

KAPALBHATI

This breathing practice (pranayama) is a type of bellows breath but only the exhale is forcible. It may be performed at any time of day but only on an empty stomach 3-4 hours after a meal. The Sanskrit word Kapalbhathi means "shining skull". Kapalabhati is one of the 6 hatha yoga cleansing practices – to clear the mind. It is also a pranayama and is then done slightly differently.

How to do it

1. Establish a quiet sitting posture first, and a regular smooth breath with equal length for inhale and exhale. Focus the awareness in the abdomen.
2. Exhale completely then take a relaxed breath in, allowing the belly to expand fully.
3. Exhale forcefully through both nostrils by pulling in the abdominal muscles. Be careful to ensure that the action takes place in the abdomen; no lifting of the chest or shoulders.
4. The next inhalation takes place by passively allowing the abdominal muscles to expand. Inhalation is passive, involving no effort. .
5. After completing 10 breaths rapidly as above, inhale and exhale deeply; this is one round. Practise 3-5 rounds.
6. After completing the practice, sit quietly for a few moments focusing on the eyebrow centre and experiencing calm and quietness.

BENEFITS: purifies ida and pingala nadis and as such balances the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Is used to prepare the mind for mental work, banishing sleepiness; and also to prepare for meditation. Physical benefits - good for asthma; clears the nasal passages, enhances blood circulation to brain.

CAUTIONS: Kapalbhathi should not cause light-headedness; if it does, slow down or stop and rest and ask advice of your yoga teacher. Can be practised by people with chronic breathing difficulties but more slowly and with fewer rounds. Bipolar disorder OK as long as stable.

CONTRA-INDICATIONS: Recent chest surgery, pregnancy, possibly menstruation, unstable high blood pressure, vertigo, epilepsy, stroke history, emphysema.