



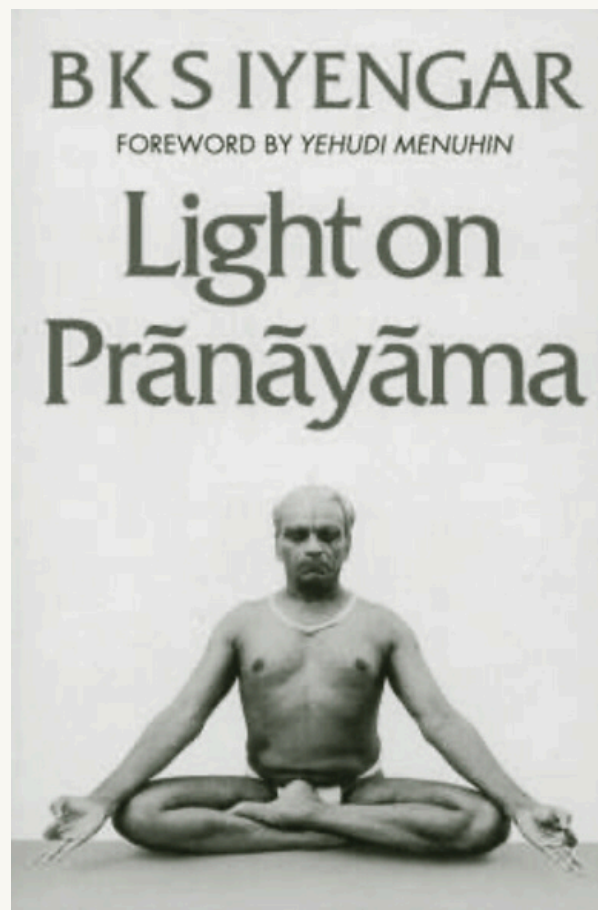
Yoga

READERS

WITH AGI WITTICH

LIGHT ON PRĀṆĀYĀMA

STUDY COMPANION



LIGHT ON PRĀṆĀYĀMA

STUDY COMPANION



Welcome

Thank you for joining this journey through B.K.S. Iyengar's Light on Prāṇāyāma. This Study Companion brings together everything you need to engage deeply with the text – whether you're reading alone, studying with the Yoga Readers community, or preparing to teach.

Inside you'll find:

- Reading schedule with page numbers and main themes for each unit
- Focus questions to guide your reading
- Reflection prompts for journaling and integration with your practice
- Practical tools for using this material with students or study groups
- Sanskrit terms with transliteration and explanations
- Further reading to continue your exploration

You can work through this linearly, or jump to whatever section serves you now. The questions and prompts are meant to open inquiry, not to be "answered" definitively. Return to them as your practice deepens.

How to Use This Study Companion

First Time Through

1. Read the unit overview to orient yourself
2. Review the focus questions before reading the assigned pages
3. Read the text slowly, marking passages that resonate or confuse
4. Return to focus questions – can you engage with them now?
5. Choose one reflection prompt that calls to you
6. Write for 10-15 minutes in response

Returning to Material

1. Start with the reflection prompts – how do they meet you now?
2. Reread the text passages that confused you initially
3. Notice what's different in your understanding
4. Consider: How has practice changed since your first reading?

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Reading Schedule

Foundations (Pages x-31)
Session Date: February 1, 2026

Subtle Architecture (Pages 32-63)
Session Date: February 15, 2026

Embodied Practice (Pages 64-98)
Session Date: March 1, 2026

The Art of Breath (Pages 99-120)
Session Date: March 15, 2026

Techniques I (Pages 123-151)
Session Date: March 29, 2026

Techniques II (Pages 152-184)
Session Date: April 11, 2026

Advanced Integration (Pages 185-220)
Session Date: April 26, 2026

Beyond Technique (Pages 223-254)
Session Date: May 10, 2026

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Foundations

Read: Pages x-31
Session Date: February 1, 2026

Main Themes

- Prāṇāyāma as the "heart of yoga"
 - The eight limbs - prāṇāyāma as bridge between external and internal practice
 - Subtle anatomy of prāṇa through Sāṅkhya philosophy
 - Five kośas (sheaths), nāḍīs, and chakras
- Connection between ancient wisdom and modern respiratory physiology

