

8 Yoga Stress Relief Techniques

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8 Yoga Stress Relief Techniques

Introduction

In yoga there are many techniques that provide particular relief to stress and tension. Many of those practices come from the tradition of hatha yoga, where certain asanas (postures) and kriyas (movements) are used to release pent up tension in the body. The branch of yoga known as jnana yoga also provides a number of practices for the cleansing of the body and psyche, and release from stress and strain. Pranayama is a third area of yoga that possesses many powerful cleansing, purifying and relaxing practices for the stress sufferer.

Here I'll introduce you to 8 yogic practices that can be performed alone or in combination with one another to provide release from normal, day to day stress, as well as chronic, built up tension.

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HATHA YOGA STRESS RELIEF TECHNIQUES

Shava Asana

Shava asana (pronounced sha wa asana) means the ‘pose of the corpse’. It is the primary position used in yoga for relaxation, one in which we attempt to literally mimic the ‘lifeless state’ by completely letting go of all conscious tension.

This position is used for a number of different types of practices in yoga. Here I’ll introduce you to three *hatha yoga* practices performed in this position, which are specifically geared toward the release of stress and tension.

The Shava Asana Position

- » Lie down on your back with the legs and feet together and the arms straight down along the sides with the palms face upwards.
- » Optimally, the head should be directed toward the north, or if that is not possible, then toward the east.



I. Breath Awareness

In this simple stress release technique, the mind is focused on the breath while a rhythm of deep steady breathing is gradually established.

Method

- » Lie in *shava asana*
- » Breathe normally for a few minutes, allowing yourself to settle down and your mind to become relaxed.
- » Begin to pay attention now to the breath as it moves in and out through the nostrils only.
- » Now imagine the feeling of cool air flowing in through the nostrils on the inhalation, and the sensation of warm air flowing out on the expiration of air.
- » Continue to maintain this visualization for 5 to 10 minutes.

2. Spandha/Nishpanda

Spandha is the Sanskrit word for ‘tension’. *Nishpanda*, then, means ‘no tension’, or ‘without tension’. In this practice, we first tense different parts of the body to the maximum and then relax them as much as possible.

Method

- › Begin in *shava asana*
- › Breathe normally and allow yourself to settle down and your mind to become relaxed.
- › Turn your attention to your left leg and intentionally tense up all of the muscles from the tips of the toes to the top of the hip.
- › Hold that tension (*spandha*) for 5 to 10 seconds, and then release it.
- › Now allow all of the muscles in the left leg to relax as much as possible (*nishpanda*). Allow a feeling of heaviness to flow through the entire left leg, from the tips of the toes to the top of the hip.
- › After about 30 seconds, repeat the process again, tensing for 5 to 10 seconds, then relaxing for 30 seconds.
- › Now continue this same process throughout all the other regions of the body, in the following order:
 - › Right leg
 - › Left arm
 - › Right Arm
 - › Buttocks and entire pelvic region
 - › Front torso (abdominal and chest regions)
 - › Rear torso (low, mid and upper back)
 - › Shoulder and neck
 - › Face and head
- › Once you have performed the *spandha/nishpandha* tension release process two times through all of these regions, you may repeat the entire process again, or simply allow yourself to remain relaxed in *shava asana* for as long as you like.

3. Kaya Kriya

Kaya is a term in Sanskrit used to refer to the human body. *Kaya kriya*, then, is a whole body cleansing practice that is most useful for releasing mental and physical tension, providing relief from physical traumas and body pain and balancing the ‘energy flows’ within the body.

This is a three-part relaxation technique in which the lower, middle and upper regions of the body are relaxed in succession with movement/breath combinations. It is performed in *shava asana*.

Method

First Stage

- › In *shava asana*, slide your legs about 1½ feet apart.
- › Begin by inhaling and then roll the legs inward as you continue to fill the lungs (i.e., internal hip rotation), drawing the toes together and toward the floor.
- › On the exhalation, roll the legs/feet outward as far as possible.

