrils; or partially close one nostril and completely close the other.

But there’s also a pair of variations we have to take into account. Say, for example, that we want to practice the second combination (open one nostril and close the other) on the inhale. We can either inhale through the same nostril all the time while we keep the other bonded, or we can alternate the inhale nostril, first the right, then the left, while blocking the other.

With all these combinations and variations, there are at least a couple of dozen possible breaths—I’ll let you do the math and figure out exactly how many. Modern systems of

pranayama include a few of them but tend not to wander too far off the traditional path. Obviously we can't cover all the possible breaths; we'd be here all night. So I've narrowed the digital breaths down to the seven I think are most useful:

INHALE	EXHALE
1. Both nostrils open	Both nostrils partially closed
2. Both nostrils open	One nostril partially closed, one nostril closed
3. Both nostrils partially closed	Both nostrils open
4. One nostril partially closed, one nostril closed	Both nostrils open
5. Right nostril only	Left nostril only
6. Left nostril only	Right nostril only
7. Alternate nostrils	Alternate nostrils

The first four practices aren't traditional, the last three are. While all have Sanskrit names, I don't really think those of the nontraditional practices make much sense, so we won't be offending anyone's sense of yoga propriety by assigning them new, more descriptive (if somewhat unexciting) names: we'll call the first pair Digital Exhale 1 and 2, while the second pair will be called—you guessed it—Digital Inhale 1 and 2. Happily the name of the three traditional practices fit them to a T: there's Sun Piercing breath (*surya-bhedana pranayama*, number 5 on our list), Moon Piercing breath (*chandrabhedana pranayama*, number 6), and Channel Cleaning breath (*nadi-shodhana pranayama*, number 7).

So what do we need to know before we begin digital pranayama? We need to know about gesture (or hand seal) and placement (of the fingers on the nose)—which we'll cover in the following two sections—and manipulation (of the nose by the fingers)—which we'll postpone until the next chapter.

How It Helps

What are the benefits of using our fingers to regulate breath flow? I'll list the specific benefits of each of the digital pranayamas when we get to the individual practices, but for now we can generalize that digital practice helps to further cultivate, refine, and strengthen the breath, and it serves either as a preparation for or a means of meditation.

Avoid digital pranayama if you have a headache or a cold or are prone to depression or anxiety.

Playing Around

Of course, just because I'm limiting my descriptions to seven breaths, it doesn't mean you have to limit yourself. After a reasonable length of time practicing the magnificent seven, you can start to experiment; for example, you can inhale and/or exhale with viloma-like pauses; breathe with a ratio—either equal or unequal—between the inhales and exhales; or add retentions after the inhales and/or the exhales, using the appropriate bonds (bandha).

Deer Seal (*Mrigi-mudra*)

Digital Gesture

You can see from the illustration (see [fig. 16.1](#)) that the name of this seal is quite descriptive: the thumb and two fingers project from the body of the hand look like a pair of antlers. Notice something else: the tips of the ring finger (hereafter referred to as Ringo, after my favorite drummer) and little finger (hereafter affectionately referred to as Pinky) are overlapped, the former over the latter, to make a single “tip” out of the two. At first, this arrangement may not be easy to maintain; Ringo is often reluctant to stay in place over Pinky and must be coaxed into complying.



FIGURE 16.1

Traditionally the right hand is used to make the seal, even if you're a southpaw. Why? Basically cultural prejudice against the poor left hand. Though I'm a righty myself, I see no reason why we should meekly accede to this outmoded handism any longer (see this chapter's Last Word). You lefties out there: if you're more comfortable using your dominant hand, then I say, go for it!

Preliminary

To keep things balanced (even though we'll use only one hand to make the gesture), stretch both hands wide, radiating the fingers of each hand out from the palm-center like the spokes of a wheel from their hub. Then make tight fists. Stretch and squeeze your hand several times, finishing with fists, the index and middle fingers of each hand burrowed deep in the soft mounds of the thumbs. Release the fist on the hand you're not going to use.

Practice

Next release Ringo and Pinky on the hand you're going to use, and stretch them away from your palm. You might have to press the thumb mound against the nails of your index and middle fingers to hold them securely in place. Then lower Ringo and Pinky until

they're about parallel to your thumb; if you point your fingertips upward, your hand will form a rough U. Keep Pinky relatively straight, but bend Ringo slightly and lap its pad on top of Pinky's fingernail. Be aware that Ringo may seem reluctant at first and refuse to obey your instructions to bend or stay lapped over Pinky (see [fig. 16.2](#)).

What to do? Tear an inch-wide strip off the eleven-inch side of a piece of paper, and roll it up tightly (to about a half-inch diameter). Put Ringo in place over Pinky as best you can, and insert the paper roll into the space between the two. It'll serve as a kind of wedge to help keep Ringo properly bent and (hopefully) in place. If worse comes to worst, bind Ringo to Pinky with a small rubber band. You can make a permanent prop out of your paper roll by wrapping it with tape, so you have it around each time you need it until Ringo learns to cooperate. Finally, curl the thumb and paired fingers and tap their tips together a few times.



FIGURE 16.2

There are a few things to remember when digitally regulating your breath. Always remember that your fingertips aren't simply passive nostril-tools. Instead they're active participants, another Witness as it were, serving as sensitive monitors and regulators of the quality of your breath.

When you raise your hand to your nose, be sure that you don't lift the same-side shoulder as well. Keep both shoulders at the same level, parallel to the floor. Imagine your raised-hand shoulder is like a wheel: it rolls up the front armpit and down the back (if you could see yourself from the side, your shoulder would be rotating counterclockwise).

Also be aware that there's a strong tendency to turn your head toward the raised hand. Try to keep your head in a neutral position, with your chin centered over the hollow of your throat. Keep your raised-hand armpit soft, no different from the armpit of the unused hand. Imagine you're cradling something fragile, like a soft-boiled egg, in your armpit. Make the raised-hand elbow heavy so that it hangs beside your torso, but don't squeeze your arm against the side of your torso. Try to keep your raised wrist in a fairly neutral position.

Going Further

It will take some time before you're comfortable with the hand gesture. It helps to practice it periodically during the day; as you're walking along the street, for example, or sitting down to watch TV, you can hold your hand in Deer Seal for a few minutes, just to get it accustomed to the shape.

Playing Around

My teachers were very insistent on holding the hand in a certain way, so that's the way I do it just in case they're spying on me from behind a bush. But be aware that other yoga schools may have different ways of holding the gesture. For example, some schools extend the index and middle fingers away from the hand; then, when the thumb, Ringo, and Pinky are working on the nostrils, the index and middle fingers press against—and presumably stimulate—the “third eye” or “eye of wisdom” on the midforehead. Other schools don't worry about training Ringo to overlap Pinky; they just leave Pinky out of the picture altogether and use only Ringo to press the nostril. You might like to try one or both of these methods in your own practice, or any other appealing method you may run across in your digital career.

I've Gotta Hand It To You

Digital Placement

Now that we know how to shape our hand gesture, where exactly do we position the fingertips on the nose for digital pranayama? Before we get to the answer, let's define a few key nosy landmarks to help us find our way around. Look at (or at least imagine you're looking at) your face in a mirror. The root (sometimes called the bridge) of your nose is right between your eyebrows, while the base is located where the septum (from a Latin word meaning “fence”), which divides the two nostrils, joins the upper lip. See those fleshy bumps on either side of your nose, sort of like awnings over your nostrils? Each is called an ala (a Latin word for “wing”; plural *alae*), and the C-shaped crease formed where each ala joins your cheek is called the alar groove.

Preliminary

In digital pranayama, we want to touch our fingertips, not our finger pads, to our nose. That's because our fingertips, abundantly supplied with fine-touch receptors, are much more sensitive than the pads or palms; in fact, the most sensitive parts of the body are the mouth and fingertips. This being the case, if you have long fingernails, you have two choices: keep them long and use your finger pads, diminishing your touch-sensitivity to some degree, or clip your nails short.

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. Gently place an index fingertip on the tip of your nose. Slowly slide it around and down the curve of one nostril opening until you come to where the wing joins your upper lip. From here trace back along the alar groove until your fingertip snugs neatly into a small indentation at the top of the wing, just where it joins the side of your nose. Do this two or three times, then repeat with the other wing. I'm not sure if these two little nooks have a technical name, but for our purposes we'll call them the nose-hollows.

Practice

Now shape your hand, as best you can, into Deer Seal. We'll assume you're working with your right hand; if you're working with your left, you'll have to adjust the following instructions accordingly (that is, right equals left, left equals right). Bring your fingertips to your nose. Remember there's a tendency to turn your head slightly toward the raised

hand, so try to keep your chin aligned over your throat as you bring your hand to your nose. Gently insert your fingertips into the nose-hollows, the thumb in the right, the lapped Ringo/Pinky tip in the left (see [fig. 16.3](#)). Still gently, squeeze and release the hollows a few times, first simultaneously, then alternately, squeezing one while releasing the other. Experiment with your fingertips' pressure, running the gamut from light to firm. But be sure not to squeeze your nostrils too hard—do I really need to mention this?—especially individually, which will push the septum into the other nostril.