Summary

This foundational section establishes Iyengar's philosophical framework for understanding prāṇāyāma as the "heart of yoga." Beginning with traditional invocations to Hanumān and Patañjali, Iyengar presents yoga as a comprehensive system for self-realization rather than mere physical exercise. He outlines the eight limbs of yoga, emphasizing how prāṇāyāma serves as the crucial bridge between external practices (yama, niyama, āsana) and internal disciplines (pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, samādhi). The text explores the subtle anatomy of prāṇa through the lens of Sāṅkhya philosophy, introducing the concept of five sheaths (kośas) that envelope the soul and the intricate network of nāḍīs and chakras through which vital energy flows. Iyengar connects ancient wisdom with modern respiratory physiology, demonstrating how conscious breathing practices can purify the nervous system and prepare the practitioner for deeper spiritual work.

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Foundations

Read: Pages x-31
Session Date: February 1, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. Who is Ādi Śeṣa and why does Iyengar invoke him at the beginning of the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā reference?
2. What are the five kośas (sheaths) and how do they relate to prāṇāyāma practice?
3. How many nāḍīs does Iyengar say originate from the heart, and which Upaniṣad is he referencing?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. How does your current understanding of breath compare to Iyengar's description of prāṇa as cosmic energy?
2. When you practice āsana, do you experience the subtle body (energy, breath, awareness) or primarily the physical body?
3. How do you personally experience the connection between breath awareness and mental states?

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Foundations

Read: Pages x-31
Session Date: February 1, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Prāṇa (प्राण)

breath, life force, vital energy

Iyengar distinguishes between prāṇa as breath (the physical act) and prāṇa as the vital energy that animates us. He also uses prāṇa to refer to one of the five directional movements of energy in the body (prāṇa-vāyu). Prāṇa is described as the bridge between body and mind, the link between material and spiritual existence.

Prāṇāyāma (प्राणायाम)

breath control, extension of prāṇa

Etymology: prāṇa (life force) + āyāma (extension, expansion, restraint)
Iyengar emphasizes prāṇāyāma as the deliberate regulation and extension of breath to influence the nervous system and prepare for meditation. Not merely "breathing exercises." He calls it "the heart of yoga" - the bridge between the outer limbs (yama, niyama, āsana) and the inner limbs (pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, samādhi).

Kośa (कोश) (plural: kośas)

sheath, layer, covering

The five sheaths that envelope the soul - annamaya (food sheath), prāṇamaya (vital energy sheath), manomaya (mental sheath), vijñānamaya (wisdom sheath), ānandamaya (bliss sheath). Prāṇāyāma works primarily with the prāṇamaya kośa but affects all layers. Iyengar explains how breath practice penetrates through the layers from gross to subtle.

Subtle Architecture

Read: Pages 32–63
Session Date: February 15, 2026

Main Themes

- Sacred relationship between guru and śiṣya
- Embodied practice (sādhana) under proper guidance
- The role of food (anna) as foundation for spiritual practice
- Patañjali's obstacles to practice and practical solutions
- Therapeutic and spiritual effects of prāṇāyāma

Summary

This section delves into the traditional framework of yogic learning and the practical foundations necessary for prāṇāyāma practice. Iyengar explores the sacred relationship between guru and śiṣya, drawing on classical examples like Nachiketa and Yama from the Kaṭhōpaniṣad. The text emphasizes that true learning requires not just intellectual understanding but embodied practice (sādhana) under proper guidance. Significant attention is given to the role of food (anna) as the foundation for spiritual practice, connecting dietary choices with mental clarity and prāṇic vitality. The chapter on obstacles addresses Patañjali's comprehensive list of impediments to yogic practice, offering practical solutions rooted in ethical living and disciplined practice. The effects of prāṇāyāma are presented both therapeutically and spiritually, demonstrating how breath practices purify the physical body while preparing consciousness for subtler states of awareness.

