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Viloma Pranayama

These notes begin to discuss the classic viloma pranayama series of B.K.S. Iyengar in his *Light on Pranayama*. They presuppose a familiarity with ujjayi breath. They also draw on what I call the opening of the valves of the breath, the inhale valve and the exhale valve. (In some ways this is a topic onto itself and separate from the viloma practices, one on which I hope to write more extensively at some point.) A principal use of the “valve work” here will be to gain an unforced, greater access to the breath, the inhale (perhaps most particularly) and the exhale. I include below an introduction to these ideas that I think should be enough for us here.

Iyengar explains the meaning of “viloma” this way:

Loma means hair, the “vi” denotes disjunction or negation. Viloma means anti-hair or against the natural order of things. [We might say, “against the grain.”]

In viloma pranayama inhalation or exhalation is not a continuous process, but one that is interrupted by several pauses. *Light on Pranayama*, p. 146.

He presents a nine part viloma series. He does so in familiar fashion – full presentation of the whole series in all of six pages.

I will be concerned here with just the first six of the series. (In the final three Iyengar addresses retentions.) To read through Iyengar’s descriptions of these – which one might do in just a few minutes – might create an appearance that the practices are incredibly simple – so much so that you might be inclined to move on in search of meatier stuff. Based on my own experience, however, I would say that it could easily take someone several months or more of regular practice to become quite comfortable with any one of these six. As always, what we want to be looking for in experimenting with these practices is an ability to remain sufficiently relaxed in body and mind, so that the breath is never forced or held (as opposed to paused). At no point – and here my language differs some from that of Iyengar – do we ever want to “grip” anything.

Iyengar refers to the parts of his series as “stages,” Stage I, Stage II, and so forth. This usage might connote (misleadingly, I would say) that each practice is one stage in a process that ultimately extends to a final stage. In order to avoid that implication I will not speak of stages, but rather simply of Viloma 1, Viloma 2, and so forth.

In addition, we will not necessarily march in lock step from Viloma 1 to Viloma 2 to Viloma 3, etc. – but rather permit ourselves more of a back and forth exploration. This can be useful because the sitting practices, which comprise numbers 4, 5 and 6, have both advantages and disadvantages as compared with their supine cousins, which make up numbers 1, 2 and 3. Following Iyengar, I generally introduce a particular practice in a lying down position and then transfer this practice to a sitting up position. This is helpful because for most of us it is more difficult to be suitably relaxed when sitting up, or at least the desired level of relaxation is generally more easily attained and retained lying down than sitting up. On the other hand, however, we are generally able to gain more access to the breath in a sitting mode than when lying down – at least this is so once we are able to undertake a sitting practice. And so the sitting practice may teach us things that we might not pick up so readily lying down, which we may then be able to take into our supine practice. This (I believe) is quite consistent with Iyengar’s presentation.

A Guiding Thought: Allowing and Encouraging the Breath to Breathe Itself.

To comfortably parse the breath into a series of breath moments (either in or out) and pauses, you may find that you need to be able to somewhat increase your capacity to “take” breath in, in order to have more of it to work with on both the inhale and exhale sides of the practice. An idea that guides the viloma practices, as I will present them, is that this increase of breath does *not* come about by you “taking” a bigger breath. It is, in some sense, *not* something that you do. To say this may, however, sound strange, or just plain stupid: “If I increase my intake, it is surely something that I do; it is not as if someone else can take my inhale for me or join together with me in a group effort.”

Still in all I want to suggest that we can make good sense, in our bodies, by what I mean in saying that a deeper inhale can arise without you “taking” a bigger breath. And, indeed, I will own as much as that only in this way

will it be possible (in all likelihood) to increase the breath flow (both in and out) without causing any disturbance of the desired state of relaxation. Admittedly, words run a little thin at this point. But what I hope to show you – or, rather, get you to find for yourself – is a subtle yet profound difference between “taking” a breath (or a portion of a breath) and appropriately setting the stage so that the breath can take care of showing up without any effort on your part.

We will continually come back to the idea of allowing and encouraging the breath to breathe itself. I consider it to be of paramount importance, even though it may initially sound rather counterintuitive.

An Introduction to the Opening of the Valves of the Breath.