Note: Keep the legs completely straight during these movements.

Note: Both the inhalation and exhalation phases should be performed slowly, to a 6-count

- › Repeat this action 6 to 9 times.



Second Stage

- › Bring your legs back together and then slide your arms slightly away from your body.
- › Again, inhale slowly while rolling the arms outward.
- › As you exhale, roll them inward, back to the starting point.



Note: Make sure to keep the elbows straight and rotate at the shoulder joints, allowing the wrists to roll along the floor.

- › Also repeat this 6 to 9 times.

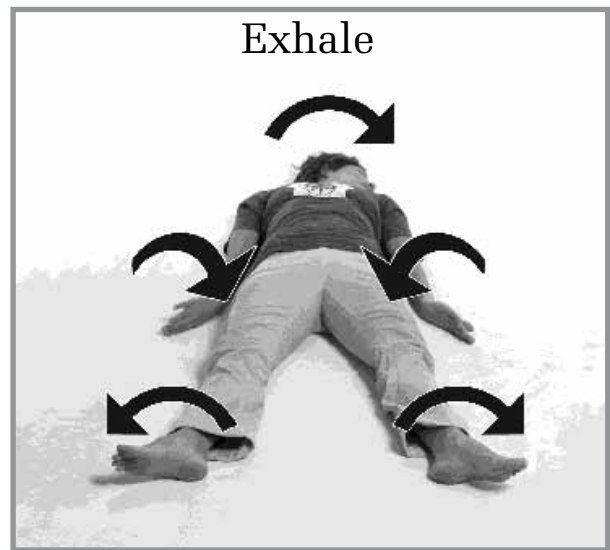
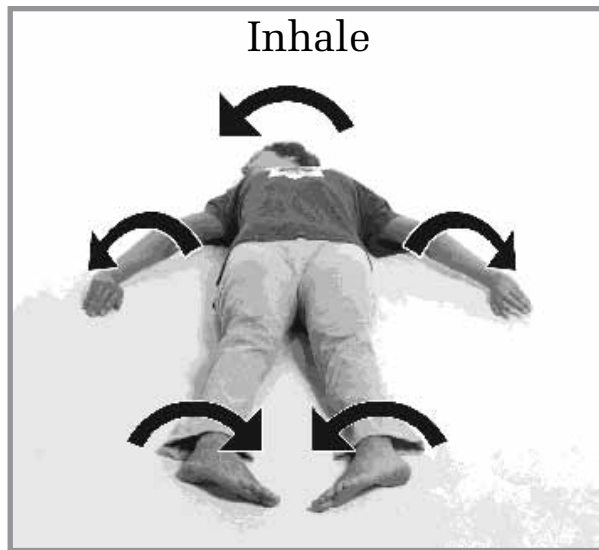
Third Stage

- › This time, roll the head to the right side on the inhalation and to the left on the exhalation (6 to 9 times).



The Full Kaya Kriya

- » Perform the entire *kaya kriya* by performing all three of the previous movements one after the other.
- » On a 6-count in-breath, the feet are first moved inwards, then arms outwards, and then head turned to the right.
- » The reverse movements are then performed on a 6-count out-breath (legs outward, arms inward, then head to the left).
- » Continue until you feel completely relaxed and free from tension, with a desire to simply lie motionless.
- » Relax for some time in this state of stillness.



JNANA YOGA STRESS RELIEF TECHNIQUES

4. Loma-Viloma Kriya - The Polarity Practice

This *jnana yoga kriya* helps to establish basic polarity of the body, a principle aspect of hatha yoga, by balancing the two fundamental universal energies '*prana*' and '*apana*'. (These are referred to variously in different traditions, such as yang and yin, positive and negative, solar and lunar, etc.)

This is a 're-polarizing process' that regulates the electrical flow of the nervous system and the ionization at the cellular level. This practice is also referred to as *Anu-Loma-Viloma*, and among other benefits, it is highly effective in producing a state of deep relaxation.



