

Breath of Fire (Bastrika and Kapalabati)

by Pieter Schoonheim Samara

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Just a note, Breath of Fire is not Bastrika. It is also not Kapalabati.

Hopefully, the descriptions here below will help bring some understanding to the proper practice of these pranayamas, so that all may have the maximum benefit of their use by themselves or in combination with Kundalini Yoga postures and movements.

It's important to note that Kundalini Yoga, as taught by Yogi Bhajan is not at all like other yogas or even Kundalini Yoga involving the transmission of energy of a yogi. When one begins the Kundalini Yoga Sadhana as taught by Yogi Bhajan, a relentless process begins that takes you inexorably through all the stages to abide in your True Identity (Sat Nam).

Bastrika in hatha yoga and raja yoga practice is primarily meant to establish a rhythm to the breath with the purpose to make the mind subtle and steady. The diaphragm moves evenly, smoothly, lightly, and in rapid rhythm in and out. In the process, the tendency towards erratic moods and changing thought patterns is subdued.

There are a number of ways to come into Breath of Fire. If one has practiced Bastrika correctly then it should not be difficult to shift from Bastrika to Breath of Fire: If you're doing Bastrika the right way, as described here above, then it is easy to shift gears, so to speak and come into Breath of Fire simply by taking a slightly deeper breath and pumping with that, evenly, but with slightly more force from the Navel and solar plexus. As you ratchet up the power of the breath from Bastrika to Breath of Fire, at each stage, watch through the body that the muscles of the shoulders and neck are relaxed, that the chest and rib cage muscles are relaxed, that the sides, lower back and abdominals are relaxed. Feel the flow and come mentally in connection with the expanding electricity/voltage. Once you feel at ease in the motion and power level of the rhythmic movement of the diaphragm and the expansion / contraction of the navel and solar plexus, then take the volume of the breath to be pumped up another notch by taking a slightly deeper breath and pumping the navel and solar plexus with that.

In Bastrika, like Breath of Fire, you should have the feeling of the air or prana down to the navel, through the solar plexus and all the way up behind the sternum and chest cavity without using the muscles of the ribcage or shoulders at all.

Many people think that by contracting and expanding the navel that no air should come into the chest cavity, while practicing Breath of Fire, but this is a mistake.

When one comes into the Breath of Fire with full power, after a while it will seem that the whole room, not just the body, is filling with lightning bolts, and yet within yourself you will feel at ease. Within 5 minutes the entire blood stream will be purified and alkali. You will feel a sense of alertness and electric clarity spreading through the body evenly and smoothly. And in the process tensions that bind and grip the mind will simply dissolve. The neck and throat areas will open. The center of the head will open and you will have the feeling that you're on the top of a mountain viewing the panorama with a crystal blue sky above you. (A clear day in Espanola)

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Then you inhale and hold the breath. With this flow of energy swirling through the body, it's important that you know how to hold the breath at the end of a session of Breath of Fire, whether sitting in easy pose or from a posture or movement. In easy pose, you expand the lungs from the very bottom, feeling the downward pressure through the navel to the solar plexus, then continuing to breathe downward, with your hands on your knees, you pull and expand the ribcage forward and press down with the hands against the knees to cause the upper part of the ribs to lift. This will enable you to fill the lungs entirely from the bottom, to the top and every area between.

Then you pull the shoulders back, chest forwards, pull the root lock, press the lower spine forwards (the spine remains straight) and you will feel a sensation of the breath suspending, as the energy flow presses from the spine through all the frontal chakras through the heart, throat, forehead and crown. Then exhale and squeeze the breath out until the sides compress and the area below and between the navel and 4th vertebra contracts upwards creating an electromagnetic sensation in the Kundal. Repeat this (inhale hold/suspend, exhale contract suspend) a few times, then relax the breath. You may feel a swirling sensation in the area just below the navel, a sensation of a flow of electricity from this area (Kandal) to the 4th vertebra and an electric sensation from the base of the spine through the crown. Then just wait! Wait a few minutes for the glands to secrete and support the electric flow, so that the electric flow deepens. This results in the conversion of bindu to ojas, where you develop a ground of basic voltage and with each Kundalini Yoga exercise, kriya, mantra and meditation the ground of energy consciousness deepens and expands.