Imagine someone (perhaps yourself) in cat pose: hands and knees on the floor; shoulders over hands, hips over knees; neutral (Tadasana) spine. On the inhale the hips rotate forward (in place) so that the pubis drops down, deepening the “backbend” curve of the spine and lifting the heart (which carries the head up with it). The exhale involves the reverse process of the hips rotating back to drop the tailbone down, with a resulting rounding up of the spine and a concomitant release of the head.

In these patterns, what I am most interested in is the movement of the pubis on the inhale and the tailbone on the exhale. I will assume, however, that you are generally familiar with these movements – perhaps so familiar that, sitting still, you can imagine them subtly taking place. These acts of imagination are the bases for what I call the opening of the valves of the breath.

Now sit in a supported seated position, and begin an ujjayi breath. As the inhale naturally proceeds, at some point imagine the drop of the pubis. Properly “imagined,” this will augment the natural flow of the inhale. This is what I call opening the inhale valve. Analogously, while still seated focus on your exhalation. At some point as the exhale naturally flows away, imagine the release of the tailbone. Properly “imagined,” this will deepen the natural flow of the exhale. This is what I call opening the exhale valve.

The opening of the valves of the breath works with the neuro-muscular patterns that, when triggered, effectuate (in a well-working body) the drop of the pubis on the inhale and the release of the tailbone on the exhale. Our

aim in familiarizing ourselves with these patterns is to come to be able to trigger the neurological pattern that, for instance, is designed to drop the pubis, without at the same time activating the muscular pattern that is designed to move your bones in a certain way so as to actually bring about this movement. In other words, we want to initiate the neurological pattern without having this cause any skeletal (or bodily) movement at all – or only an imperceptibly minor movement of the body. And as with this example of working with the inhale, quite analogous remarks apply as to the triggering of the neuro-muscular pattern that (normally) causes the movement that results in the release of the tailbone on the exhale.

On this idea of valve openings I want to make three comments. First, if you haven't tried this, it may sound super mysterious. But I think that you will find that, with a little practice, these "valve openings" are quite accessible and entirely natural. Second, although our aim is minimal bodily movement, to begin with somewhat accentuated movement in imitation of the inhale and exhale cat pose movements can be quite useful in sensitizing you and directing your attention to just how it can be that we – and here words begin to fail us – begin to trigger the relevant neurological patterns without moving the body (or moving it much at all). However even when (or if) you find that the triggering of one or the other of the valve opening patterns does result in some perceptible bodily movement, initiating this movement – and this is my third comment – does not involve (if all goes well) any sense that you are either actively drawing more breath in or actively expelling more breath out. There will be no feeling that *you* are actually "taking in" or "emptying out" the breath. You are simply triggering a pattern, a pattern which (as I put it) opens one of the valves of the breath, which then allows a different movement of the breath itself, a somewhat fuller inflow on the inhale or outflow on the exhale.

Viloma 1.

A. Preparation.

Begin by taking your seat; and when settled, start the building of your Jalandhara Bandha. (See my "Building the Architecture of Jalandhara Bandha Using the Image of Patanjali.") And then commence an easy ujjayi breath.

We will then begin to initiate an opening of the inhale valve. When your ujjayi is smooth and easy – so that you begin to feel that the breath is breathing itself – try the following: Begin a normal ujjayi inhale. About two thirds the way into your inhale you may feel that you have come to a natural pausing or stopping place; just as you reach this place, slightly drop the pubis – or better: in an unforced fashion initiate the “drop the pubis” action or pattern – and allow a small flood of additional breath to swell up in you. Permit a small pause at the top of your inhalation – and then allow the exhale to complete itself in a long, slow exhalation.

This one round of breath employing the opening of the inhale valve on the inhalation. It could be that it will take some time for it to become so familiar to you that you can almost automatically initiate it in a gentle and undisturbing fashion. In addition, we will initially be using it in Viloma 1 (V-1) in a reclining position, and there the opening of the inhale valve is somewhat subtler and less accessible. (This is why we just went through it sitting up.) So don't move to the Viloma 1 practice until you are quite comfortable with using the opening of the inhale valve to easily extend the ujjayi inhalation when sitting up,

B. Practice.

Lying over a pranayama folded blanket, when you are ready, begin an easy ujjayi breath. Then take a few (or more) breath cycles – relaxed, centered, present – in which you locate and familiarize yourself with the opening of the inhale valve of the pubis in this supine position. When that is smooth and easy, you are ready to parse the breath into the interrupted (or “paused”) breath of Viloma 1.

