

Kapalabhati

Kapalabhati (kapala means “skull” and bhati means “to shine or to be lustrous”) is said to make the skull shine by cleansing the nasal passages and sinuses and ultimately supplying the brain with fresh, oxygen-rich blood. It also cleanses the throat and lungs and stimulates the abdominal muscles and organs.

Most of the many yoga breathing practices emphasize muscular control during inhalation, not exhalation. Kapalabhati reverses this pattern: here it is the exhalation that is active, and the inhalation passive. And unlike most yoga breathing exercises, kapalabhati is initially energizing rather than calming; cleansing and heating, rather than cooling.

The Technique

Kapalabhati is practiced in a seated pose, and it is important to maintain a steady posture during the practice. Make sure that the head, neck and trunk are erect and that your body is stable and comfortable.

The essence of kapalabhati is a steady repetition of forceful exhalations followed by slower, passive, inhalations. Each outward breath is propelled by a powerful inward thrust of the abdomen; following this thrust the abdomen is relaxed and the breath automatically flows back into the lungs, recoiling from the force of the exhalation. Each inhalation is smooth and effortless and prepares the respiratory system for the next strike of the abdomen, which again drives air up and out through the nose. A cycle of exhalation and inhalation is counted as one breath, and a prescribed number of repetitions is completed depending on the capacity of the student. All breaths are through the nose.

The correct practice of kapalabhati produces a clear crisp sound as the breath leaves the nostrils. The air passing through the throat does not interfere with the sound, and the cheeks always remain in place without puffing out. The exhalation in kapalabhati is created by the inward-thrusting abdomen, not by other accessory muscles, and it is important not to involve the muscles of the chest, the shoulders, or the neck and face in the vigorous contractions.

Picking Up Speed

After a little practice, when the movements of the breath seem comfortable, you must establish a rhythmic pace. A good starting rate is about one second for exhalation and 2-3 seconds for inhalation. You may increase the speed gradually; however, it is important not to sacrifice the vigor of the abdominal contractions merely for the sake of going faster. And whatever the speed, the breaths are always nasal and there are no pauses between them.

Benefits and Cautions:

Kapalabhati is a breathing exercise with connections to many systems of yoga practice. It is one of six practices (shat kriyas) taught in hatha yoga for internal cleansing—it purifies the lungs, the air passageways, and the subtle nerve currents, or nadis. It is energizing and heating, and because of its effect on the respiratory center, a few rounds are also done before more advanced pranayama practices.

Kapalabhati oxygenates the blood: thus it renews body tissues and helps to arrest the process of aging. It is said to correct ailments arising from coldness, and it is beneficial for nerves, circulation, and metabolism. It is said to invigorate the lungs and increase respiratory capacity. If you are trying to stop smoking, the practice of kapalabhati followed by breath awareness in the crocodile pose will be helpful.

As in all breathing practices, there are cautions to be followed. Kapalabhati is not to be practiced by persons with high or low blood pressure or with coronary heart disease. Those who have problems with their eyes (e.g. glaucoma), ears (e.g. fluid in the ears) or a bleeding nose should not practice this exercise. For these problems consult with a physician who is familiar with the practice.

Always practice on an empty stomach, two or more hours after eating. Stop if you experience pain in your side, if you feel dizzy, or if you are unable to maintain a steady rhythm. Most important, pay full attention to your capacity. This practice will build stamina if it is allowed to develop over time. Whenever signs of fatigue develop, end your practice.

Establishing a practice:

Practice kapalabhati twice a day. Because these breaths can be energizing, it is usually best to do this in the morning and either late afternoon or early evening rather than just before bedtime. In the context of a full yoga practice, kapalabhati comes at the end of your posture routine and before alternate nostril breathing and meditation. This will reduce physical and mental lethargy and keep the mind alert and refreshed.

In order to establish a practice of kapalabhati, keep three objectives in mind:

- Build abdominal strength to create forceful contractions.
- Gradually increase the speed of the breaths to the desired pace.
- Gradually increase the number of repetitions.

The practice is done in rounds. In the beginning, 11 expulsions of air constitute one round, and 1-3 rounds are completed at one sitting. Pause between rounds and breathe normally to rest and relax your nervous system. You can slowly increase the number of repetitions in a round, but always stay within your capacity.