Subtle Architecture

Read: Pages 32–63
Session Date: February 15, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. Which heroic figure from the Kaṭhōpaniṣad is mentioned as an example of the ideal student, and what did he seek from Yama?
2. What are the six “destroyers of yoga practices” mentioned from the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā?
3. How does Iyengar describe the three categories of students (śiṣyas)?
4. What specific warning does the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā give about improper prāṇāyāma practice?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. What “obstacles” from Patañjali’s list do you recognize most in your personal practice?
2. How has your relationship with food and eating changed through your yoga practice?
3. In what ways do you see yourself in the three categories of students, and how has this evolved?
4. How do you balance caution about prāṇāyāma’s power with encouraging students to explore breath practices?

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Subtle Architecture

Read: Pages 32–63
Session Date: February 15, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Nāḍī (नाडी) (plural: nāḍīs)
channel, tube, nerve

The subtle energy channels through which prāṇa flows. Iyengar details the network of 72,000 nāḍīs, focusing on the three principal channels – iḍā (lunar, cooling), piṅgalā (solar, heating), and suṣumnā (central). He explains their relationship to the chakras and how proper prāṇāyāma purifies these channels.

Guru (गुरु)

teacher, spiritual guide

Etymology: gu (darkness) + ru (light); one who leads from darkness to light

Iyengar emphasizes the sacred relationship between guru and śiṣya as essential for safe prāṇāyāma practice. The guru transmits not just technique but understanding, watches for dangers, and guides the student's progression. He stresses that prāṇāyāma should never be learned from books alone.

Śiṣya (शिष्य)

student, disciple

Iyengar describes three types of students – adhama (dull), madhyama (average), and uttama (keen). He details the qualities of an ideal student: humility, dedication, patience, and willingness to practice steadily under guidance. The śiṣya must approach prāṇāyāma with reverence and discipline.

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Embodied Practice

Read: Pages 64–98
Session Date: March 1, 2026

Main Themes

- Physical foundations for prāṇāyāma – sitting postures
- Padmāsana as "queen of postures" and preparation for prāṇic flow
- Preparing the mind – receptive, witnessing quality of consciousness
- The three principal bandhas as energetic seals
- Body as temple – physical mastery serving consciousness transformation

Summary

This technical yet deeply philosophical section establishes the physical foundations necessary for prāṇāyāma practice. Iyengar provides extraordinarily detailed instructions for sitting postures, emphasizing that the body becomes a temple when properly aligned for breath practice. The extensive discussion of padmāsana reveals how this “king of postures” creates optimal conditions for prāṇic flow and mental equilibrium. The preparation of the mind receives equal attention, with emphasis on the receptive, witnessing quality of consciousness needed for subtle breath work. The three principal bandhas are introduced as energetic seals that prevent the dissipation of prāṇa and direct it toward spiritual awakening. Jalādhara bandha humbles the intellect, uddīyāna lifts the life force upward, and mūla bandha transforms sexual energy into spiritual power. Throughout, Iyengar maintains that physical mastery serves the deeper purpose of consciousness transformation.

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Embodied Practice

Read: Pages 64–98
Session Date: March 1, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. In the Bhagavad Gītā passage quoted about sitting for meditation, what specific materials does Kṛṣṇa mention for the seat?
2. What does “jalādhara bandha” literally mean, and how does it affect the solar and lunar plexuses?
3. What are the three crucial spots to be aware of in correct sitting posture?
4. What does Iyengar mean when he compares the spine to an Indian lute (vīṇā)?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. How does your experience of sitting for prāṇāyāma change when you focus on detailed alignment principles?
2. What challenges do you face in maintaining alertness while keeping the brain passive during prāṇāyāma practice?
3. How does understanding the body as a “temple” or “field” change your relationship to physical practice?

Embodied Practice

Read: Pages 64–98
Session Date: March 1, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Jalādhara Bandha (जालन्धर बन्ध)

chin lock, throat lock

Etymology: jala (net, web) + dhara (holding); holds the network of nāḍīs. The chin is brought down toward the chest, creating a lock at the throat. Iyengar describes this as essential for safe retention, as it prevents prāṇa from moving upward too forcefully and protects the heart and brain. He provides detailed instructions for correct positioning.

Uddīyāna Bandha (उड्डीयान बन्ध)

upward flying lock, abdominal lock

Etymology: ud (up) + dī (to fly); the diaphragm flies upward. The abdominal organs are drawn inward and upward toward the spine. Iyengar explains this as creating a powerful lift of energy from the lower to upper body. He warns this should only be practiced on empty stomach and describes its effects on the digestive and nervous systems.