We will use a three-part inhalation, with each of the three parts, or parcels, of the inhalation lasting about the same length and with the pauses that follow each of portion of the inhale also of about the same duration as the inhales. I suggest using a count of two to measure your inhales and your pauses.

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Interruption: A Word on the Pauses.

As to the pauses, I almost imagine that as the inhale comes to a pause, it is “rounded off” at the upper end of the breath and, then, perhaps also on the lower end, as if a pair of parentheses marks off an island in the stream of the breath, a place of refuge. The pauses are not holdings – they do not involve a holding on to the breath, or the body, or to oneself. They are moments of suspension – suspension of activity, of time, of self. Sometimes I like to think of these pauses as if they were little loaves of freshly baked bread, still warm from the oven. As we may discover, the pauses of the inhale can feel somewhat fuller than those of the exhale, which may be a little less plump.

Iyengar, in this context, says: “To pause, the diaphragm is lightly immobilized.” *Light on Pranayama*, p. 146. Later (p. 148) he more forcefully expresses this as “grip the diaphragm and hold the breath.” I would submit that such (relatively common) uses by Iyengar of strong verbs such as “grip” and “hold” should not be taken too literally, so as to suggest (for example) anything like “hold on for dear life.”

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Here’s how we will use the opening of the inhale valve to facilitate this V-1 practice. Let the first portion of your inhale be simply an easy, normal inhalation to a count of two. Then there is an equal pause. And then with the second portion of the inhale open the inhale valve to slightly increase the inhale flow, to the same count of two. Then pause again. And then with the third portion of the inhale accentuate just a bit the action of dropping the pubis to more fully open the inhale valve and allow still more breath to flow in of its own accord upward in the chest, again to your count of two. Pause. Easy, full exhalation. Wait at the bottom of the exhale for the inhale to be ready to arrive. And then repeat.

For how many repetitions? Iyengar says (page 146) repeat the cycles “for seven to ten minutes,” then “breathe normally two or three times” and “rest in savasana.” We should be impressed (I think) with the relative brevity of the recommended practice – and so not be surprised to find it quite challenging.

In addition, if your count of two seems to take too long, then quicken it slightly to find your comfort level. And if the three-part interrupted breath seems too much to begin with, use a two-part inhale instead. (Iyengar, at page 146, suggests breaths and pauses of “two or three seconds” and that a

single inhale “may involve four or five pauses.” But there is no reason to rush things. He does importantly add: “No strain should be felt throughout the practice.”)

You want to look for an easy rhythm that can pretty much maintain itself. In this your attention needs to be on the breath. (A side benefit of incorporating the valve openings into the viloma practice is that it gives you a specific mental focus and hence aids your attention.) But otherwise you want to encourage the sense that you are just along for the ride. Iyengar defines “pranayama” as the “*rhythmic* control (ayama) of the breath.” *Light on Yoga*, p. 527 (my emphasis).

At the close of your practice, definitely take the Savasana Iyengar recommends. It can be rather short, perhaps three or four minutes. Notice how you feel when you first take up your Savasana. Some days you may be quite surprised. Generally, if you pay attention your Savasana will tell you when you are ready to sit back up. But you may always linger for longer periods if that suits you.

Viloma 2.

We will follow, in an analogous way, the general approach set out for Viloma 1, with some comments more directly pertinent to fact that Viloma 2 (V-2) is an exhale practice.

A. Preparation.

As before, begin by taking your seat and moving into Jalandhara Bandha. When comfortable, begin easy ujjayi breathing. For a few breaths, return to idea of opening the inhale valve somewhere around the two-thirds point of your natural inhalation, and feel the breath begin to fill more completely. And then switch over to the exhale, to explore the correlative idea. Along about two thirds of the way into your natural exhalation, see if you can sense a place in the flow that almost asks for the initiation of the release of the tailbone into what I call the opening of the exhale valve. Then allow the exhalation to complete itself. When it arrives, permit the inhalation to begin and slowly build to its completion.

