

YOGA | PRACTICE

The 5 Prana Vayus in Yoga: Prana



Sandra Anderson



At its heart, hatha yoga is more than just flexibility or strength in postures; it is the management of *prana*, the vital life force that animates all levels of being. Prana enables the body to move and the mind to think. It is the intelligence that coordinates our senses, and the perceptible manifestation of our higher selves. By becoming more attentive to prana—and enhancing and directing its flow through the practices of hatha yoga—we can invigorate the body and mind, develop an expanded inner awareness, and open the door to higher states of consciousness.

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The yoga tradition describes five movements or functions of prana known as the *vayus* (literally “winds”)—*prana vayu* (^{head & chest} **not to be confused with the undivided** ^{shakti} **master prana**), *apana vayu*, *samana vayu*, *udana vayu*, and *vyana vayu*. These five ^{abdomen-pelvis} ^{navel & solar plexus} ^{throat} ^{co-ordinated entire body as a whole} *vayus* govern different areas of the body and different physical and subtle activities. When they’re functioning harmoniously, they assure the health and vitality of the body and mind, allowing us to enjoy our unique talents and live life with meaning and purpose.

Hatha yoga practices, including *asana*, *pranayama*, and traditional cleansing techniques (known as the ^{shatkarmas} *shat kriyas*, or six actions), can profoundly affect prana in all its five forms. By working directly with the body’s intrinsic vitality, these practices **balance and enhance the physiological system** and the **functions of the mind**. The *asanas* create an inner structure which supports the efficient work of all the *vayus*. *Pranayama* augments and expands the vital life force, and, along with hatha yoga cleansing techniques, it purifies the *nadis*, or channels of pranic flow.

A closer look at each vayu individually can help us maximize the effectiveness of our hatha practice. In this issue, we'll focus on practices for prana vayu.

EXPLORING PRANA VAYU

Of the five vayus, **prana vayu is the fundamental energizing force**. It is the inward moving vital energy that governs respiration and reception, allowing us to take in everything from air and food to impressions and ideas. **Prana vayu is most active in the region of the lungs and heart**. It provides propulsive energy, speed, motivation, and vitality. On a more subtle level, this vayu gives heightened sensitivity both to the external senses and to inner awareness. It allows us to see the world in all its brightness—full of possibilities—and to anchor our inner focus in a resting place of contentment. If, however, **prana vayu is deranged, we suffer from cravings, fall prey to bad habits, and wrestle with a restless and dissipated mind**.

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The hatha yoga practices that follow help enhance the balanced functioning of prana vayu, opening the body to deep breathing and boosting our energy and confidence.

ASANA FOR PRANA VAYU

The **following mini-sequence** supports the intake of prana vayu—and helps maximize the effectiveness of pranayama—by creating strength, alignment, and activation through the upper body. You'll benefit most from this sequence when **preceding it with standing poses and seated forward bends, and following it with twists, inverted poses, and a systematic relaxation**.

1. PARIVRITTA JANU SHIRSHASANA (REVOLVED HEAD-TO-KNEE POSE)



Sit with the spine straight and the legs spread wide apart. Fold the right foot into the inner left groin. Wrap the right arm behind the waist and fold to the left from the left hip crease, keeping the spine neutral and looking straight ahead. Press the left forearm or hand onto the left leg or onto the floor beside the leg. Firm the lower belly to stabilize the lumbar spine, and roll the sternum toward the sky, keeping the shoulder blades drawn down and the collarbones wide. Then stretch the right arm up and alongside the ear, turning the chin over the shoulder. Draw the right sit bone down and feel the stretch along the right side of the body. Breathe into this opening, taking care not to collapse on the left side, and pressing the left leg into the floor to support the pose. Hold, keeping your attention on the fullness and ease of breath, and lift gently out of the pose when the opening feels complete. Repeat on the other side.

2. ADHO MUKHA SHVANASANA (DOWNWARD-FACING DOG POSE)



Cross your legs, lean forward into your hands, and lift the pelvis as you straighten the arms and legs into downward-facing dog. Press the hands strongly into the floor to lift the sit bones. Keep the heels up or the knees bent if the back of the legs are tight, so you can lengthen the line from the sit bones through the center of the hands. Broaden the tops of the shoulders and collarbones as you push the floor away.