Method

- » Lie in *shava asana* with your head toward the north.
- » Begin with a few rounds of deep, slow breathing.
- » When you have established firm control over the breath, imagine that a current of warm, golden *prana* (solar, yang energy) is moving through the body from above the top of the head to below the soles of the feet during the inhalation.
- » On the outgoing breath, feel a cool, silvery flow of *apana* (lunar, yin energy) entering through the soles of the feet and moving upwards through the body and out the top of the head.

Note: Breathing (both in and out) happens through the nostrils only.

- » Continue to breathe fully and deeply while performing this visualization until deep relaxation develops (this should take about 6 to 10 minutes or more).

Further:

After some practice with this powerful polarity breath, you may begin to further visualize these *pranic* and *apanic* flows at the deeper cellular level – as waves of energy washing through the cells, energizing, refreshing and balancing all of the biological functions.

5. Nishpanda Jnana Kriya - The Progressive Relaxation

As we learned earlier, *nishpanda* means 'no tension', or 'without tension'. *Nishpanda jnana kriya* (the progressive relaxation) is the mental exercise for the release of all tension in the body.

Note: The progressive relaxation is a rather long process. You are advised to read the description of this technique in its entirety before beginning.



Method

This technique is broken down into 2 stages:

- The **General Relaxation** and
- The **Gradual Relaxation**.

The General Relaxation

- » Begin in *shava asana*.
- » Focus firstly on each of the major muscles groups of the body, consciously letting go of superficial, gross tension and creating a mental feeling of heaviness in each area.
- » Begin with the legs, spending as much time as needed in order to feel a sense of heaviness and relaxation in them.
- » Proceed to the arms, doing the same.
- » Next focus on letting go and perceiving a sensation of heaviness in the entire pelvic region, followed by the abdominal area, then the lower back, then the upper back.
- » Next, move your attention to the chest region, then the shoulders.
- » Lastly, relax the neck and head.
- » Spend about 3 to 5 minutes in total to achieve a general relaxation of all the major regions of the body.

The Gradual Relaxation

- » Begin by projecting your mind to the tip of your left toes.
- » Start the gradual relaxation process through the foot and slowly upward toward the knee, then to the hip, focusing your attention on all the physical structures/tissues along the way.

Note: Move slowly and unhurriedly, trying to perceive each and every inch of the body and its structures, letting go of any and all sensations of tension or 'holding' along the way. Pause whenever and wherever you feel an additional need to focus and 'let go'.

- » Continue likewise with the right leg.

- » Feel now, as much as possible, the earth with its gravitational pull on each cell, each molecule and atom of the legs. Give up to this force entirely. Let them rest heavy on the floor. If you try to move the legs now with your muscles, you will notice, at this depth of relaxation, that they are very heavy.
- » Perform the gradual relaxation process several times, first on the left and then the right leg — then proceed on to the rest of the body.

Note: With each repetition, notice a greater and greater relaxation of the legs, pinpointing each time precise spots of tension and contraction. Perform this exercise patiently, without thought to time or results.

Continue with the rest of the body in the following order:

- » Left arm, starting at the fingertips and moving up to the shoulder
- » Right arm (in the same fashion)
- » Buttocks, groin and pelvic area
- » Abdomen, from the lowest margin at the pubic bone up through to the lower rib cage.
- » Lower back, along the spine, including all the muscles on either side, around the shoulder blades and right up to the upper back
- » Chest
- » Shoulders (back, sides and front), both at the same time
- » Neck and throat, from the anterior (front), the lateral (sides) and up the posterior (back) to the base of the skull
- » Relax the chin and jaw
- » Lips and tongue
- » Cheeks
- » Eyelids, eyeballs, eyebrows
- » Forehead
- » Entire scalp and ears

Finish by becoming aware of the deep relaxation of the entire physical body. Feel a loss of body outline, a detachment of the mind from the physical body and a sensation of floating — ‘mental freedom’. Allow yourself to remain passive, yet aware within this state of deep relaxation for at least a further 5 to 10 minutes.