As before, to get a feel for this, you may want (to begin with) to physically round the hips a bit as in exhale cat pose, rather as if you had a

tail attached to your tailbone and someone was gently drawing it forward and slightly up between your legs. (Were you to map the direction of the drop of the pubis on the inhale with one line and, similarly, draw the direction of the release of the tailbone on the exhale as another line, then the two lines would cross one another some distance underneath you.) The idea is to find this phenomenon of the release of the tailbone and experience how, when you initiate it, the exhale more fully and freely flows away. Eventually, you want to see if you can so “internalize” this, that you can initiate the opening of the exhale valve with minimal muscular effect.

Take some time familiarizing yourself with this most basic exercise of opening the exhale valve to complete the exhale.

B. Practice.

V-2 is also a reclining practice, so again lie back over a pranayama folded blanket; settle in; and begin an ujjayi breath. Don’t rush this. Give it time to develop. You may find that it takes a little longer to settle into this when you are lying down than when sitting up.

When this is established, then focus initially on the inhale and on the idea that you can include just a bit of the inhale valve opening towards the top of the inhale to gently allow the inhale to more fully complete itself, swelling easily upward. We are doing this in order that in your V-2 breath there will be plenty of breath available to parcel out into the three components of the exhale. You may come to find that you can pull this off so simply that it seems to be just a natural component of the inhale itself. Then begin on the exhale to similarly lightly use the opening of the exhale valve towards the bottom of the exhale to more fully permit the breath to empty out. Do several rounds of this cycle of breath.

Now we will move to V-2 itself. You may fall quite easily into this. Or maybe not. Don’t be too surprised if it takes several breaths for it to take on a natural feeling of ease.

As with V-1, we will use a three-part breath – here a three-part exhalation – with pauses (as before) after each of the three parcels of breath. As for the pauses, see the earlier “Interruption.” But note that in V-2, it will be the lower end that first “rounds off,” perhaps followed by the upper end.

And, because you are lying down, the little loves of bread (remember these?) may not feel quite as plump.

Unlike with V-1 (in which we used the opening of the inhale valve with the second and third portions of the inhale), I suggest using the opening of the exhale valve only on third (and final) portion of the exhale. The first and second portions of the V-2 exhale will be just normal exhalations.

I also suggest that you consciously have the first portion of the exhale to be the smallest (at least to begin with), followed by a somewhat fuller second portion and then an equally extensive final release, which is “teased out” by an opening of the exhale valve. Pause. Then don’t rush the initiation of the inhale.

If the next inhalation seems a bit “stuck” so as to not begin to flow easily, you might start with just a “sip” of the inhale – but have the “sip” enter “over the pubis,” not up towards the ego area of the head – and then let it build as it continues on up.

Again, you may need several breath cycles for this pattern to begin to work for you.

Be aware, however, that the exhale valve opening may be rather harder to access when you are lying down than while sitting up. If you are encountering this and it is disrupting your V-2 practice, you might try “reducing” the practice. Rather than thinking of *opening* the exhale valve on your third portion of the V-2 exhale, on your with the third parcel of breath (or with the second and third parcels) just focus a bit more attention on the exhale valve and lightly *touch* it with you mind. Play with this idea. If it proves useful in this practice, you might want to return to V-1 and incorporate the analogous “touching” of the inhale valve – in place of the more extensive “opening” of the valve – in that practice.

Or here is another way of experimenting with developing your V-2 breath. (Some days one approach may seem more helpful; some days, another.) On the initial piece of the inhale, relax your throat; on the second portion, relax the rib cage; and with the completing third stage encourage the sensation that your hips (or buttocks flesh) slide or glide away.

The earlier comments on V-1 breath concerning how long to practice and modifications of the practice apply equally here.

When you have completed your V-2 practice, drop back into several rounds of simple breathing. To conclude your practice, take a short Savasana – or a longer one, as you wish.

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Interruption: A Word on the Transitions from One Side of the Breath to the Other.

Iyengar says: “At each inhalation and exhalation there is a fractional pause when the muscles of the torso adjust themselves. Learn to be aware of this.” *Light on Yoga*, p. 139. I feel that this is an important remark. But it is just sort of comment which one might miss or take no particular notice of at all.