Continue with your pressure experiments for a few more minutes, then release your hand and lay it in your lap. Take a few everyday breaths.



FIGURE 16.3

Going Further

While you're beginning your work with Deer Seal and its placement, you can get a feel for what digital pranayama might feel like by using your nose clips. You can also do this exercise reclining or sitting.

Preliminary

The clips are designed, of course, to pinch the nostrils shut, so the first thing to do is stretch them open a bit so that when you position them, your nostrils are still more than half open. Then slip the elastic band over your head (you can just cut this band off if you'd prefer) and position the clips over (or slightly above) your nose-hollows.

Practice

Now spend a few minutes breathing through your partially closed nostrils. You'll notice that the time of your breath is naturally slowed and that, at least at first, breathing will seem more of an effort. This breath is essentially a combination of Digital Exhale 1 and Digital Inhale 1, both of which we'll be working on formally in the next chapter. Remember that you don't need to apply Unspoken Hymn in digital pranayama—the

narrowing of the nostrils stands in for the narrowing of the glottis.

Playing Around

PINOCCHIO NOSE

Many people have an unconscious tendency to harden their nose during breathing, especially during the inhale. Here's an exercise from an old Italian yoga manual, titled *Pinocchio*, that will help you soften and lengthen your nose.

Preliminary

Retrace the section of the head circuit that follows the sides of your nose. Touch your index fingertips *gently* to the inner corners of your eyes—right fingertip on the right eye, left fingertip on the left eye—and softly stroke down along the sides and wings of your nose. Repeat several times. As you do this, imagine your nose is lengthening away from your face like Pinocchio's (without, of course, telling a fib).

Practice

As you stroke and lengthen your nose, take a long, smooth inhale: start it when your fingertips are on your eye corners, and end it when they reach the bottom sides of your nose wings. On the exhale, use your fingertips to draw down on the sides of your nose, accentuating its length. Repeat several times with tactile aid. Then see if you can breathe and lengthen your nose in your imagination, without physically stroking it.

How It Helps

A long, soft nose helps deepen the breath, especially the inhale.

Last Word

As I mentioned before, Deer Seal is traditionally made only with the right hand. That's because the Hindus consider the right hand to be *dakshina*, which means "able, clever, dexterous" and "straightforward, candid, sincere"; in other words, a nice guy. On the other hand, the left hand is *vama*, which means "adverse, contrary, unfavorable, wicked"; you can see where this is leading. But don't single out the Hindus for your opprobrium: prejudice against the left hand is found just about everywhere in the world, not only in the East but right, um, left here in the West. It's even embedded in our language: *dexterous* means "skillful in the use of hands" and derives from the Latin *dexter*, or "on the right"; *sinister* "suggests or threatens evil," and in Latin it means "on the left."

After a class one day, I was approached by a student who told me she was once reprimanded by a teacher for using her vama hand for digital pranayama. It seems that her right wrist was sprained, which made the practice painful. She asked me what I thought about this incident. Of course my first reaction was, Where would Sandy Koufax and Whitey Ford have ended up if they'd been forced to throw with their nondominant hand? Certainly not in the Hall of Fame.

Anyway, while there may be strong traditional injunctions about left-handed digital pranayama, there doesn't seem to be any logical reason why southpaws shouldn't use their dominant hand. In fact, it may be an excellent learning opportunity for right-handers to

occasionally use their nondominant hand for Deer Seal. After all, yoga is balance, right (er, I mean, left)?

Besides, statistically about 13 percent of all men and 10 percent of all women are left-handed.

CHAPTER 17

Let Your Fingertips Do the Breathing

Digital Pranayama

The simple, involuntary physiological function of breathing lends itself to a variety of *pranyamas* that have different benefits depending on a number of parameters. These variables may be broadly classified as follows: (1) the site in the respiratory passage at which the flow of breath is regulated; (2) whether or not the breath is held; (3) the ratios of the duration of inhalation, holding of the breath, and exhalation; (4) whether or not mantras are used; (5) whether or not *bandhas* are used; (6) whether inhalation and exhalation are continuous or discrete ... (10) the number of rounds of *pranayama* per sequence; (11) the number of sequences per sitting; (12) the frequency of doing *pranayama* per day; (13) hybrid *pranayamas*.

—Srivatsa Ramaswami, *Yoga for the Three Stages of Life*

WHILE THE TWO DIGITAL EXHALE and two Digital Inhale practices aren't traditional pranayamas, they do have some traditional precedent in certain other breaths (such as Sun Piercing and Channel Cleaning, described in this chapter), which are performed with one nostril completely blocked on either the inhale or the exhale. But the half-closed nostril or nostrils of these four breaths are (as far as I can discover) a modern innovation.

With Conqueror and Against-the-Grain we listen to the sound of our breath-mantra and transform what we hear physically into breathing action. This action then changes the sound of the mantra, which in turn is again translated into action, and so on. With digital breaths the mantra is no longer used, since we're now regulating the airstream with our fingertips. If you can imagine such a thing, we "listen" with our fingertips and make our adjustments based on what we "hear," that is, what we feel.

What exactly do we feel, and how do we adjust? Actually there are two stages. In the beginning, gross (sthula) stage, we'll feel the airstream through the nostrils and ask, Does the flow through the right nostril feel (more or less) equal to the flow through the left? This isn't, of course, rocket science: there's no way to objectively measure the flow, unless we're hooked up to some kind of special machine—which now that I think about it might be an interesting experiment. But we can feel (or imagine we feel) the relative side-to-side flow and, based on what we feel, make pressure adjustments that seem to create balance or equal flow. As our practice advances, our fingertips will become increasingly sophisticated, which will lead to increasingly educated adjustments.

Eventually (though there's no telling when) we'll shift into the second, subtle (sukshma) adjustment stage. At first we feel (or imagine we feel) only the airstream itself. But that stream also transmits delicate vibrations to the wings of the nose, which we can use to make extremely refined, even sublime, adjustments. For now, be happy in stage one, but always stay alert for those good, good, good vibrations, which are ultimately the most accurate means of measuring balanced breathing.

Preliminary

For these digital exercises, sit in a comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed. At first, lay a bolster or a few folded blankets on your lap to support your elbow. You'll find that your digital manipulations will be easier if you don't have to think too much about holding your arm in place. Shape your dominant hand into Deer Seal.

Digital Exhale 1

Some modern yoga schools (such as the Iyengar-ites) call Digital Exhale *anuloma*, literally "natural" or "with the grain." Conversely, Digital Inhale is called *pratiloma*, "against the grain" or "reverse" (not to be confused with Against-the-Grain).

Preliminary

Inhale slowly through open nostrils. As you approach the end of the breath, raise your hand and position your fingertips on your nose-hollows, partially pinch your nostrils closed, and slowly exhale. First just feel the force and texture of the airstream through your nostrils. Don't worry about making any adjustments; just get a sense of what it's like to regulate your breath digitally. When you complete the exhale, lower your hand onto the bolster support, but don't release the shape of the fingers. Take two or three normal breaths (or more if needed), and proceed in this manner for a few minutes, interspersing two to three normal breaths between each Digital Exhale cycle.

You might want to stay with the preliminary practice for a while—a few days or even weeks. Always remember that digital adjustment, like self-liberation itself, is a continual process, never a state. It's like adjusting an old-fashioned analog radio dial, twisting and turning it this way and that, always getting close to but never exactly pinpointing the station.

Practice

When you feel confident about your preliminary practice, you can move on to Digital Exhale practice proper. Now, instead of simply passively feeling the airstream, start to make adjustments. Notice and compare the force and speed of the breath through your nostrils. Ask yourself, Is one stronger and/or faster than the other? Increase and/or decrease your fingertips' pressure accordingly to bring the force and speed of the airstream into balance.

As you did in the preliminary practice, lower your hand onto the support after each Digital Exhale (but don't release the seal), then take two to three (or more) normal breaths. Repeat this sequence for five to eight minutes. Over time you can gradually decrease the number of in-between normal breaths while increasing the number of consecutive Digital Exhales; for example, a sequence of three consecutive Digital Exhales followed by a single normal breath.

At the conclusion of practice, lay your hand on your support and release the seal. Breathe normally for a minute or two.

Digital Exhale 2

If you decide to continue, form Deer Seal again. You'll still inhale through open nostrils, but this time you'll exhale through only one partially blocked nostril, its mate being completely blocked. Remember with this breath not to push on the closed nostril so hard that you distort your septum; apply just enough pressure to block the nasal passage and prevent air from leaking out.

It seems to me that Digital Exhale 2 is slightly trickier than its predecessor, just because the partially blocked nostril has nothing to measure itself against directly. You still want to balance the airstream between the two nostrils, only now you do it not on the same exhale through both nostrils but on successive exhales through alternating, partially blocked nostrils.

You can begin the alternating pattern any way you like; let's just say for convenience that during odd-numbered exhales (that is, one, three, five, and so on), the left nostril is partially blocked and the right completely blocked, and during even-numbered exhales (that is, two, four, six, and so on), the blocking is reversed—partially on the right nostril and completely on the left.

