

Beat the Heat: Sitali and Sitkari Two cooling pranayamas—sitali and sitkari—soothe emotions and quell a pitta imbalance, especially in the summer heat.

Are you irritated by the summer heat? Flushed with anger? Plagued by hot flashes? Long ago, the yogis discovered a cooling pranayama practice that can soothe you in the time it takes to drink a glass of water.

Deep in the Himalayas, ancient sages observed and imitated the world around them in the noble attempt to master body, breath, and mind. They noticed the curve of a bird's lower beak, a new green leaf uncurling, and the hiss of a cobra—and emulated those shapes and sounds in a practice called sitali (the cooling breath). In this pranayama, the inhalation is moistened as it passes through the curl of the tongue (alternately described as a bird's beak and an uncurling leaf), so that you are "drinking" water-saturated air.

Sitali cools the body, adds moisture to the system, and soothes a pitta imbalance.

Besides building breath awareness, this practice is said to calm hunger and thirst and cultivate a love for solitude. Sitali also cools the body, adds moisture to the system, and, in the parlance of ayurveda, soothes a pitta imbalance, which is common in the summer months. In addition, this practice reduces fatigue, bad breath, fevers, and high blood pressure.

How To Practice Sitali

Sit in a comfortable position with the head, neck, and spine in alignment.

Close your eyes, breathe diaphragmatically for several minutes, then open the mouth and form the lips into an "O."

Curl the tongue lengthwise and project it out of the mouth (about 3/4 of an inch).

Inhale deeply across the tongue and into the mouth as if drinking through a straw.

Focus your attention on the cooling sensation of the breath as the abdomen and lower ribs expand.

Withdraw the tongue and close the mouth, exhaling completely through the nostrils.

Continue doing sitali for 2 to 3 minutes, return to diaphragmatic breathing for several more, and repeat the cooling breath for 2 to 3 minutes longer. Gradually you can work your way up to a 10-minute practice.

Can't Curl Your Tongue? Try Sitkari

Sit comfortably with your eyes closed.

Gently press your lower and upper teeth together and separate your lips as much as you comfortably can, so your teeth are exposed to the air.

Inhale slowly through the gaps in the teeth and focus on the hissing sound of the breath.

Close the mouth and slowly exhale through the nose.

Repeat up to 20 times. This practice is called sitkari. According to the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, in addition to its cooling effects, sitkari balances the endocrine system and builds vitality.

Cautions for Sitali and Sitkari

Because sitali and sitkari reduce body temperature, they are best practiced during hot weather or after a vigorous asana or heating pranayama practice (like bhastrika).

If you have a vata or kapha constitution, sitali and sitkari may not be appropriate during wintertime. But no matter when you practice, be sure to take in air that is close to body temperature, since the breath won't be warmed by the nostrils—if the air is cold, it may aggravate the lungs.