Mūla Bandha (मूल बन्ध)

root lock

Etymology: mūla (root, base)

Contraction and lifting of the pelvic floor, particularly the perineum. Iyengar describes this as the foundation of energy control, preventing downward dissipation of prāṇa and directing it upward through suṣumnā. He discusses its subtle nature and difficulty to master.

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The Art of Breath

Read: Pages 99–120
Session Date: March 15, 2026

Main Themes

- Fundamental techniques as conscious artistry
- Inhalation (pūraka) as receiving cosmic energy
- Exhalation (rechaka) as surrendering to unite with universal consciousness
- The art of retention (kumbhaka) – sahita and kevala forms
- Grading practitioners – quality over quantity
- Bija prāṇāyāma and sacred sound
- Vṛtti prāṇāyāma – sama and viṣama ratios

Summary

This section presents the fundamental techniques of prāṇāyāma as conscious artistry rather than mere breathing exercises. Iyengar describes inhalation (pūraka) as receiving cosmic energy and exhalation (rechaka) as surrendering individual energy to unite with universal consciousness. The art of retention (kumbhaka) is presented as the pause where transformation occurs – both sahita (intentional) and kevala (spontaneous) forms are explored. The grading of practitioners from beginner (adhama) to advanced (uttama) emphasizes that quality and subtlety matter more than duration or force. Bija prāṇāyāma introduces the use of sacred sounds, particularly AUM, as vehicles for focusing the wandering mind and connecting with divine consciousness. The chapter on vṛtti prāṇāyāma distinguishes between sama vṛtti (equal ratios) and viṣama vṛtti (unequal ratios), with warnings about the dangers of advanced ratio work without proper preparation and guidance.

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The Art of Breath

Read: Pages 99–120
Session Date: March 15, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. What is the unconscious mantra that every being naturally breathes according to the text
2. What is the ideal ratio for viṣama vṛtti prāṇāyāma?
3. What are the three syllables that emerged from the three Vedas when Prajāpati brooded upon creation, and what do they represent?
4. How does Iyengar describe the difference between sabīja and nirbīja prāṇāyāma?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. How do you experience the difference between mechanical breathing and conscious prāṇāyāma?
2. What is your relationship to retention (kumbhaka) – do you approach it with curiosity, fear, or ambition?
3. How do you balance the desire for progression in prāṇāyāma with the need for patience and gradual development?

The Art of Breath

Read: Pages 99–120
Session Date: March 15, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Kumbhaka (कुम्भक)

retention, holding

Etymology: kumbha (pot, pitcher); the torso as a vessel holding breath

The pause between breaths where transformation occurs. Iyengar distinguishes between sahita kumbhaka (deliberate, with effort) and kevala kumbhaka (spontaneous, effortless). He emphasizes approaching retention with great caution and proper preparation, warning of dangers if practiced prematurely.

Pūraka (पूरक)

inhalation, filling

Etymology: pūr (to fill)

The act of receiving cosmic energy, drawing prāṇa into the body.

Iyengar emphasizes quality and control over force or quantity. He describes how proper pūraka should be smooth, continuous, and expanding - filling the lungs from bottom to top without strain.

Rechaka (रेचक)

exhalation, emptying

Etymology: ric (to empty out, to reject)

In this book: The act of surrendering individual energy to unite with universal consciousness. Iyengar often emphasizes rechaka as more important than pūraka. Complete exhalation prepares the lungs for fresh prāṇa and symbolizes letting go of the ego. He stresses the exhalation should be longer and more controlled than inhalation.