Preliminary

Inhale slowly through open nostrils. As you approach the end of the breath, raise your hand and position your fingertips on your nose-hollows, partially close your left nostril, completely close your right, and slowly exhale. Again as with Digital Exhale 1, first simply feel the force and texture of the airstream through your nostrils. Don't worry about making any adjustments; just get a sense of what it's like to regulate your breath digitally with this slightly different blockage. When you complete the exhale, lower your hand onto the bolster support, but don't release the shape of the fingers. Take two or three normal breaths (or more if needed), and proceed in this manner for a few minutes, interspersing two to three normal breaths between each Digital Exhale cycle.

Again you might want to stay with the preliminary practice for a few days or even weeks.

Practice

When you feel confident about your preliminary practice, move on to Digital Exhale practice proper. Notice and compare the force and speed of the breath through each partially closed nostril. Ask yourself, Is one stronger and/or faster than the other? Increase and/or decrease your fingertips' pressure accordingly to bring the force and speed of the airstream into balance as you alternate nostrils.

As you did in the preliminary practice, lower your hand onto the support after each Digital Exhale (but don't release the seal), then take two to three (or more) normal breaths. Repeat this sequence for five to eight minutes. Over time you can gradually decrease the number of in-between normal breaths while increasing the number of consecutive Digital Exhales; for example, a sequence of three consecutive Digital Exhales followed by a single normal breath.

At the conclusion of practice, lay your hand on your support and release the seal. Breathe normally for a minute or two.

How It Helps

Digital Exhale refines and strengthens the exhale and sensitizes the fingertips. Just as Conqueror and Against-the-Grain are preparations for digital pranayama, this breath is a preparation for more challenging digital pranayamas, such as Channel Cleaning (nadi-shodhana). Digital Exhale also calms the mind and prepares it for meditation.

Digital Inhale 1 and 2

The two Digital Inhale exercises reverse the procedures of their similarly numbered Digital Exhales, so there's no need to go into much detail about them. Simply follow the general instructions for Digital Exhale, substituting inhales for exhales.

How It Helps

Digital Inhale refines the inhale and further sensitizes the fingertips. Like its Digital Exhale counterpart, it prepares us for more challenging digital pranayamas. But Digital Inhale has a stimulating, as opposed to Digital Exhale's soothing, effect on the brain.

Sun Piercing and Moon Piercing Breaths

Here are two practices that are complements to or mirror images of each other, not only physically but energetically. In the Sun Piercing breath, the right nostril always inhales and the left always exhales (while the other nostril is blocked); conversely, in the Moon Piercing breath, the left nostril always inhales, the right always exhales (again, while the other nostril is blocked).

Several texts I consulted on these two breaths made the cautionary point that they shouldn't be performed on the same day.

Sun Piercing Breath (Surya-bhedana Pranayama)

Sun Piercing breath is a traditional pranayama described by Svastmarama. The practice takes its name from the right nostril's subtle connection with the tawny channel (pingala-nadi), which is associated with the fiery energy of the sun.

Preliminary

Sit for a minute or two in a comfortable asana. Check your nasal dominance and, if necessary, shift the dominance to your right nostril. It seems appropriate that, for this breath, you take some time to meditate on your inner sun.

Practice

Exhale fully, block your left nostril, and inhale through your right. Pause briefly at the top of the inhale while you shift your finger pressure: open the left nostril, close the right, and then exhale. Continue in this fashion, inhaling right, exhaling left. Both inhale and exhale should be performed slowly, though the latter should be somewhat slower than the former.

Sun Piercing is an ideal breath for opening an asana or a pranayama practice when you're feeling cold or tired, either physically or psychically. Some books suggest practicing this breath for up to ten minutes, but this seems extreme, at least when you first begin learning. Start with eight to ten rounds, then gradually build your practice to a

reasonable time.

How It Helps

According to Gheranda, Sun Piercing destroys old age and death, awakens kundalini, and not surprisingly stokes the body's internal fire. Svatmarama adds that it cleans out the skull and cures various diseases. Other texts note that, since Sun Piercing increases body heat, it's effective for purifying the blood and curing skin diseases. It's also said to stimulate the brain and thus help to alleviate depression and lethargy.

Is there any modern “scientific” proof of these traditional claims for Sun Piercing? In fact a few researchers have looked at what they call unilateral forced nostril breathing (UFNB). Most found that right-nostril breathing (or more accurately, inhaling) does have a stimulating effect on the sympathetic nervous system, which suggests possible applications to certain psychological disorders. There was at least one study, however, that contradicted these findings: a couple of spoilsports studying UFNB at Boston University found no evidence of “significant changes in heart rate, pulse amplitude, temperature, skin conductance response, or respiration force.”¹ As for the rest of the traditional claims—the death and skin diseases—until further research on Sun Piercing is conducted in these areas, we'll take them with a grain of salt.

People with hypertension and/or heart disease are warned away from this practice. I found a reference to Sun Piercing as beneficial for people with low blood pressure; however, I certainly don't recommend trying to elevate chronically low blood pressure with this breath unless you're being supervised by an experienced teacher.

Moon Piercing Breath (Chandra-bhedana Pranayama)

Moon Piercing breath is a natural complement to its sunny counterpart. This practice takes its name from the left nostril's subtle connection with the comfort channel (ida-nadi), which is associated with the cooling energy of the moon.

Preliminary

Sit for a minute or two in a comfortable asana. Check your nasal dominance and, if necessary, shift the dominance to your left nostril. It seems appropriate that, for this breath, you take some time to meditate on your inner moon, which the yogis traditionally locate in the area at the base of the brain.

Practice

Exhale completely, then block your right nostril and inhale through your left. Pause briefly at the top of the inhale while you shift your finger pressure; open your right nostril and close your left, then exhale. Inhale and exhale slowly again, but try to prolong the exhale as long as possible.

Moon Piercing is an ideal breath for opening an asana or a pranayama practice when you're feeling hot or tense, either physically or psychically. Start with eight to ten rounds, then gradually build your practice to a reasonable time.

How It Helps

Moon Piercing is traditionally credited with cooling the body and mind. Modern studies of left-nostril breathing are scarcer than those of right-nostril breathing (subtle nostrilism?). In a 1991 study, researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego found that “unilateral forced nostril breathing” enhances “cognitive ability” in the contralateral brain hemisphere²; in plain English, left-nostril breathing stimulates the spatial abilities of the right brain, and right-nostril breathing triggers the verbal abilities of the left brain. Unfortunately, I stumbled over some other researchers, reporting in a journal called *Biological Psychology* (October 1986), who found that while the pattern of airflow through the nostrils during normal breathing does have a significant effect on spatial and verbal abilities, unilateral forced breathing has “no effect on performance.”³ We can only hope, for the sake of our Moon Piercing, that the more recent study was the more accurate.

I ran across a warning that introverts should avoid Moon Piercing, though the exact reason wasn't made clear. We can speculate that the advertised cooling action of this breath might exacerbate the introvert's self-withdrawing tendencies, but I mention this only in the interest of full disclosure. I think, if you consider yourself an introvert, you should still test the effects of Moon Piercing for yourself, though if you have any concerns, get the help of an experienced teacher. We might expect that extroverts would be warned away from Sun Piercing—after all, wouldn't the heating action of the breath drive them even further out of themselves?—but as far as I could tell, extroverts seem to be safe with that breath.

Going Further

There are various ways to alter these two breaths for interesting effects; for example, you could retain your breath after the inhale and/or the exhale (using the necessary bandhas), or you could inhale and/or exhale with Against-the-Grain breath.

Playing Around

The *Yoga-Chudamani-Upanishad* suggests an appropriate visualization exercise to accompany each of the two Piercing breaths. For Moon Piercing, we should “meditate on the luminous disc of the moon [located at the back of the head or base of the brain, and the source of amrita], which is like the ocean of nectar and white like the milk of cows” (v. 96). For Sun Piercing, we should “meditate in the heart on the prescribed zone of the Sun, which is blazing brightly ... [and] be happy” (v. 97).

Channel Cleaning Breath (Nadi-shodhana Pranayama)

Channel Cleaning is also known as *nadi-shuddhi*, which means about the same as nadi-shodhana, and oddly *anuloma viloma*, which literally means “with-the-grain-against-the-grain.” Sometimes it's simply called by the English name alternate-nostril breathing.

Preliminary

Imaginary Channel Cleaning is a good preliminary practice.

Practice

Sit in any comfortable yoga seat, eyes closed, and shape your hand into Deer Seal. Exhale fully through both nostrils. Block your right nostril and inhale through your left. Next

block your left nostril, open and exhale through your right; continue blocking the left and inhale right. Finally block your right nostril, open and exhale through your left. This concludes one round of Channel Cleaning.

Channel Cleaning is traditionally done daily in three sets (three rounds per set). One round consists of a complete cycle of alternating the exhalation and inhalation of each nostril. I recommend that you begin with three to five rounds and gradually increase your practice to ten to twelve rounds.