Kapalabati is a special type of pranayama that is also not Breath of Fire, although

one often sees Breath of Fire described in yoga books as being Kapalabati. In Kapalabati, the air in the lungs is entirely expelled and squeezed / out by contracting the diaphragm inwards together with the navel and solar plexus in a way that you feel the area between the navel and 4th vertebra contracting upward, as though you are effecting a root lock, but without actually pulling the anus and sex organs. The basic practice of this pranayama can be done sitting crosslegged in easy pose or sitting on the heels in rock pose. When you exhale you also press the hands down on the knees to effect a complete contraction of the diaphragm. There is no inhalation involved, only exhalation with a force that in the process of squeezing the air out, the abdomen and sides between the hips and ribs are compressed inwards and the ribs are compressed inwards. Thus, when you release the internal contraction, the abdomen and ribs spring back to a relaxed state and the air naturally is drawn back into the lungs without effort.

Kapalabati is performed with a rhythmic breath, forceful on the exhalation and contraction, no force on the inward flow of air. The effect is to completely squeeze the impurities from the blood stream, as the lungs are compressed to the deepest part where most of the blood sacks are located. At the same time the entire bronchial system is purified. All the tensions in the abdominal and chest areas are also wringed out of the body.

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A typical set of Kapalabati in Kundalini Yoga practice might be as follows:

You begin by inhaling and exhaling, breathing in deeply and completely, then exhaling squeezing the breath out completely, 5 breaths. Then begin Kapalabati for 3 to 5 minutes, followed again with 5 more breaths, then one more round of Kapalabati, followed by 5 more breaths. At the end of the last breath inhale deeply, pull the root lock, press the lower vertebra forward, press the shoulders back and down, bring the chin in slightly, and project the flow of energy up through the spine and through the passage through the crown and through the third eye (forehead). Then exhale and pull all the locks (Mahabhanda) holding the breath out. Inhale relax.

A milder version of Kapalabati is used in kriyas and mantras and meditations where you chant "har" repeatedly, while exhaling and compressing the navel inwards, the diaphragm upwards. Another example is the mantra:

"Eh Ong Kar-ah, Sata Nam-ah, Siri Wha-ah, He Guru" where on each "ah" sound you contract inward, as though doing Kapalabati, releasing to allow the air to flow inwards.

After Kapalabati, one might also do a set of Sat Kriya, because, when you make the sound "Sat," pulling the root lock and compressing the navel inward, the diaphragm goes inward and upwards together with the shoulders and arms as the palms are pressed together, bringing the flow of energy up to nourish the glands in the brain, which in turn opens the tenth gate in the crown.

Again to affect the greatest benefit of Sat Kriya, you will find that after Kapalabati, when you squeeze with the sound "Sat" the diaphragm is compressed similar to Kapalabati. So that when you release air flows in allowing you to chant the sound "Nam" and then continue with "Sat." In a Sat Kriya series following a set of Kapalabati, the nadi system including the circulatory system, nervous system and meridians will be so energized and free flowing with prana, that the sound of the mantra - Sat Nam - will begin to vibrate powerfully throughout and around the body, even generating a kind of subtle blissful energy that will have the effect that you will want to continue on with Sat Kriya for some time.

Hopefully, from the above descriptions of Bastrika and Kapalabati in relation to Breath of Fire, as well as the weblink, these three types of pranayamas will be well understood, as well that Breath of Fire is neither of the other 2.

Proper understanding and practice of the different pranayamas, in particular Long Deep Breathing and Breath of Fire, leads to gaining the maximum benefit in the shortest time with the least problems in Kundalini Yoga Sadhana - the Radiant Road to Reality, through which all the knots (granthis) that seem to bind one's idea of identity to the reflected consciousness if the mind in the Sacred Centers of the Kandal, the Sahasrara and 10th Gate, and the One Star (Hridayam) - are sundered.