Techniques I

Read: Pages 123–151
Session Date: March 29, 2026

Main Themes

- Ujjāyī – the "victorious breath"
- Progressive stages from therapeutic to advanced practice
- Viloma – "against the grain," interrupted breathing
- Developing sensitivity and control
- Quality of breath over quantity

Summary

This section introduces two foundational prāṇāyāma techniques that work with natural breathing patterns while refining awareness and control. Ujjāyī, the "victorious breath," expands the lungs fully while creating a subtle internal sound that serves as a focal point for concentration. Iyengar presents ujjāyī in progressive stages, beginning with simple awareness practices in lying positions for therapeutic benefit, gradually building to complex retention practices with bandhas for advanced practitioners. The technique serves both as preparation for meditation and as a complete practice in itself. Viloma, meaning "against the hair" or "against natural order," introduces the concept of interrupted breathing – pausing during inhalation or exhalation to develop greater sensitivity and control. This practice trains the nervous system while building the capacity for more advanced techniques. Both practices emphasize the quality of breath over quantity, developing the subtle internal awareness necessary for deeper prāṇāyāma work.

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Techniques I

Read: Pages 123–151
Session Date: March 29, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. What does “ujjāyī” literally mean and why is this breath called “victorious”?
2. What specific therapeutic applications does Iyengar mention for ujjāyī practice in lying positions?
3. In Stage II of ujjāyī, what specific instruction does Iyengar give about the movement of the eyeballs during deep inhalation?
4. What does “viloma” mean and how does this relate to the technique?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. What do you notice about your relationship to control when practicing viloma?
2. What does “victory” over the breath mean to you personally in your practice?
3. How do you balance effort and ease when working with Ujjayi and Viloma?

Techniques I

Read: Pages 123–151
Session Date: March 29, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Ujjāyī (उज्जायी)

victorious breath

Etymology: ud (up, expanding) + jaya (conquest, victory)

A foundational prāṇāyāma technique creating subtle internal sound through partial closure of the glottis. Iyengar presents ujjāyī in progressive stages from therapeutic (lying down) to advanced (with retention and bandhas). The gentle friction creates heat and a soothing sound that helps maintain concentration.

Viloma (विलोम)

against the grain, reverse, interrupted

Etymology: vi (against, opposite) + loma (hair, natural direction)

Interrupted breathing practice – pausing multiple times during inhalation or exhalation to develop sensitivity, control, and lung capacity. Iyengar compares it to climbing stairs, with brief pauses at each step. This technique builds the foundation for more advanced practices and teaches subtle breath control.

Vṛtti (वृत्ति)

modification, pattern, ratio

In this book: The ratio or pattern of breathing. Iyengar describes sama vṛtti (equal ratio – same length for inhalation, retention, exhalation) and viṣama vṛtti (unequal ratio – different lengths, often with longer exhalation). He provides specific ratio progressions like 1:1:1 advancing to 1:2:2 and eventually more complex patterns.

Techniques II

Read: Pages 152–184
Session Date: April 11, 2026

Main Themes

- Bhrāmarī (humming bee breath) – internal sound vibrations
- Digital prāṇāyāma – sophisticated finger control
- Bhasrikā (bellows breath) and kapālabhātī – vigorous practices
- Cooling breaths – sītalī and sītakārī
- Contraindications and warnings

Summary

This section explores specialized prāṇāyāma techniques that require particular skills and serve specific purposes. Bhrāmarī (humming bee breath) creates internal sound vibrations that calm the nervous system and prepare for meditation. Digital prāṇāyāma introduces the sophisticated art of using fingers to control nostril openings, requiring the development of extreme sensitivity and dexterity. Iyengar compares this to the skill of a master musician, emphasizing how the fingers become instruments for refining the flow of prāṇa. Bhasrikā (bellows breath) and kapālabhātī represent vigorous, heating practices with specific contraindications and warnings about proper application. The cooling breaths sītalī and sītakārī work with the tongue to regulate body temperature and calm the system. Each technique represents a different approach to working with prāṇic energy, from gentle humming to vigorous pumping to precise digital control, demonstrating the vast range of possibilities within prāṇāyāma practice.

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Techniques II

Read: Pages 152–184
Session Date: April 11, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. What does “bhrāmarī” mean and when is the best time to practice it?
2. Which fingers are recommended for digital prāṇāyāma and why are the fore and middle fingers not used?
3. What are the five elements (panchamahābhūtas) located in the nose according to Śiva Svarodaya?
4. What serious warning does Iyengar give about bhasrikā practice for women?
5. How do sītalī and sītakārī differ in tongue position?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. What draws you more – the vigorous energizing practices or the cooling, calming techniques?
2. What role does sound (whether humming, hissing, or internal) play in your prāṇāyāma experience?
3. How do you balance curiosity about advanced techniques with respect for their power and potential risks?