How It Helps

According to Svatmarama and the anonymous author of the *Shiva-Samhita*, regular practice of Channel Cleaning purifies the energy channels after three months (HYP 2.11). Svatmarama adds that certain outward signs appear that indicate purified channels, including good health (HYP 2.19). The *Shiva-Samhita* backs this up: the purified practitioner “emits a sweet smell, and looks beautiful and lovely” (SS 3.29) and has a “strong appetite, good digestion, cheerfulness, handsome figure, great courage, mighty enthusiasm and full strength” (SS 3.31).

Modern commentators, even mainstream nonyogis, also sing the praises of Channel Cleaning. Kausthub Desikachar, son of T. K. V. Desikachar and grandson of twentieth-century yoga giant T. Krishnamacharya, calls it the “King of Pranayama.” It’s said that the right nostril is cross wired with the brain’s left hemisphere (often grossly characterized as analytical and logical) and the left nostril with the right hemisphere (just as grossly characterized as creative and emotional); regular alternation of the breath between the two nostrils is supposed to stimulate and synchronize the activity of the two hemispheres and the two branches of the autonomic nervous system (sympathetic and parasympathetic). This balancing act is in turn believed to have a number of salubrious effects on the body: it lowers the heart rate; helps reduce stress and anxiety (Channel Cleaning is recommended as a remedy for headaches and insomnia); increases vitality; and improves memory and concentration, an important prelude to meditation.

Any “scientific” truth in any of this? One study found that consistent practice of Channel Cleaning over about a month tends to lower both the baseline heart rate and blood pressure.⁴ Another study determined that, just as the yogis tell us, Channel Cleaning has a “balancing effect on the functional activity” of the brain’s hemispheres.⁵

Playing Around

You can nondigitally mimic several of the digital practices taught in this book. Take, for example, Sun Piercing breath: imagine that you’re inhaling only through your right nostril and exhaling only through your left. Or take the opposite breath, Moon Piercing and mentally inhale only through your left nostril and exhale through your right.

Last Word

At the outset of your digital career, your fingering will necessarily be more or less heavy-handed, until you acquire some experience and sensitivity. It’s akin to my daughter learning to play the violin. When she first started, her fingering was, as it is for all beginners on this challenging instrument, clumsy and slow. But as she practiced over the

years, her fingering (and bowing) became more adept, and the sound of her music went from screechy to sweet.

CHAPTER 18

The Pause That Refreshes

Breath Retention

He who binds the breath, binds the mind.

—Svatmarama, *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika*

THE SANSKRIT *kumbha* means “jar, pitcher, water pot.” It’s a word the yogis traditionally use to stand for the human body, or more particularly the torso. The average body, untrained by yoga, is compared to an unbaked clay pot: if you pour water into it—and water here stands for a massive influx of prana—the clay will simply dissolve. Before we can practice pranayama then, we have to “bake” or condition our body, especially with asana, until it’s firm enough to contain the increased energy safely.

A derivative word, *kumbhaka*, means “potlike.” On the one hand, the yogis use it to refer to pranayama in general (for example in HYP 2.44); on the other, they use it specifically to refer to, and is rendered as its literal translation as “retention,” that is, of the breath. This dual application, general and specific, suggests that retention is the essence of pranayama. I’m a little wary about using “retention” as an equivalent for *kumbhaka*, since many of the synonyms we commonly associate with it—my thesaurus lists “hold tight, throttle, strangle, hang on for dear life, vicelike grip”—are extremely misleading about the actual performance of the practice. Pranayama retention doesn’t (or at least shouldn’t) involve stress or struggle, there’s no eye-popping, red-in-the-face death grip on the breath.

In fact I’m actually wary about teaching retention in a book at all. It seems like one of those practices, such as Headstand or Lotus, that need flesh-and-blood supervision. It’s one reason why all the old texts were kept such closely guarded secrets: many of the practices they describe—*kumbhaka* and the three major bonds, for example—are potential health hazards when performed by the uninitiated or unprepared. I’m not trying to frighten you off of retention, but I want you to be aware that it demands respect. We’ll follow custom here and, to avoid confusion, continue to read *kumbhaka* as retention. But if I had my druthers we’d substitute a phrase like “breathing spell” or “breathing space,” or maybe just a word like *breather*, as in “Let’s take a breather from breathing.”

According to Svatmarama there are two kinds of *kumbhaka*: associated (*sahita*) and pure (*kevala*). The former is the retention practice already familiar to us, which is “associated” with the relative effort of inhalation and exhalation. *Kevala-kumbhaka* isn’t so much a practice we can *do*; rather it’s a spontaneous event, the wished-for culmination of *sahita-kumbhaka*, when we cease breathing effortlessly, without exhalation or inhalation. It’s hard to grok exactly what this means, though it’s likely we get a small taste of the experience—if we’re aware of our breath at all—every time we get engrossed in a good book or some interesting project.

Patanjali, writing over a thousand years before Svatmarama, also mentions this second *kumbhaka*, only he calls it the fourth (*chaturtha*), by which he means that it succeeds and transcends the triumvirate of inhale, exhale, and *sahita-kumbhaka* (though he doesn’t use

that term). When it happens, he continues, the “veil lifts from the mind’s luminosity” (YS 2.52), which suggests a significant increase in self-insight, and we’re all set for some serious meditation.

Considering our level of practice, we won’t be concerned with kevala-kumbhaka in this book, though you should be aware that such an experience exists and stay alert for signs of it in your own practice and even daily life. Remember there’s nothing that we do in our practice that we don’t do in some way, shape, or form in our daily life. As Sri Aurobindo says, “All life is yoga.” So just to be clear, from here on out that retention will signify only its associated version.

There are two traditional ways to perform retention: after the inhale, when it’s called inner (antara) retention, and after the exhale, which is called outer (bahya) retention (there are also the short retentions during the breathing process in Against-the-Grain breath, which isn’t a traditional pranayama). The lengths of the retentions are typically related to the lengths of the inhales and exhales. You might remember from *The Yoga of Breath* that when the inhale and exhale are of equal length, the practice is called equal ratio breathing (*sama vritti pranayama*), notated as 1:1. When the inhale and exhale are unequal—for example, when the latter is longer than the former—then the practice is known as unequal ratio breathing (*vishama-vritti pranayama*).

There are many possible unequal ratios between inhale and exhale (see the Playing Around section for examples), but the most common one cited in the old texts is 1:2. This means one count of inhale for every two counts of exhale; for example, if I inhaled for four counts, I’d exhale for eight. Normally, when first starting inner retention, you would retain the breath for no longer than the inhale count, which in the example we’re using now would be four. From here you would gradually increase the count, first to double (eight counts), then to triple (twelve), and finally to quadruple (sixteen) to match the classic ratio. A similar process is used for outer retention, except here the breath is first held out for *half* the inhale count (two) and gradually increased to match it. The final four-phase ratio (inhale, inner retention, exhale, outer retention) is notated as 1:4:2:1.

You might wonder exactly how long it is possible to hold the breath. You’ve probably heard tales of accomplished yogis and their breath-holding marathons that last hours, even days. I can’t (or at least I won’t) vouch for any of these stories, but we do have one credible account from our friend Theos Bernard, who went through an intense pranayama training. For the first two months, he held his breath for 50 seconds (reasonable enough), then gradually worked to double this count (100 seconds), which he repeated five times, for a total of 500 seconds or just over eight minutes. From the 100-second count, he went to 150, then to 200 (three minutes, 20 seconds); he repeated this retention until he totaled first 1,200, then 3,000, then 5,000 seconds (over an hour and twenty minutes). It appears he finally reached what he calls the “Greater Kumbhaka,” a monster breath-holding of 60,000 seconds—over sixteen hours—though it isn’t clear from his account (in his book, *Yoga Gave Me Superior Health*) whether he did this at one sitting—not likely—or over an extended period of time. All this seems a bit, shall we say, excessive, even for Bernard, who apparently took his yoga practice *very* seriously.

Then too, while researching this chapter on the Internet, I ran across the breath-holding (formally called “static apnea”) world record for a freediver—that’s a nut who dives

underwater for as long and deeply as he or she can without air tanks—held by a Czech diver by the name of Martin Stepanak. Quick, close your eyes and guess how long before reading on. Remarkably, eight minutes and six seconds, though he actually wasn't diving, just floating facedown in a swimming pool.

Of course, all this is in regard to *what* we're doing (we'll get to *how* in a little while), but the question remains, *Why* are we doing this to ourselves in the first place? Breathing is good, isn't it? Why do we want to stop breathing? The small but vociferous anti-pranayama camp is especially adamant in their opposition to breath-holding, and they have a point. They're concerned about a teensy problem called hypoxia, or oxygen starvation, which according to medical literature can cause perspiration, headaches, nausea, mild to violent shaking, even (gulp) seizures and coma. And if you don't trust the medical reports, then listen to Svātāmarama on kumbhaka: "In the beginning, there will be sweat. In the middle there is trembling" (HYP 2.12). The anonymous author of the *Shiva-Samhita* describes the latter stage more graphically; the yogi, he says, jumps about "like a frog" (SS 3.41).

