



KAPALABHATI



Practicing Kapalabhati on a regular basis results in a shining face glowing with inner radiance. Kapalabhati clears the stale and residual air from the entire respiratory system. It purifies the blood and super-saturates the cells with both breath and prana. It also strengthens abdominal muscles, stimulates cellular metabolism and improves the bowel movement. Kapalabhati also strengthens the heart and nervous system. It helps to raise energy to the brain and prepares your mind for meditation.

Kapalabhati should, ideally, be done daily and regularly, particularly after Neti and prior to Pranayama.

Kapalabhati (Skull Shining) Pranayama

One of the prominent yogis from India, Yogiraj Dr. Om Prakash ji, who was on a US visit last summer, presented a series of yoga sessions at the Hindu Bhavan Cultural Hall in Morrisville, NC. He highlighted the value of pranayama (breathing practices) in general as an integral component of any yoga routine. However, he specifically emphasized the importance of Kapaalabhaati and called it "sarvaroga nivarini" which literally means '(a practice) that can heal all types of ailments'. When practiced regularly under proper guidance it can bring about radiant health and provide other benefits at a more subtle level. Another very famous yogi from India, Swami Ramdev, who has shot to fame via his daily TV programs, calls it 'the Sanjeevani' which is an herb that can supposedly bring even a dead body back to life. This is based on a famous parable in Ramayana - "When Lakshmana was wounded, Hanuman flew to the Himalayas for the medicinal herb Sanjeevani. Unable to identify the Sanjeevani, he wrested the entire mountain from the land and carried it to Lakshmana". Based on these strong statements from prominent yogis of today, it is easy to see why it is important to include this practice in your daily yoga routine.

In the classical Hatha Yoga text "Hatha Yoga Pradeepika", Kapaalabhaati is described as one of the six cleansing kriyas (shatkarma). However, because it involves manipulation of the breath and offers great benefits, it is widely practiced as a part of the pranayama techniques.

Not sure how to pronounce kapAlabhAti? The 'A' represents a long vowel sound, somewhat like the 'o' in 'mom' (American) or the 'a' in 'fast' (British).

Contraindications

Before I describe the technique it is important to understand that people with the following conditions should not practice kapaalabhaati - cardiac problems, nasal congestion, severe cold, severe headache, abdominal ulcers, hernia. People with high blood pressure should either refrain from it or practice a milder version of the technique.





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Pregnant women and those who have had recent abdominal surgery should also refrain from this practice.

One cautionary note - practice kapaalabhaati on an empty stomach, preferably in the morning. However, if your schedule only allows you to practice it during the day/evening, then you should give a gap of at least 2.5 hours after eating a meal.

The Technique

Now let us turn our attention to the technique itself and learn how to practice it. Sit in any comfortable position with the spine erect. You can sit either cross-legged or in “vajrasana” (the diamond pose) or in any position that you feel comfortable in. If you have problem sitting on the floor, you can even sit in a chair, preferably with the spine erect and not resting against the back of the chair. Breathe normally for a few breaths. Once composed, you can begin by first exhaling and then inhaling half-way. First, exercise the diaphragm by exhaling suddenly and quickly through both nostrils while simultaneously drawing the abdominal muscles inwards. The brisk and vigorous exhalation produces a “puffing” sound. Allow the abdominal muscles to relax at the end of exhalation and let the inhalation happen automatically and passively. The rate of expulsion will vary from one individual to the next depending upon capacity. On the average, one can maintain a rate between 70 to 120 expulsions per minute (remember the normal breathing rate is 12 to 15 breaths per minute).

It is important to understand that you should not strain or become uncomfortable during the practice. If you begin to feel dizzy or uncomfortable in any way, it means that you are trying too hard or trying to breathe too forcefully. At this point stop the practice and sit quietly for some time before trying it again. Start with only 20-30 expulsions per round and try three rounds. Over a period of time, with practice, you can increase the number of breaths per round. A little rest can be taken in between the rounds according to your convenience. Throughout the exercise, the chest should be kept still without expansion or contraction and the shoulders should remain steady and relaxed. Only the diaphragm is used for breathing and not the upper chest.

An Alternate Approach

Some of you might have some difficulty getting the technique right in the beginning. In that case, you can try this alternate approach. Put both your hands on your belly, just a little below the navel. Keep the belly soft. Now push your abdomen in with your hands and at the same time try to throw all the air out of the lungs in a forceful, brisk manner. At the end of the exhalation, allow the inhalation to happen passively. Repeat the pushing with the hands accompanied by expulsion of air and then passive inhalation. When this rhythm seems to become natural, you may try to remove the hands from the belly and continue with the practice.





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Benefits of Kapaalabhaati

Kapaalabhaati helps clear mucous from the lungs. As air moves into the throat, it travels down the superior portion of the airway called the trachea. The walls of this single tubed airway consist of several layers, of which the innermost layer is lined with cilia cells. Cilia are microscopic, grass-like projections that continually beat and propel mucous that traps dust particles, bacteria and debris. This mucous is propelled by the cilia toward the pharynx where it is released by coughing or swallowing. Smoking inhibits and ultimately destroys cilia. When the cilia function, as described above, is lost, coughing is the only method of moving accumulated mucous out of the lungs. Because of the cleansing effect on the lungs, this practice is recommended for people who suffer from respiratory ailments like bronchitis, asthma, tuberculosis etc.

The force of the exhalations in Kapaalabhaati acts further on debris-filled mucous in the lungs and trachea. This additional force works with the cilia and helps move the mucous more readily up the airway against gravity. Coughing after Kapaalabhaati helps in releasing these impurities. In addition to removing mucous, Kapaalabhaati also helps expel more carbon dioxide and other waste gases from the cells and lungs compared to normal breathing.

The rapid and forceful movement of the abdominal muscles in Kapaalabhaati gives a massage to the internal organs. With each vigorous exhalation, the abdominal walls draw inwards applying pressure on internal organs. This pressure helps increase the circulation of blood flow into and out of abdominal organs. This massage also sends a direct pressure into the digestive system helping move remaining food and fecal matter through the intestines and colon. Kapaalabhaati helps in reducing the incidence of constipation. With this increased circulation of blood and material in the internal organs comes a release of toxins as well.

Literally, the word kapaalabhaati means 'skull shining' (kapaala = skull; bhaati = shining/polishing). Regular practice is supposed to clear and calm the mind and over a period of time, one develops a healthy natural glow on the face. It also brings about the state of 'pratyahara' (sense withdrawal) which prepares the mind for meditation.

Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God.