Techniques II

Read: Pages 152-184
Session Date: April 11, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Bhrāmarī (भ्रामरी)

humming bee breath

Etymology: bhramara (a large black bee)

A calming practice where the practitioner creates a humming sound during exhalation, resembling a bee's buzz. Iyengar describes this as soothing for the nervous system, preparing the mind for pratyāhāra and meditation. He notes it's best practiced in the evening or before sleep.

Sītalī (शीतली)

cooling breath

Etymology: śīta (cold, cool)

Cooling breath performed by curling the tongue into a tube and inhaling through it. Iyengar explains this reduces body temperature, calms pitta (fire element), and soothes the nervous system. He notes not everyone can curl their tongue anatomically, and provides sītakārī as an alternative.

Bhasrikā (भस्त्रिका)

bellows breath

Etymology: bhastrikā (bellows used by blacksmiths)

A vigorous, heating practice involving rapid, forceful breathing that resembles bellows pumping air. Iyengar provides serious warnings about this technique - it should never be practiced by those with heart conditions, high blood pressure, or during menstruation. It generates tremendous heat and energy and requires careful progression.

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Advanced Integration

Read: Pages 185–220
Session Date: April 26, 2026

Main Themes

- Anuloma, pratiloma, and nāḍī śodhana prāṇāyāma
- Pinnacle of breath control techniques
- Sūrya bhedana and candra bhedana – solar and lunar energies
- Integration of digital control, retention, and bandhas
- "Constant meticulous attention and firm determination"

Summary

This advanced section presents the sophisticated practices of anuloma, pratiloma, and nāḍī śodhana prāṇāyāma, representing the pinnacle of breath control techniques. Anuloma (“with the grain”) emphasizes controlled exhalation through alternate or both nostrils, while pratiloma (“against the grain”) focuses on refined inhalation control. Both practices require the integration of digital control, retention, and bandhas, demanding years of preparation and exceptional sensitivity. Sūrya bhedana (sun-piercing) and candra bhedana (moon-piercing) work specifically with solar and lunar energies through right and left nostril breathing respectively. The culminating practice of nāḍī śodhana (nerve purification) combines all previous techniques into a complete system for balancing the nervous system and preparing for meditation. Iyengar emphasizes that these practices require “constant meticulous attention and firm determination,” representing the marriage of technical precision with deep spiritual purpose. The detailed stages and progressions demonstrate how advanced prāṇāyāma becomes a complete path of transformation.

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Advanced Integration

Read: Pages 185–220
Session Date: April 26, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. What is the key difference in emphasis between anuloma and pratiloma prāṇāyāma?
2. What does “nāḍī śodhana” literally mean and why is it called the most difficult prāṇāyāma?
3. How many possible permutations and combinations exist for sūrya and candra bhedana with viloma techniques?
4. What specific brain effects does Iyengar describe for advanced nāḍī śodhana practice?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. How do you personally experience the difference between solar (heating) and lunar (cooling) breath practices?
2. How has learning about these advanced techniques changed your appreciation for simpler practices?
3. What does “nerve purification” mean to you based on your own experience with alternate nostril breathing?

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Read: Pages 185–220
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Sanskrit Terms

Nāḍī Śodhana (नाडीशोधन)

nerve purification, channel cleansing

Etymology: nāḍī (channel) + śodhana (purification, cleansing)

The culminating practice combining all previous techniques into a complete system for balancing the nervous system through alternate nostril breathing. Iyengar calls this "the most difficult prāṇāyāma" because it integrates digital control, specific ratios, retention, and bandhas. When perfected, it purifies all the nāḍīs and balances iḍā and piṅgalā.

Anuloma (अनुलोम)

with the grain, natural order

Etymology: anu (with, following) + loma (hair, natural direction)

Alternate nostril breathing where inhalation alternates between nostrils but exhalation is through both. Iyengar presents this as a preparatory practice for nāḍī śodhana. It begins to establish balance between iḍā and piṅgalā while being gentler than full alternate nostril work.