None of this seems to bother our yogis, who treat the sweating, shaking, and amphibian-like behavior as no big deal, just natural signs that the practice is moving along as expected. We can piece together one story about the why of traditional Hatha retention from a close reading of Svātāmarama (in his fourth chapter, on samadhi). There seem to be two stages. The first is based on the not-so-farfetched idea that human consciousness (citta) and the breath are simply two sides of the same coin.

So? Well, both the classical and Hatha schools agree that our everyday consciousness, which is in constant fluctuation (vritti) except maybe in dreamless sleep, presents us with a huge problem. These fluctuations, which are often compared to ripples on the surface of a deep lake, are thought to obscure our view of our authentic self; moreover, they tend to sweep us off our feet, so to speak, and tempt us to identify solely with our small or surface self, represented outwardly by the fluctuations themselves. This not-seeing or not-knowing (avidya), and its consequent feeling of self-limitation and isolation, is the root of humankind's heartbreaking existential sorrow. We're all homesick, whether consciously or unconsciously, for our true self; after all, as Dorothy reminds us, "There's no place like home," though in yoga it's called the atman and not Kansas.

What do we do? Obviously we have to calm the fluctuations, pacify the ripples on the surface of our consciousness-lake, so that we can see more clearly into the depths of our self and unburden ourselves of our fundamental sorrow. But if you've ever tried to do that directly, say in meditation, you know it's something like, to use a popular image, herding cats. Here's where the breath comes in: if we slow and stop our breath, assert both Patanjali and Svātāmarama, we can indirectly slow and eventually stop the fluctuations. As the latter writes, "When one is active, the other is active. When one perishes, the other perishes... . If these two perish, the state of liberation [i.e., from our false sense of self] is attained" (HYP 4.25).

But according to the Hatha school (and not mentioned by Patanjali), there seems to be a further stage in this retention process, which presumably is nearly impossible to realize (and extremely risky to attempt) without first completing the initial stage. That's the arousal of the famous kundalini, our coiled (*kundala*) or dormant spark of spiritual energy.

This practice, like kevala-kumbhaka, is well beyond the scope of our current level, and in any case should be attempted only under the tutelage of a very experienced instructor.

SIDELIGHT

Kundalini

We might say that kundalini, the “coiled one,” is the central figure of the Hatha-Yoga story; in fact, another name for this school might be Kundalini-Yoga (not to be confused with the modern school of that name founded by Yogi Bhajan). Lots has been written about kundalini in popular books and magazines over the past couple of decades, much of which needs to be taken with a few grains of salt. Probably the most influential book on the subject, and certainly the most technically demanding, is *The Serpent Power* by Englishman John Woodroffe (who wrote his early books under the pen name Arthur Avalon). First published in 1919, it reveals (as its subtitle notes) the “secrets of Tantric and Shaktic Yoga” and includes translations of two traditional texts—the “Investigation of the Six Wheels” (cited earlier, which is actually a chapter from a longer text), and the *Fivefold Footstool* (*Paduka Panchaka*). Despite its dense language, it’s must reading for all serious Hatha-Yoga students.

There are also a few other interesting retellings of the kundalini story by modern Westerners that should be on your reading list: *The Yoga of Power*, by a rather controversial Italian intellectual named Julius Evola; *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*, by Gopi Krishna; *Kundalini: Energy of the Depths*, by Lilian Silburn; and the *Kundalini Experience*, by Lee Sannella.

Preliminary

I assume you’ve been working with mild inner retention for a while (including the short preparatory retentions in Against-the-Grain breath), along with Net-Bearer Bond. Now it’s time to refine this practice and add some outer retention to the mix. But first please review the diaphragm lift and the rib case shell from chapter 8 and Root Bond from chapter 10. You’ll need all three to perform inner retention safely and sanely.

It’s possible to perform the beginning stage of both retentions while reclining. Make a suitable support for your spine, then prop your head a bit higher than usual to approximate Net-Bearer Bond. Just be sure the prop isn’t so high that it strains the back of your neck. Reclining retention should always be mild and of brief duration; it’s strictly a preparation for the sitting version.

Inner Retention (*Antara-kumbhaka*)

Preliminary

Sit in a comfortable yoga seat. If you feel the need for physical support as you begin this practice, rest your back against a wall (or against a bolster braced by a wall) or sit in a chair (again with the back bolstered if desired).

There’s some evidence¹ that intentional hyperventilation—we call it Skull Brightener—measurably increases the time we can hold our breath. So you might like to begin this practice with Skull Brightener at your capacity. Then switch to Conqueror, counting the

length of your inhales, until you establish your fullest count (let's say eight). Then back off to about half that number (four) for the practice proper.

Practice

As you approach the four-count, lower your head into Net-Bearer Bond and activate Root Bond. With the two “openings” of your torso-pot sealed, apply the diaphragm lift and rib case shell, and retain the breath anywhere from two to four counts (but not longer). Hold the two bonds and slowly release the diaphragm lift and rib case shell as you exhale, relaxing the bonds at the end of the exhale. Then take two or three (or more) Conqueror breaths *without* retention or the bonds. Repeat this sequence for a few minutes or until you feel tired, whichever comes first.

I understand this is a rather conservative approach, but it's best to come up on retention cautiously, without haste. Remember never to struggle to restrain the breath. Any tension in your body—whether in your groins, throat, eyes, ears, brain, or elsewhere—is a pretty sure indication that you're overdoing things. If you have high blood pressure, don't practice retention without expert supervision.

Over the next few weeks (or months), you can gradually do the following:

- Increase the length of the inner retention, but never to the point where you begin to tense delicate body areas or organs like your eyes, inner ears, throat, or brain.
- Decrease the number of intermediary Conqueror breaths.
- Increase the length of your inner retention practice.

Outer Retention (*Bahya-kumbhaka*)

Preliminary

At least one important school of modern yoga insists that inner retention should be practiced and to a certain extent mastered even before beginning outer retention. I assume this is recommended because it's generally safer to work with air held *in* your lungs, though naturally there's still some air in your lungs no matter how fully you exhale. I'm not sure this procedure is absolutely necessary; let's just say that the two retentions should be practiced separately at first, that is, not during the same cycle and preferably not together on the same day.

Also, don't apply Flying-Up Bond at the beginning of your outer retention practice. Work with it separately, maybe during your asana practice while sitting in Thunderbolt Pose.

Much of what was written about inner retention applies in its own way to outer retention. At the start, establish your fullest inhale count (again, we'll use eight), but this time there's no need to halve it during the practice.

Practice

After an inhale, exhale slowly. As you approach the completion of the breath, lower your head into Net-Bearer Bond and activate Root Bond. Hold the breath out for anywhere

from two to four counts (but not longer). Then release the two bonds and take two or three (or more) Conqueror breaths *without* retention or the bonds. Repeat this sequence for a few minutes or until you feel tired, whichever comes first.

Over the next few weeks (or months), you can gradually do the following:

- Increase the length of the outer retention until it matches the length of your exhale.
- Decrease the number of intermediate Conqueror breaths.
- Increase the length of your outer retention practice.
- Cautiously apply Flying-Up Bond.

How It Helps

A number of benefits are said to accrue from inner breath retention in addition to the slowing and ultimate cessation of the consciousness fluctuations. Physically, the practice is said to increase stability, strengthen the diaphragm and the lungs, making them more elastic (the technical word is *compliant*), more “breathe-able.” It also stimulates inner breathing, that is, the cellular exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. This results in more efficient absorption of the inhaled oxygen and elimination of waste gases; the former is said to energize and the latter to purify the body-mind.

The experts are somewhat less specific in their assessments regarding the benefits of outer breath retention. Generally *bahya-kumbhaka* is said to calm the brain and lead to a state of contemplative quiescence. M. L. Gharote, founder of the Lonavla Yoga Institute (in Lonavla, India, and an associate of Swami Kuvalayananda), determined that *bahya-kumbhaka* had much the same effect on the body as that of *antara*: it helps increase oxygen consumption and the elimination of carbon dioxide.²

As we learn from Patanjali, retention is also supposed to have an effect on our normally “out-going” senses, drawing them away from the myriad distractions of the surrounding environment and helping to redirect them inward as a preparation for meditation (at least the kind of meditation that eliminates the outside world). My own experience suggests that simple retention (and in particular *bahya-kumbhaka*) can itself be a form of meditation.

Medical investigators have found (if you can decipher the eye-glazing prose of their reports), though not conclusively, that inner retention has a tendency to decrease the baseline heart rate, blood pressure, and “sympathetic discharges.”³ Put another way, it stimulates the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system.