3. DOWNWARD-FACING PLANK POSE



From downward-facing dog, press up onto the balls of the feet, shift your weight forward over the shoulders as you lift your chest between your arms, and lower the pelvis in line with the chest. Press the palms evenly into the floor, and activate the shoulders by rotating the forearms inward and the upper arms outward. Flatten the shoulder blades against the back as you draw them away from the ears. Reach back through the inner edges of the heels and draw both the lower abdomen and the sacrum deeper into the body to stabilize the pelvis in a neutral position. Hold with steady even breathing for 5 or more breaths, then lower down to the floor.

4. URDHVA MUKHA SHVANASANA (UPWARD-FACING DOG POSE)



Stretch the legs back and press the tops of the feet into the floor. Place the palms on the floor and straighten the arms to lift the chest and pelvis (the hands should now be directly under the shoulders). Draw the chest forward and up, and reach the legs back to anchor the pelvis and support the lower back. Press the hands down as you spin the shoulders back and draw the upper spine toward the front of the body. Keep the back of the neck long as you take the head back slightly. Hold for several breaths, keeping the whole body strongly active, and feel the rib cage expand to the sides, back, and front. Then press back to downward-facing dog or child's pose and breathe into the back.

5. GOMUKHASANA (COW'S FACE POSE)

chest opener



From your hands and knees, cross the right knee behind the left and sit back on the right heel. (Alternatively, sit between the feet.) Wrap the right arm behind the waist and draw the right elbow toward the midline with the left hand. Then stretch the left arm overhead, bend the elbow, and clasp the right hand. If the hands don't reach, either draw the right elbow toward the spine with the left hand, or draw the left arm back with the right hand. Firm the legs, draw the lower abdomen in, keep the spine neutral, and look straight ahead as you focus on the breath in the lower ribs for 5 to 10 breaths. Repeat on the other side.

PRANAYAMA FOR PRANA VAYU

BHASTRIKA

Of all the hatha yoga practices, pranayama most directly affects prana (the master life force) in the body. In particular, the **vigorous, dynamic, and vitalizing pranayama known as bhastrika, or bellows breath**, is a powerful tool for expanding prana vayu. Bhastrika clears obstructions in the respiratory system, strengthens the nervous system, increases physical vitality, and enhances clarity of mind. On the subtle level, ^{combined with kapahlabati} bhastrika is treasured by the yoga tradition for **awakening kundalini, removing the obstacles at the entrance to brahma nadi** (the gateway to higher consciousness), and loosening the forces which bind us to ordinary awareness. = heightening awareness

Prerequisites for bhastrika include regular asana practice, strong and supple abdominal muscles, diaphragmatic breathing, a stable sitting posture, and regular practice of the balancing and cleansing practice of nadi shodhanam, or alternate nostril breathing.

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Like a blacksmith's bellows, both the inhalation and the exhalation in bhastrika are vigorous and driven from the navel center. To begin the practice, find an effortless upright sitting posture with the spine in neutral alignment, propping the pelvis high enough for the inner thighs to relax.

Exhale by contracting the abdominal muscles quickly and forcefully, and follow immediately with a quick inhalation of equal force and speed. Start slowly (about 2 breaths every three seconds) with no more than 11 breaths to maintain the rhythm and ease of movement. Then rest for at least 3 breaths. Be aware of the spontaneous flow of your breath and see if you can sense the whole body as a field of energy.



A good daily beginning practice consists of one to three rounds of 7 to 11 breaths, resting between rounds. If you feel dizzy, lightheaded, or ill at ease, stop, rest, breathe normally, and practice fewer breaths next time, or check your technique with an experienced teacher.

CLEANSING FOR PRANA VAYU

NETI WASH

Your nose plays a crucial role in receiving and assimilating prana. It purifies, moisturizes, warms, and “reads” incoming air, transmitting information back to the brain and the rest of the body to optimize the absorption of prana. The yogic texts recommend the cleansing practice of **jala neti**, or nasal irrigation (also known as the neti wash, and typically performed with the neti pot), to support the intake of prana through the nose.

ABOUT THE TEACHER



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For over 20 years Sandra Anderson has shared her extensive experience in yoga theory and practice with... [Read more](#)