Pratiloma (प्रतिलोम)

against the grain, reverse order

Etymology: prati (against, opposite) + loma (hair, natural direction)

The complement to anuloma – inhalation through both nostrils, exhalation alternating. Iyengar describes this as emphasizing control of exhalation, which he considers more important than inhalation. Combined with anuloma, it provides comprehensive alternate nostril training before full nāḍī śodhana practice.

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Beyond Technique

Read: Pages 223–254
Session Date: May 10, 2026

Main Themes

- Transition from technical mastery to spiritual purpose
- Dhyāna (meditation) as natural flowering of breath work
- Śavāsana as the most difficult practice
- Integration of body, breath, mind, intelligence, and Self
- Pointing toward samādhi

Summary

This profound section transitions from the technical mastery of prāṇāyāma to its ultimate spiritual purpose. Dhyāna (meditation) is presented not as a separate practice but as the natural flowering of refined breath work. Iyengar describes meditation as the integration of all aspects of being – body, breath, mind, intelligence, and Self – into unified awareness. The detailed instructions reveal meditation as both effortless and requiring perfect preparation through the preceding limbs of yoga. Śavāsana receives unprecedented attention as the most difficult of all practices, requiring the conscious simulation of death while maintaining complete awareness. The extensive technical instructions for relaxation demonstrate how apparent simplicity masks profound depth. Both practices represent the culmination of yoga – dhyāna as the active absorption in ultimate reality, and śavāsana as the passive dissolution of individual identity. Together they point toward the final goal of samādhi, where the practitioner experiences union with cosmic consciousness.

LIGHT ON PRĀṆĀYĀMA

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Beyond Technique

Read: Pages 223–254
Session Date: May 10, 2026

Focus Questions

These questions guide your attention as you read. Let them orient you toward what matters in each section.

1. What are the “nine gates” of the body that must be closed in meditation?
2. What hand position (mudrā) does Iyengar recommend for dhyāna and what is its significance?
3. Why is śavāsana considered “the most difficult of yogic āsanās to perfect”?
4. What are the four states of consciousness that yoga teaches, and which is the goal?

Reflection Prompts

Read these during or after you read to connect the teachings with your embodied experience.

1. How has your pranayama practice influenced your ability to remain present during challenging situations?
2. What role does the concept of surrender play in your personal practice and teaching?
3. What has been your experience with the relationship between deep relaxation and insight or clarity?

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Beyond Technique

Read: Pages 223-254
Session Date: May 10, 2026

Sanskrit Terms

Dhyāna (ध्यान)

meditation, sustained contemplation

Etymology: dhyai (to think, meditate)

Not a separate practice but the natural flowering of refined breath work. Iyengar describes dhyāna as the integration of body, breath, mind, intelligence, and Self into unified awareness. He explains it as "like deep sleep, but with a difference" - complete relaxation with full awareness. Prāṇāyāma prepares the nervous system and mind for this state.

Pratyāhāra (प्रत्याहार)

withdrawal of the senses, sense control

Etymology: prati (against, away) + āhāra (food, taking in)

The fifth limb of yoga, the bridge between outer practices (āsana, prāṇāyāma) and inner meditation practices. Iyengar describes how refined prāṇāyāma naturally leads to pratyāhāra as the senses withdraw from external objects and turn inward. The mind becomes internalized and no longer pulled by sensory stimuli.

Samādhi (समाधि)

absorption, contemplation, union

Etymology: sam (together, completely) + ā (toward) + dhā (to hold, to place)

The ultimate goal of yoga - union with cosmic consciousness. Iyengar describes how prāṇāyāma, by purifying the nāḍīs and calming the mind, prepares the way for samādhi. He explains this is not a state to be "achieved" through force but arises naturally when all the preparations have been fulfilled through dedicated practice over many years.

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Further Reading

This is a non-comprehensive list of books from the Iyengar tradition, offered as a doorway into the rich world of prāṇāyāma literature so you can follow whatever directions call to you.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1966). Light on yoga. Schocken.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1988). The tree of yoga. Shambhala.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1996). Light on the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali. Thorsons.

Iyengar, B. K. S., Abrams, D., & Evans, J. J. (2005). Light on life: The yoga journey to wholeness, inner peace, and ultimate freedom. Rodale.