I once asked a group of about thirty teacher-trainees what they experienced when they practiced retention. Here’s a summary of their responses. On the plus side, group members generally agreed that retention is relaxing or quieting and that their “natural breath” improved after practice. There were some interesting individual responses: retention made some people feel buzzy, giddy, high, safe (a “welcome place to be”), light (in the sense of weightless) or buoyant, vast or expansive, grounded, focused, and alert. For one trainee, time seemed to stop (a result reported in the classic Hatha books); another felt like she was underwater in a submarine; another felt “replete,” but at the same time empty. One felt curious about “uncharted territory”; another seemed transported to the edge of that

territory, which made her “confront fear”; yet another entered an “entirely different universe.”

But there were some negative responses too. Retention generated feelings of panic, impatience, sorrow, tension, or “full to bursting” (I *told* you not to overdo it). One respondent wrote, “I feel like I’m wrestling a dragon.” Hmm, kundalini?

Going Further

Eventually you’ll feel comfortable with the separate practice of inner and outer retention. Then what? First you can join the two retentions together during your Conqueror breath, though naturally you’ll need to return to the beginning counts (such as a four-count inner retention for a four-count inhale) and once again laboriously work your way to the traditional ratio. You can also learn to apply retention in other pranayamas, such as Against-the-Grain and Channel Cleaning.

Playing Around

As I mentioned earlier, though the 1:4:2:1 pranayama ratio is the most commonly cited, there are other possible ratios. Here’s one from the *Secret Book of the Yoga Crest Jewel* (*Yoga-Chudamani-Upanishad* 101–3), a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Hatha-Yoga manual. The ratio is a rather odd (and here reduced to its lowest common denominator) 6:8:5. Notice especially that the inhale is slightly longer than the exhale. The ratio forms the basis of a practice called *omkara pranayama*, which means that the breathing practice is accompanied with the recitation of the mantra om (or aum). The text recommends twelve rounds of breath, the inhale accompanied by a, the inner retention by u, and the exhale by m.

Interestingly, just like Svatmarama, the anonymous author of the text remarks that the lowest level of this practice “causes perspiration,” the middle level “trembling of the body” (v. 105), but the highest level—unlike Gheranda’s report of levitation—achieves physical stability.

Last Word

I can say from my own experience over the past twenty years or so that retention (much like pranayama itself) is an acquired taste, like certain soft cheeses or Monty Python. Don’t be surprised if you experience some discomfort at the start of your practice; you’ll have to decide for yourself whether or not to soldier on. Proceed at your own pace, never according to some rigid timetable, preferably closer to a canter than a gallop. But once you start practicing retention, *practice consistently*. I have spies everywhere, submitting regular reports on your progress—don’t make me come to your house.

I still think of retention not so much as holding the breath but as a reasonable prolongation of the natural breathing pause. While the antiretentionists definitely have a point, I’ve found that retention can be an amazing transformative tool.

LAST LAST WORD

IN 1796, A SHIP'S CAPTAIN by the name of Jacob Crowninshield returned to New York harbor from a long voyage to India with, of all things, a two-year-old female elephant. He had bought the unfortunate creature for \$450 and soon sold her for \$10,000, a considerable sum of money for the day. For the next fifteen years she was exhibited—one would hope with kindness and care—along the Atlantic seaboard, from Boston down to Charleston and out to Philadelphia. Thousands of Americans—including President John Adams—saw this rare and wondrous sight, and soon it was said that if you had seen everything of something there was to see, you had “seen the elephant.”

If you've bravely followed me to this point, you have now yourself seen the elephant, at least as far as learning pranayama from a book. Wherever you go with your practice from now on, you should ideally do it with the help of an experienced teacher—a book can only take you so far.

I hope you've realized by now that your pranayama practice doesn't begin and end with your formal practice. In a way it's unfortunate that we think of pranayama as a *practice*, a word that unconsciously limits its boundaries to a set place and time. Pranayama is nothing more or less than conscious breathing, and this breathing isn't something we *do*, it's something we *are*. Self-transformation is a continuous process that goes on without ceasing as long as we breathe—or at least as long as we breathe consciously.

I've been working at this now for more than twenty years. I was recently asked at a workshop I was teaching why I've stuck with it for so long, and for a moment I was lost, without a truthful answer. I joked that my first pranayama teacher scared me into persisting. Early on I also believed that, as a yoga teacher wannabe, it was important that I learn all the central yoga practices, not just asana. But there was also something else that came to me that seemed to be the real reason: under all the discomfort I experienced for the first half of my pranayama career, I still sensed that my breath was (as my introductory epigraph says) a “refuge.” I wasn't wrong.

APPENDIX 1

How to Use the Audio Program for Practice

THE PHYSICAL AND BREATHING EXERCISES in the audio program that accompanies this book are ordered according to a typical pranayama sequence, except that there are instructions for two different sitting poses and you'll need only one. To download the audio program, go to www.shambhala.com/pranayamapractices. How you arrange the practice depends on the time you have available and the exercises you want to work on. You can, for example, simply practice with the entire program, beginning with the Greats and choosing either Perfect Pose (*siddhasana*) or Hero Pose (*virasana*) for your sitting position for Skull Brightener (*kapalabhati*) onward; this will take you about an hour and a quarter. Alternatively you can begin in a sitting position with Skull Brightener and work through the rest of the sequence, or omit either Conqueror 1 or Conqueror 2, or just practice both or either of these breaths. In other words, it's up to you, though I'd prefer you order your sequence (whatever it is) more or less in line with mine. Here's a practice outline reminder:

The Greats

Perfect Pose or Hero Pose

Skull Brightener

Cooling breath

Channel Cleaning breath

Conqueror 1

Conqueror 2

Corpse Pose

APPENDIX 2

Practice Schedule Outline

Thus constantly practising the Self-luminous becomes manifest: here end all the teachings of the Guru (they can help him [i.e., the student] no further). Henceforth he must help himself, they [i.e., the guru's teachings] can no more increase his reason or power, henceforth by the mere force of his own practice he must gain Gnosis.

—*Shiva-Samhita*

AT SOME POINT IN YOUR PRANAYAMA CAREER—and I think you've reached that point now—it's necessary to assume the responsibility for devising your own practice timetable. At first you may be somewhat unsure of exactly what to do and how long to do it (both daily and over an extended period of time), but figuring out a personal program makes the practice—for me at least—more interesting and more fun. So here I've listed the main exercises (and a few of the lesser ones) described in this book under two main headings, Body and Breath. I'll give you a few hints on how to proceed, but the rest is up to you! Good luck.

The pace of your practice depends to a large extent on your own *samvega*, which means “excitement, vehemence, intensity, desire for emancipation.” Patanjali describes three levels of student:

- The student who's “moderate, gentle, slow” (*mridu*); who has lots of time and patience; and who may not progress to more advanced practices for a year or more
- The “intermediate” or “middling” student (*madhya*), in the sense of standing between two, that is, between levels 1 and 3; who moves at a relatively steady pace, which probably describes most students
- The student who's “above measure” (*adhimatratva*); who's willing to spend a little extra time and energy on the practice; and who's naturally expected to progress more quickly than levels 1 and 2 (though it doesn't always turn out that way)

Just remember that the “above measure” practitioner isn't any better than the “gentle” one, just different. Be reasonable about yourself and your capacity for practice. Going too fast at first, if you're not ready for it, can be discouraging; on the other hand, going too slow, if you're ready for more, can be boring. Either way, practice isn't much fun or very interesting.

Over time you may stay at the same level, or you may move up or down a level. Be willing to reassess your practice continually to make sure it suits your level. Remember: quality of practice is always more important than mere quantity. It's better to practice intensely for fifteen minutes than mechanically and unconsciously for thirty. I don't think I have to remind you—though I guess I'm doing just that—that the key to a successful practice is consistency.

Practice Routine

Body

In general, the body exercises are preparations for both sitting and breathing. They're divided into five sections: eyes, circuits, asana-based exercises, two bonds, and the Three Greats. You can practice these exercises just prior to your pranayama practice or at some appropriate time during your asana practice.

Eye Exercises

Trataka (eye circuit)

Shiva's Seal

Mental bathing

The eye exercises help you gather your awareness in preparation for breathing and meditation. Either or both Shiva's Seal and mental bathing (which focuses on the spot between your eyes) can be done individually or in conjunction with trataka. I also like to practice Shiva's Seal right at the end of my pranayama practice, just before Corpse.

Circuit Exercises

Midbrow Seal (head circuit)

Accordion Spine, end-of-twelve (spine circuit)

There are two ways to use the head and spine circuits in your pranayama program: indirectly, as preparations for the asana-based exercises, or directly, as preparations and then imaginative supports for sitting and breathing. The Midbrow Seal, which might be used as a preparation for an asana practice, further supports the head circuit; similarly, Accordion Spine and end-of-twelve further support the spine circuit.

Asana-Based Exercises

Pond Seal

Side-Lying Serpent Pose

Thunderbolt Pose

Lion Pose

Frog Pose

Bound Angle Pose

Inverse Action Seal

If you have the time and inclination, you can perform these exercises as a sequence in the order listed here (along with any or all of their variations), or you can choose one or more of them for a shorter practice session. Remember that these are only a few of the possible preparations for sitting and breathing. For more ideas, go to *The Yoga of Breath* or consult these resources:

- Judith Lasater, *Relax & Renew*. Berkeley, Calif.: Rodmell, 1995.

