

Clearing Your Head: The Practice of Kapalabhati

Pranayama

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Kapalabhati will be a welcome change for those of you who are impatient with subtle pranayama practices and their even subtler effects. With kapalabhati, you can immediately feel that something is "really" happening. *Kapala* is the Sanskrit for skull, and *bhati* is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning "to shine." This vigorous cleansing exercise has significant benefits, not the least of which is clearing the nasal passages and providing a bath of freshly purified blood to the brain.

Kapalabhati consists of a forceful, vigorous exhalation, followed by a passive inhalation. You practice this sequence slowly at first, gradually gaining the proficiency to do it rapidly. The classical manuals on hatha yoga list kapalabhati as one of the six cleansing exercises (*shat kriyas*), because the emphasis on exhalation enhances the ability of the lungs to expel wastes and toxins. Kapalabhati also helps develop the strength and stamina needed for other hatha yoga practices.

Reversing Habitual Breathing Patterns

In most breathing exercises, inhalation is active and exhalation is passive. Passive exhalations are never as complete as they could be. To exhale completely, you must use the abdominal muscles near the end of exhalation. Try it: Sit upright and inhale; don't move your chest and shoulders. The sensation of effort that you feel represents the active contraction of the diaphragm muscle. Feel the effort of the diaphragm? Now exhale completely. Notice how the first portion of the exhalation is effortless, but to force out more air, you have to contract the abdominal muscles. Do this a few times until you can feel when you begin to use the abdominal muscles to complete the exhalation.

Kapalabhati reverses the usual pattern of active inhalation and passive exhalation, and this reversal takes a little getting used to. The exhalation in kapalabhati is short, powerful, and complete, and it takes some practice to perfect. Begin by establishing a baseline of deep, even, nasal breathing. At the end of a normal exhalation, contract the muscles that form the front wall of the abdomen--from just below the ribs to the pelvis--strongly and quickly, forcing the air out of the nostrils. Contracting these muscles will move the abdomen toward the spine and push the diaphragm up into the chest cavity, compressing the lungs. This results in the expulsion of air through the nostrils, provided there is no other movement and no obstruction of the nostrils. Only the abdomen moves--keep the rest of your body completely still. Each exhalation should be as complete as you can comfortably achieve in one short, powerful blast.

Without pausing, relax the abdominal wall and you will automatically inhale. Allow the abdomen to return to its resting position. Do not inhale actively. Initially, this is the most difficult part of learning kapalabhati and requires practicing slowly and deliberately.

You must develop the ability to breathe using the abdominal muscles alone, contracting them quickly during exhalation and relaxing them completely for each inhalation. The diaphragm should remain passive through both inhalation and exhalation. Think of kapalabhati as an abdominal exhalation exercise. The mobility of the diaphragm will partially determine the effectiveness of each exhalation. A relaxed, supple diaphragm will allow rapid and complete exhalation in response to the inward movement of the abdomen. If you maintain tension in the diaphragm, it will create resistance both to the expulsion of air and to free inhalation.

The passive inhalation takes longer than the strong and forceful exhalation, so in practice, inhalation will be about twice as long as exhalation. Throughout the practice, emphasize exhalation and wait for inhalation. Repeat the exercise slowly, at first at the rate of about 1 to 1.5 exhalations per second.

How to Sit

Practicing kapalabhati requires a firm, stable posture because, as you progress, the muscular contractions during exhalation become very powerful; an unstable posture may allow movement, which will disrupt the practice.

The head, neck, and trunk must be held in vertical alignment. When the spine is properly aligned, the capacity of the lungs is slightly expanded. Try this for yourself. As you are reading this, purposely slouch, bringing your shoulders toward your hips. Take a few breaths. Notice the difficulty during inhalation? Now sit upright and continue breathing evenly. Notice the difference?

