



Kapalabhati & Bhastrika

Description

Introduction

- While often referred to as a type of *pranayama*, *Kapalabhati* is more technically described as a *kriya* or a cleansing / purification practice.
- The translation of *kapalabhati* is “skull shining.” While some refer to it as the “Breath of Fire,” this may be somewhat confusing as the [Kundalini Breath](#) of Fire can be considered a different practice.
- *Kapalabhati* breathing is often taught at the beginning of class to bring warmth and energy, and during *asanas* for connecting with the [core](#).

Benefits / Effects

The meaning of *kapalabhati* is “skull shining” which describes the intention of the practice: clearing the head.

1. Cleanse nasal passages.
2. Said to “cleanse the energy body” of excess stagnation.
3. Increase alertness.
4. Decrease lethargy.
5. Heat / stimulate.
6. “Purify” nerves.
7. Decrease carbon dioxide.
8. Increase digestive capacity
9. Tone abdominals.
10. Breath may be smoother and/or longer afterward and mind may feel more spacious.

11. While some sources cite the practice as “increasing oxygen absorption,” in *The Science of Yoga* William Broad asserts that most yogic breathing does not actually do this. We mention this so that you can investigate the different perspectives if you wish.

Preparation

Olga Kabel offers the following excellent suggestions for mindfully preparing to practice *kapalabhati*.

1. [Progressive abdominal contraction](#)
2. [Core strengthening](#)
3. [Neck release](#)
4. [Exhale lengthening](#)

Instructions

1. Take slow, deep and steady breaths through the nostrils.
2. Prepare by drawing abdomen in on the exhalation for a few rounds.
3. As you move into *Kapalabhati* breathing, let the belly release as the inhalation arises spontaneously.
4. Continue to speed up exhalations by drawing abdomen in and continuing to let belly release with the inhalation.
5. Keep upper body and face relaxed.
6. In contrast to a natural breath, the exhalation is active, and the inhalation is passive. Simply receive the breath on the inhalation.

Practice up to a minute and then breathe normally before beginning another round. Practice up to 3 rounds.



Kapalabhati Pranayama: The Skull Shining Breath “” [5-min video](#)

Next Step



Experienced practitioners may wish to move to a single nostril version.

1. Breathe only through right nostril for 2 to 3 rounds.
2. Then breathe only through left nostril for 2 to 3 rounds.
3. Complete by practicing *Kapalabhati* through both nostrils for 2 to 3 rounds.

Bhastrika

Related to *Kapalabhati* is *Bhastrika*, or Bellows Breath.

- It has a similar purpose and benefits.
- However, this technique is more advanced and vigorous as it requires a forceful inhale and exhale.

Contraindications

Kapalabhati and *Bhastrika* are [contraindicated](#) in these situations:

- After eating
- [Pregnancy](#)
- Menstruation
- Heart conditions
- High blood pressure
- Eye or ear issues
- [Herniated disc](#)

See [General Practice Cautions](#) for more information.

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