This process, though it sounds simple, when performed slowly and with proper attention, can give you a sensation of deep relaxation previously unknown. It truly is a powerful practice. Use it often!

PRANAYAMA STRESS RELIEF TECHNIQUES

Vibhagha Pranayama

The lungs have 3 distinct regions (or lobes) – the lower, middle and upper. The Sanskrit word *vibhagha* means ‘section’, or ‘division’. *Vibhagha pranayama* teaches lobular (sectional) breathing, or control of the breath within each of these three distinct regions of the lungs. This pranayama, or breathing technique is the ‘A-B-C’ of proper breathing, the foundation for good breath control and the bedrock of good health.

The lungs are divided into three major sections:

1. **Adhama**, the inferior or lower abdominal area.
2. **Madhyama**, the mid or intercostal (rib cage) area.
3. **Adhyama**, the superior, high or clavicular area.

In the practice of vibhagha pranayama, we divide the breathing practice into three parts, focusing on each area of the lungs individually and then, at the end, performing them all together as the **mahat yoga pranayama**, or the ‘complete yogic breath’.

Methods

Important Notes:

- › The breath (both the inhalation and exhalation) should move through the **nostrils only**.
- › When breathing, both the incoming and the outgoing breath should be of equal length and volume. In the beginning, try to make each inhalation and each exhalation last for a minimum of 4 to 6 counts (roughly 4 to 6 seconds each), increasing the duration as lung capacity improves.

Adham Pranayama

- › To control the lower or inferior lobes of the lungs, place the palms of the hands onto the lower margin of the rib cage, in the region of the diaphragm.
- › Inhale deeply and slowly, doing your best to send the breath deep down into the lower portion of the lungs. In other words, do not let the mid-chest or shoulders expand.
- › Exhale and slowly releasing the air.
- › Perform 6 rounds of this lower-lung breath.



Madhyam Pranayama

- » To control the breath into the middle lobes of the lungs, place the hands onto the mid-chest, over the breast region.
- » Breathe slowly and deeply, gradually expanding the mid-chest region and filling the middle part of the lungs.
- » Thus time, avoid expanding both the lower, abdominal region as well as the upper shoulders.
- » Exhale and slowly empty the lungs.
- » Perform this mid-lung breathing 6 times,



Adhyam Pranayama

- » To control the superior lobes of the lungs, place the hands onto the upper chest just below the clavicles (the collar bones) and slowly breathe high up into the upper chest.
- » Exhale and slowly empty the upper lungs.
- » Again, perform 6 rounds.



Mahat Yoga Pranayama

In this 'complete yogic breath' the air is consciously directed sequentially to the three parts of the lungs.

- » Place the right hand onto the diaphragm region and the left hand at the mid chest.
- » Start a long, slow, deep breath regulating the first two counts to the low lung area.
- » Continue inhaling, filling the mid-chest region for another two counts and then move the right hand to the upper chest (pic 2).
- » Fill the upper area of the lungs for the next two counts.
- » Return your hands to the start position (pic 1) and let the breath out in the same order, first deflating the low lungs, then the mid-lungs, and then finally the upper lungs.

Note: Pay close attention that the length of the breath is equal for each of the three lobe sections (i.e., 1/3 each).

- » Take a short rest at this point and then repeat the entire cycle for a total of 6 to 9 full rounds.

* When finished all 4 parts of this practice, lie down in *shava asana* and allow yourself to relax for 5 to 10 minutes.



7. Chandra Pranayama

Chandra is the Sanskrit word for ‘moon’. Here it refers to the ‘left side’, as the body is regarded as having two distinct energetic sides, the right (solar or positive) and the left (lunar or negative).

This *pranayama* is particularly effective for those who suffer from of anxiety, hypertension and other stress-related conditions.

Method

- › Take up a comfortable seated position, where the spine is vertical.
- › Close your right nostril with your thumb.