- Linda Sparrowe (with yoga sequences by Patricia Walden), *The Woman's Book of Yoga & Health*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002.
- Rodney Yee (with Nina Zolotow), *Moving Toward Balance*. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale, 2004.

Two Bonds

Flying-Up Bond

Root Bond

These two bonds, along with a review of Net-Bearer Bond, should be practiced as preparations for breathing, but work first with the head and spine circuits and the asana-based exercises. Flying-Up Bond can also be practiced at the conclusion of Skull Brightener.

Three Greats

Great Seal

Great Bond

Great Piercer

The Three Greats, as I noted in chapter 11, are excellent preparations for pranayama. I sometimes use them myself at the start of my asana practice. I've tried this in a few of my intermediate classes, but the students seem to prefer performing the Greats before pranayama.

Practice Routine

Breath

The breath exercises are divided into seven sections: preliminary practices, tongue exercises, diaphragm and ribs, preliminary breaths, imaginary breathing, digital pranayama, and retention.

Preliminary Practices

Nasal wash

Nasal wash is always a good preparation for breathing or just for the upcoming day. I use foam earplugs for all of my breathing exercises now as a matter of course. Half-closing the nostrils with the nose clips can be done when combining Digital Exhale and Digital Inhale, or to slow the breath during Corpse.

Tongue Exercises

Tongue Corpse Pose

Tongue Bond (modified Space-Walking Seal)

Tongue Corpse or Tongue Bond can be practiced in conjunction with any number of physical preparations or breaths. Remember that the release or lift of the tongue is an

energetic response to the opening of the base of the skull; this is especially true of Tongue Bond. Naturally I don't expect you to perform the traditional version of Space-Walking Seal; simply curl your tongue back in your throat to get a feel for what the actual practice might be like.

Diaphragm and Ribs

Diaphragm wrap

Diaphragm lift

Rib case shell

The diaphragm wrap can be used periodically, during either asana or pranayama practice, to contact the rim of the diaphragm. The diaphragm lift and rib case shell are necessary practices for *all* inner retention.

Preliminary Breaths

Hissing

Stop-and-wait breathing

Skull Brightener

Bee breath

Channel Cleaning breath

Cooling breath (Crow Seal)

Seet-Sound-Making breath

Walking Conqueror

Floating breath

Channel Cleaning can be used, as it is traditionally, either as a preliminary purifying breath or as a formal pranayama in itself. But *don't* include retention in any of these practices until you've worked with and assimilated the material in chapter 18. Walking Conqueror and Floating breath are simple practices that allow you to work with pranayama-like breathing in everyday settings.

Imaginary Breathing

Wisdom Seal

Breath-nostril contact, Pinocchio Nose

Breath direction

Wind withdrawal

End-of-twelve

Imaginary digital

Modified Wisdom Seal is used to "enlighten" the breath in five sections of the torso. Breath-nostril contact and breath direction should be applied in all pranayama practice.

The various types of imaginary breathing are good ways to focus attention on and gain greater facility with the breath.

Digital Pranayama

Deer Seal (finger placement)

Digital Exhale

Digital Inhale

Sun Piercing breath

Moon Piercing breath

Sun Piercing might be tried as a warm-up for a vigorous asana practice; similarly, Moon Piercing might work as a cooldown after such a practice. Combine Digital Exhale and Digital Inhale only after you've become proficient at these practices individually, and wait until you're proficient at the combined digital breaths before adding retention.

Retention

Inner Retention

Outer Retention

Retention should first be learned with Conqueror and Against-the-Grain breaths in the following manner. I assume that most of you have already completed the first two steps listed:

1. Straight Conqueror attending only to the four qualities
2. Short inner retention, with Net-Bearer Bond but no Root Bond
3. Short outer retention, with Net-Bearer Bond but no Flying-Up Bond
4. Short inner retention, add Root Bond
5. Short outer retention, add Flying-Up Bond
6. Increased retention times, working with equal and unequal ratios
7. Combined inner and outer retention, ratio, and appropriate bonds

For Against-the-Grain, once you're able to combine stepped inhales and stepped exhales, and then add a short inner retention (without Root Bond), proceed with retentions and bonds as described for Conqueror, steps 3 through 7 (disregard the instructions for ratio breathing).

APPENDIX 3

Four Traditional Purifications

Like the Ayurvedic physician ... the *hatha yogin* must also effect a preliminary cleansing (*shodhana*) of his body. This he does through a series of operations known as ... *shatkarmāni*, the “six practices,” in which the inner contours of his body are purified with air, water, and fire.

—David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body*

WE USUALLY THINK of the various behavioral restraints and observances (*yama* and *niyama*) as the initial stage of yoga, but in Gheranda’s version of Hatha-Yoga—what he calls “pot-based Yoga” (*ghatasthayoga*, GS 1.9)—the first stage consists of the six purifying acts (*shat karma*): cleaning (*dhauti*), bladder (*vasti*), *neti*, to-and-fro movement (*nauli*), Skull Brightener (*kapalabhati*), and *trataka*. *Svatmarama* covers the acts too, but after *asana* and as a preliminary to *pranayama*. Not all teachers feel that these practices are necessary for all students; *Svatmarama*, for example, says that the body system can be purified by *pranayama* by itself (HYP 2.37).

You might wonder why Gheranda doesn’t base his practice on *yamas* and *niyamas* in this school, as *Patanjali* does. Not important? Maybe. But one commentator speculates that these restraints are so basic to the practice that Gheranda simply assumed that whoever came to him for instruction had already mastered them, and so it would be superfluous to even mention them.

Although the purificatory practices are called the six acts, there are actually more than six individual practices: cleaning, with twelve “subacts,” and the enticingly named bladder with two, are better thought of as names of categories. And though *Svatmarama* mentions only one kind of Skull Brightener, Gheranda lists three (GS 1.54–58).

A good number of these practices are way beyond the scope of this book; for example, take what’s called Expelled Cleaning (*bahish krita dhauti*; GS 1.21–24), which involves filling the stomach with air, holding it there for ninety minutes, and then “expelling” it through the intestines. Tough enough, but there’s more. After passing the air, we’re instructed to stand in navel-deep water and draw out our *shaktinadi*, which apparently means our rectum, wash it clean, and then stuff it back in our body. Even one expert commentator on this practice admits, “This seems to be extremely difficult though not impossible, and rarely practised by yoga students. There are occasional references to this practice in the literature but no authentic report on the demonstration of this practice is available.”¹ We will pass quietly by this and other such practices, and look at four (all of which are in the *dhauti* category) that we can do without turning ourselves inside out.

Fire Cleaning (*Vahni Sara Dhauti*)

The Sanskrit *vahni* means “one who conveys or bears along,” which can refer to a charioteer or rider or to various gods, especially *Agni*, the god of fire, whose rising smoke conveys or bears the sacrificial oblations up to heaven and the other gods. *Vahni* can also refer to our own digestive fire.

Since *vahni* is a synonym for *agni*, Fire Cleaning is also known as *agni sara dhauti*.

Practice

Sit in any comfortable yoga seat. Exhale fully, hold the breath out (while engaging Net-Bearer Bond), and repeatedly and quickly retract and protrude your belly—squeeze it in and push it out—then finish with a long inhalation. Gheranda says to do the retraction/protruding a hundred times (*shatavaram*), but at first, it's acceptable to do it to your capacity and then gradually build up to the recommended number over time.

How It Helps

Fire Cleaning is said to tone the abdominal organs and increase digestive capacity. The latter is always important to the yogis, who are interested in assimilating their food as completely as possible. One source claims that the practice reduces “unsightly” fat deposits and makes the body “firm and luminous.”²

Tongue Cleaning (*Jihva Dhauti*)

This exercise seems to be, in part, a preparation for Space-Walking Seal, which requires a long and supple tongue. It's also known as Tongue Purification (*jihva shodhana*).

Practice

Gheranda recommends scraping your tongue clean with your fingers, but it seems a bit more civilized just to brush it with your toothbrush or scrape it with the side of a (small) spoon's bowl or a special tongue scraper (available online for about five dollars). Next he instructs us to stretch our tongue twice a day (at dawn and sunset) with a special pair of iron tongs (probably something like a pair of pliers) and rub it with butter (he calls this milking). Since our tongue is, after all, a muscle that for most of us gets lots of use, it seems useful to stretch it occasionally. I don't think you'll easily find a pair of tongue-stretching tongs online though; it might be better just to wrap your tongue in a clean cloth, grip it with your fingers, and gently tug on it for a while. And don't forget the butter.

How It Helps

Gheranda says that a long tongue gets rid of disease and old age and leads to a long life, all good reasons to give ours a stretch now and then. Although he doesn't mention another benefit (and probably didn't care much about it), modern sources claim tongue cleaning helps avoid bad breath. One commentator suggests that “milking” the tongue improves the functioning of “various glands in the deep of the neck, i.e. thyroid, parathyroids and thymus.”³

Skull Cleaning (*Kapala Dhauti*)

As long as we're poking around inside our oral cavity, Gheranda recommends massaging what he calls the skull hole (*bhala randhra*), by which he probably means the soft palate. This again seems, in part, a preparation for Space-Walking Seal.