Iyengar, G. S. (n.d.). Yoga: A gem for women. Yoga Vidya Niketan.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (2001). Yoga Dṛṣṭi [With yogic eyes]. In Astadala Yogamala: Collected works of B. K. S. Iyengar (Vol. 2). New Delhi, India: Allied Publishers.

Introduction to pranayama. (1994). Yoga Rahasya.

Our respiratory system. (1994). Yoga Rahasya.

Prana and pranayama. (1998). Yoga Rahasya.

Vedanta of asana and pranayama. (1998). Yoga Rahasya.

Pranayama under Geetaji's guidance. (2006). Yoga Rahasya.

Principle behind the practice of asana and pranayama. (2010). Yoga Rahasya.

The art of pranayama. (2015). Yoga Rahasya.

Glimpses from "Pranayama". (2015). Yoga Rahasya.

Brahmari pranayama. (2016). Yoga Rahasya.

Something to ponder about pranayama. (2016). Yoga Rahasya.

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Academic Research on Pranayama

This is a non-comprehensive selection of academic sources on prāṇāyāma, meant to give you a first taste of the research landscape and perhaps spark your curiosity to explore further.

Campanelli, S., Tort, A. B. L., & Lobão-Soares, B. (2020). Pranayamas and their neurophysiological effects. *International Journal of Yoga*, 13(3), 183–192.

Chetry, D., Tort, A. B. L., de Araujo, D. B., & Lobão-Soares, B. (2024). Exploring the health benefits of Bhramari pranayama (humming bee breathing): A comprehensive literature review. *Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology*, 68(4), 275–286.

Jayawardena, R., Ranasinghe, P., Ranawaka, H., Gamage, N., Dissanayake, D., & Misra, A. (2020). Exploring the therapeutic benefits of pranayama (yogic breathing): A systematic review. *International Journal of Yoga*, 13(2), 99–110.

Jerath, R., Edry, J. W., Barnes, V. A., & Jerath, V. (2006). Physiology of long pranayamic breathing: Neural respiratory elements may provide a mechanism that explains how slow deep breathing shifts the autonomic nervous system. *Medical Hypotheses*, 67(3), 566–571.

Kuppusamy, M., Kamaldeen, D., Pitani, R., Amaldas, J., & Shanmugam, P. (2018). Effects of Bhramari pranayama on health: A systematic review. *Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine*, 8(1), 11–16.

Mallinson, J. (2012). Haṭha Yoga. In *Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Vol. 3, pp. 770–781). Brill.

Mondal, S., Kumar, S., & Mondal, H. (2024). Proposed physiological mechanisms of pranayama: A narrative review. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*, 15(1), 100877.

Mütze, C., Mitzinger, D., & Haller, H. (2025). Effectiveness of pranayama for mental disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16, 1616996.

Sanjana, Y., & Aarti, P. (2025). Effect of pranayama on memory and attention: A systematic review. *Journal of Yoga & Physiotherapy*, 12(3), 555838.

Sengupta, P. (2012). Health impacts of yoga and pranayama: A state-of-the-art review. *International Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 3(7), 444–458.

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Closing Reflections

Light on Prāṇāyāma is not an easy book. Iyengar did not intend it to be. He asks us to read slowly, think carefully, and keep returning as our practice matures.

Some observations from reading this text over many years:

On first reading, the technical details can feel overwhelming. That's normal. You don't need to master every technique described. What matters is absorbing Iyengar's fundamental approach: preparation, precision, patience, and profound respect for prāṇa's power.

On second reading, different passages will stand out. What seemed overly cautious might now seem wise. What seemed mysterious might now resonate with your embodied experience.

On continued reading, the book becomes a companion. You return not to learn something new but to remember something essential you'd forgotten.

On Practice

Iyengar emphasizes repeatedly: prāṇāyāma requires years of preparation. This isn't meant to discourage – it's meant to redirect our attention from achievement to process.

Every breath is an opportunity for practice. Not every breath needs to be prāṇāyāma.

On This Journey

Thank you for taking the time to study this text carefully. In a culture that values speed and efficiency, choosing to read slowly and repeatedly is countercultural. You've invested not just money but something more valuable – your attention.

May your practice deepen. May your breath steady. May you find, in the space between breaths, something that cannot be named but can be known.

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