Note: Do not press too hard... only firmly enough to block the flow of air through it

- › Inhale slowly through your left nostril for a count of four.
- › Exhale through the same left nostril for a count of eight.

Note: Keep the right nostril closed all the time during the practice.

- › Repeat this again for a total of nine rounds.



8. Mukha Bhastrika

Mukha is the Sanskrit word for ‘mouth’ (or face), and therefore, the *mukha bhastrika* is the forceful expulsion of air through the mouth. This practice is performed while sitting in *vajra asana* (kneeling/heel-sitting position). Here, the breath is ‘blasted out’ through the mouth, which is puckered as if you were going to whistle. This mouth gesture is known as *kaki mudra*, or the ‘crow’s beak gesture’.

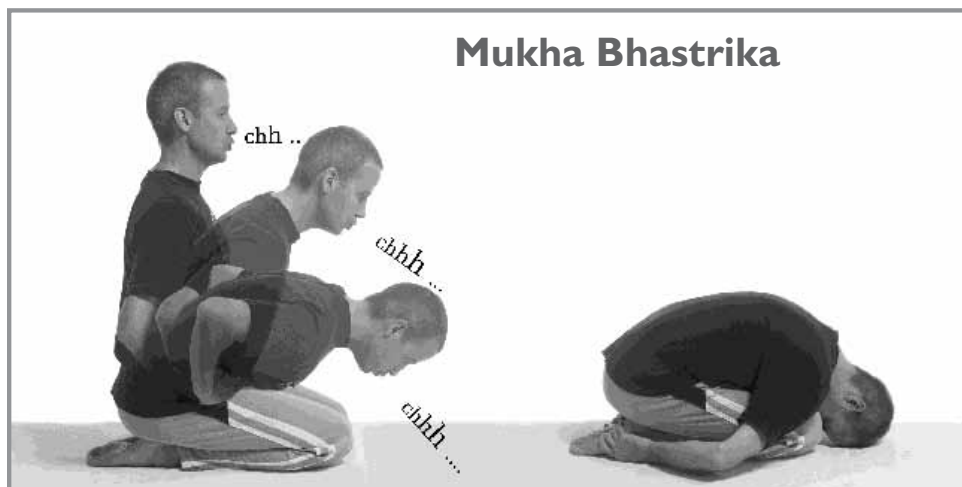
This technique helps to remove old, stagnant air from the lungs and cleanses the bloodstream of excess carbon dioxide, which is associated with mental fatigue, altered nerve sensations and physical weakness. It is a great technique for ‘blasting away’ stress too!

Method

- » Sit in *vajra asana*, the heel-sitting position.
- » Begin by taking in a long and full breath through the nose, filling all three parts of the lungs.
- » Perform *kaki mudra* and blast the breath out in several short bursts.
- » After the first couple of ‘blasts’, slowly bend forward at the waist so that the lungs collapse within the chest cavity, continuing to blast the air out until the lungs are completely empty. Make between 6 to 9 rapid ‘bursts’ of air from the start to the finished position.
- » Inhale deeply as you slowly return to the upright *vajra asana* position, completely re-filling the lungs again.
- » Repeat this process 3 to 6 times.

Important Note: The breath should only be pushed ‘out’ of the lungs. Therefore, no air is taken in at all while the lungs are gradually emptied completely with the 6 to 9 ‘out bursts’.

- » After the final performance, remain with your forehead on the floor, breath calmly and relax in this position for a few minutes.





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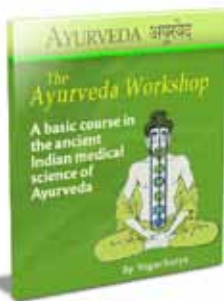
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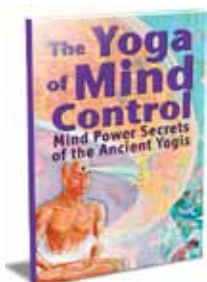
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