Practice

As usual, we're supposed to use our right thumb to do the massage, but you lefties out

there know what to do. Gheranda recommends this massage upon waking up in the morning, after meals, and at the end of the day. One commentator mentions that these times are specified because the “secretion of phlegm” is higher then than at other times of the day.⁴

How It Helps

According to Gheranda, this massage wards off certain diseases and leads to divine sight (divya-drishti), which commentators understand in three ways: as the improvement of everyday vision, the development of the power of clairvoyance, and the development of spiritual insight.

Playing Around

One translation of Gheranda I have interprets this exercise in a completely different way. The bhala randhra is located on the forehead, at the root of the nose. In a way, a massage on this area, rather than the soft palate, seems to better account for the proposed improvement of vision.

Ear Cleaning (*Karna Dhauti*)

Practice

Here we’re instructed to massage the openings of our ear canals with the tip of an index finger.

How It Helps

One commentator says that “what is indicated here is much more than a simple rubbing of one’s ears.” He continues,

It indicates a deep state of concentration on the faculty of hearing whereby, eventually, some mystical sounds (Nada) are heard. These sounds ought not to be confused with the cardio-vascular sounds ... This practice tends to induce sharpness of hearing, and later—much later (when other conditions of higher Yoga are fulfilled)—clairaudience.⁵

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GLOSSARY

Adhimatratva Above measure.

Adi koti Beginning point.

Agni Fire, often personified as a god.

Agni vaishvanara Universal fire, the digestive fire.

Amara varuni Immortal liquor or water, another name for the nectar of immortality.

Anahata Unbeaten, unstruck, a subtle sound inaudible to human hearing.

Ananda Joy, happiness.

Anjali A hand gesture signifying reverence, benediction, salutation.

Anta koti End point.

Antara Inner.

Anuloma viloma With-the-grain-against-the-grain, a type of pranayama.

Bahya Outer.

Bana Body.

Bhadra Auspicious.

Bhalabhati Brow Brightening, a synonym for kapalabhati.

Bhala randhra Brow or skull hole.

Bhastrika Bellows, a traditional pranayama.

Bhramari Bee, a traditional pranayama.

Bhru-madhya Midbrow, a traditional point of gazing concentration for the eyes.

Chandra Moon.

Chaturdasha ratnam Fourteen Jewels, produced at the stirring of the Milk Ocean.

Chaturtha The fourth, that is, spontaneous breath retention beyond the three effortful phases of inhale, exhale, and purposeful retention.

Chedana Cutting asunder, splitting, the flap of skin holding the tongue to the floor of the mouth in preparation for khecari-mudra (Space-Walking Seal).

Dakshina Able, clever, dexterous; straightforward, candid, sincere; right.

Dhairya Constancy, composure, courage.

Dhauti Cleaning.

Divya-drishti Divine sight.

Dohana To milk, that is, to draw out and lengthen the tongue in preparation for khecari-mudra.

Drashtri Seer.

Dridhata Strength, solidity.

Dughda Milk.

Dvadasha-anta End-of-twelve, a metaphysical point about a foot above the crown.

Ghantika Bell, the uvula.

Ghatastha-yoga Pot-based yoga, a synonym for Hatha-Yoga.

Goraksha Literally “Cowherder,” the name of the second great Hatha-Yoga teacher after Matsyendra.

Granthi Knot, traditionally applied to three blockages in the subtle central channel, called the Brahma knot (at the base chakra), Vishnu knot (at the heart chakra), and Shiva knot (at the midbrow chakra).

Halahala Deadly poison produced at the stirring of the Milk Ocean.

Hamsa danda Swan staff.

Hasta Hands.

Hri Heart.

Jala Salt water.

Jihva Tongue.

Kaki Crow.

Kama Desire, personified as the Hindu god of love.

Kapala Skull.

Kapala-kuhara Skull cavity into which the reversed and upturned tongue is inserted during khecari-mudra.

Kara Hands.

Karna Ear.

Kaya The body as a whole.

Khecari-mudra Space-Walking Seal, or Moving-in-Space, flying.

Krama Sequence, process.

Kundala Coiled.

Kundalini Coiled one.

Laghava Swift, lightness, ease.

Lakshya Mark.

Lalana Moving the tongue to and fro, which suggests “play” or “sport.”

Lambika Hanger, dangler, another name for the uvula.

Lila Play, sport.

Madhya Middle, intermediate.

Maha Great.

Manasa snana Symbolic mental bathing or purification, usually at the spot between the eyebrows, where the three main energy channels cross for the final time.

Mandara Slow Mountain, a sacred mountain used as the churning-stick at the stirring of the Milk Ocean.

Manduka Frog.

Manipura-chakra Jeweled city wheel, the navel energy center.

Marma Joint.

Mastakabhati Head Brightener, a synonym for Skull Brightener (*kapalabhati*).

Mihira Sun.

Mridu Moderate, gentle, slow.

Mrigi Deer, the name of a hand mudra.

Muda Joy.

Mukta triveni Triple braid of release, located in the forehead where the three main energy channels cross for the final time.

Muladhara-chakra Root foundation wheel, the sacral or lowest energy center.

Murccha Fainting, a traditional pranayama.

Nadi-shodhana Channel cleaning, a traditional preparation for pranayama.

Nadi-shuddhi Channel cleaning, channel purity.

Namaskara Salutation.

Nasa-agra Nose tip, a traditional point of gazing-concentration for the eyes.

Nauli To-and-fro movement, one of the six purifying acts.

Nirjara Not aging.

Nirliptata Immaculateness.

Nyasa Casting, placing, symbolic touching of significant points on the body.

Om kara To make the sound om.

Padma Lotus.

Paramatman Supreme or absolute self, “world self.”

Paravac Supreme sound or voice; a synonym for Brahman.

Piyusha Milk; another name for the nectar of immortality.

Plavini Floating, a traditional pranayama.

Prajna Wisdom.

Pratyaksha Present before the eyes, visible, direct perception.

Raja danta Royal tooth; another name for the uvula.

Sahita Combined, associated, a type of retention.

Sama hasta Hand chant.

Samvega Vehemence, intensity, desire for emancipation.

Sapta anga Seven limbs.

Sarpa Serpent.

Sat Being, existing.

Shabda-brahman Brahman sound, the supreme sound.

Shakti Power.

Shalabha Locust.

Shambhavi Auspicious, gracious, benevolent, friendly; another name for Shiva.

Shambhu Granting or causing happiness; another name for Shiva.

Shashi Moon.

Shat karma Six acts or inner purifications.

Shava Corpse.

Shitali Cooling.

Shiva Auspicious, gracious, benevolent, friendly; one of the gods of the Hindu trinity.

Shodhana Cleanliness.

Siddhi Accomplishment, perfection.

Simha Lion.

Sitkari Making a sound like “seet.”

Sitkrama Cooling process.

Soma Juice, extract, another name for the nectar of immortality.

Sthairya Stability.

Sthula Gross.

Sukshma Subtle.

Surya Sun.

Sutra Thread, string.

Tadagi Pond or water tank.

Talu Palate.

Tarka Liberating, saving.

Tri-kuta Triple summit, a subtle point on the forehead.

Triveni Triple braid, another name for the tri-kuta (also called mukta triveni, “triple braid of release.”)

Udara Stomach, belly; cavity, hollow.

Upanishad Literally “to sit down near” in order to hear a secret teaching, and so usually associated with the idea of secrecy; the general name for a collection of books.

Ushtra Camel.

Vahni One who conveys or bears along.

Vajra Thunderbolt; diamond.

Vama Adverse, contrary; unfavorable, wicked; left.

Vasti Bladder (also written *basti*).

Vata Air.

Vatakrama Air process.

Vedha Piercer.

Vishnu All-Pervader, one of the gods of the Hindu trinity.

Vyut Inversion.

Yantra Instrument for holding or restraining or fastening; a geometric representation of universal energy patterns.

Yoga danda Yoga staff, a traditional yoga prop.

Yoga-pattaka Yoga bandage or belt, a traditional yoga prop.

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INDEX OF PRACTICES

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Also by Richard Rosen

The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama

For several thousand years, yogis have drawn on the powerful practice of pranayama, a technique of controlling the breath to maximize *prana* or life energy. Pranayama has been practiced to rejuvenate the body and as a means of self-study and self-transformation. While most yoga practitioners today focus on *asanas*, or body postures, a growing number of people are learning the complementary practice of pranayama to deepen and enrich their practice.

The Yoga of Breath, Richard Rosen's first book on the subject, is a guide to learning the fundamentals of pranayama and incorporating them into an existing yoga practice. Rosen's approach is easy to follow with step-by-step descriptions of breath and body awareness exercises accompanied by clear illustrations. The book also covers the history and philosophy of pranayama, offers useful practice tips, and teaches readers how to use props to enhance the practices.

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