Pay particular attention to the head position. Bring the chin back over the breastbone and extend the neck upward. This positions the head directly over the hips. Relax the shoulders--you needn't lift them or pull them back. Now try moving back into the slouched position and then back to the upright position a few times to fully experience both. Notice how the rib cage opens when you sit upright? This open attitude of the thoracic cavity is essential for the proper practice of any pranayama

Correct alignment of the head and spine enables you to relax the abdominal muscles, which is imperative for proper inhalation in kapalabhati. Therefore, the best posture is one in which you can sit comfortably and firmly with your head, neck, and trunk aligned. The best asanas include *padmasana*, *swastikasana*, *vajrasana*, *siddhasana*, or sitting upright and forward in a chair.

Progression of Practice

There are three things to keep in mind when practicing kapalabhati: the duration of practice (the number of repetitions), the force applied to the exhalations, and the rhythm and speed of respiration.

The duration of the exercise • Kapalabhati is usually practiced in a series of rounds. Its best to begin with 10 to 15 repetitions per round, three rounds per sitting, and one sitting per day. Separate each round by deep, even breathing until breathing equilibrium is re-established. Increase the number of repetitions per round by about five repetitions per week. One hundred and twenty repetitions per round is considered a vigorous practice for most people.

Force of the exhalations • Make each exhalation as forceful as possible without strain or undue effort. If this is your first exposure to this exercise, you might experience some soreness of the abdominal muscles, much like the soreness that develops after an occasional physical workout. If you practice consistently and proceed slowly, this will pass in a few days. Gradually increase the force of the exhalations as your practice develops. Strive for short, explosive exhalations that are comfortably complete. Aim for exhalations that last for less than 1/4 of a second.

The rhythm of the exhalations • The rhythm should be regular and consistent, like the ticking of a clock. When you begin, do one exhalation per second until the motions become second nature. A week should be sufficient, but it may take longer. Gradually increase the speed of the exhalations to two per second.

I've seen people practicing this exercise very rapidly, three or more exhalations per second. Such rapid practice may look impressive, but it sacrifices the effectiveness of the exercise. Such rapid exhalations become shallow, thus reducing the volume of air being moved. The more complete each exhalation and inhalation, the more air is moved out and into the lungs, and the more lung capacity is used. When you have increased the speed of the exhalations to two per second, focus on increasing the completeness of each exhalation. When you find the rhythm faltering, stop. Accept that number of repetitions as your current limit, and remain at that level for a week or more before increasing the number of repetitions.

When to Practice

Kapalabhati can be practiced during your regular asana practice, as a renewing exercise after vigorous stretches. Because of its cleansing effect, its also a good practice to do after asana and before *nadi shodhanam* and meditation. Kapalabhati is invigorating--it enhances your sense of energy and awareness. The combination of cleansing and invigoration makes it an excellent exercise for the late afternoon, after work, and before the evening meal, but not a good practice just before sleep. You might even try experimenting with kapalabhati as a substitute for stimulants, such as coffee or tea. For most people, practicing twice a day is sufficient, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Precautions

Any sharp or persistent pain is a signal to stop. Consult with a physician who understands breathing exercises before continuing. If you have high blood pressure or coronary heart disease, do not practice kapalabhati without consulting your physician.

Always practice on an empty stomach, two or more hours after eating. Stop if you experience a stitch in your side, if you feel dizzy, or if you are unable to maintain a steady rhythm.

In the End

There are many versions of the classic story in which a young aspirant is asked to accompany an elderly sage on a long walk. Often the sage has lived for years in a small, cramped cave and, yet, the young person finds it difficult to keep up. The point is that asana and pranayama practices can maintain the cardiovascular and respiratory systems in excellent condition. Although other forms of physical exercise, such as brisk walking, are a must for most of us, an exercise like kapalabhati can provide an additional cleansing and cardio vascular stimulation when physical exercise isn't possible.

We'll discuss the benefits of kapalabhati in detail in a subsequent article and give you some [tips on how to perfect your practice](#). This information will be more useful once you've been doing this exercise for awhile. So in the meantime, practice, practice, practice... and enjoy.

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