I find that sometimes – for example when engaged in a viloma breath on both the inhale and the exhale – the next side of the breath doesn’t show up quite as easily or as readily as one might want or expect, almost as if it were stuck. This is commonly (for me) at the bottom of the exhale, especially if I have been using the exhale valve to augment my exhalation. But it can also be the other way round, at the pause at the top of the inhale. In Iyengar’s words, sometimes during the pauses at the end of the inhale or at the end of the exhale, the muscles of the torso do not automatically (as it were) adjust themselves and so some slight encouragement of this rearrangement seems to be called for.

To accomplish this I suggest a subtle, three-step rocking motion in which you ever so slightly shift in the direction you are going, then back from whence you came, and then forward once again. So, if we are at the bottom of the exhale, we would rock – “jiggle” is actually a better word – slightly forward, then back, and forward again, thereby allowing the awaiting flow of the inhale to naturally commence. And if we are in the pause at the top of the inhale, then it is just the opposite jiggle – back, forward, back – that may open the easy flow of the exhalation. This is a cousin of the jiggling of the hips that I speak of in “Balancing the Hip Joints to Find Openness and Stability.” (There the jiggling is predominately side to side; here it is back and forth – or forth and back.)

Like other suggestions, you may need to play with this some to get a sense of what it is and what it can accomplish. Then it may progressively become quite subtle. Indeed, perhaps in this fashion one may become sensitized to what, quite typically, just occurs without any involvement of you at all. To repeat Iyengar's words, "there [just] *is* a fractional pause when the muscles of the torso adjust themselves." (My emphasis.)

Viloma 3.

Viloma 3 (V-3) combines V-1 and V-2 into a single practice. In that sense, the territory is familiar. Nonetheless, I will offer a few comments or suggestions.

A. Preparation.

Begin sitting, as we have, and take up your ujjayi breath on both the inhale and the exhale. Towards the top of the inhale, just touch or lightly open the inhale valve. Have this be quite simple and easy. Likewise towards the bottom of the exhale, include just a little remembrance of the opening of the exhale valve. Give yourself a few minutes (or longer) of this breath.

Then move your ujjayi breath into an easy, pulsed breath. Make this a three-portioned breath that is still one continuous breath on the inhale and on the exhale. On the inhale, the breath begins and builds a little; then hesitates just slightly; then builds again; hesitates once again; and then the third portion of the breath completes the inhale, at which point there is a pause (not just a hesitation), before the exhale commences. I call this a scalloped breath because you can imagine that each of the three portions of the continuous inhale has a rounded side to it. Feel free to lightly play with using a bit of the inhale valve opening with this breath, as it feels natural and inviting to you.

Treat the exhale analogously. It begins a similar path of a three part exhalation with just a slight hesitation after the first and second portions – and then a pause at the completion of the exhale breath. Here also you can imagine a scalloped breath, one which now descends (as the inhale had ascended) in three gentle curves. And here also be free to play with an easy, simple employment of the exhale valve.

If you compare the experience of the scallops of the inhale with those of the exhale, you may find that the inhale curves feel more in the front of the body (and round forward), and that the exhale curves feel more in the back of the body (and round back).

Stay with this pattern for a while (perhaps several minutes) until you are quite comfortable with it. Then we will take it into a reclining position and a final preparation for V-3.

B. Practice.

Returning to your pranayama blanket and your ujjayi breath, begin to include just a touch of the inhale valve towards the top of the inhalation and a similar touch of the exhale valve towards the bottom of the exhalation. After you have settled into this, begin the three part scalloped (or pulsed) breath we were just rehearsing while sitting up. Note, because you are now lying on your back, you may experience your exhale scallops a little more vividly.

After this pattern feels nice and easy (or as easy as its going to be today), begin V-3. Using a count of two, as with V-1 and V-2 before, inhale to count; pause to count; inhale to count; pause to count; inhale to count; pause. And then, in an analogous manner, proceed to the “back side” of V-3, using the three-part interrupted exhale from V-2. Use the valves of the breath as seems appropriate or natural to you. The inhale valve may enhance the third portion of the inhale. And the exhale valve may encourage a fuller release in the final exhalation. If the third portion of the exhale seems a bit tricky, try relaxing more deeply as you begin that final portion.

If the full V-3 seems too much to begin with, you may alternate V-1 and V-2 for a few starter breaths. If at any time the breath is ragged, or feels forced or difficult, drop back into a couple of easy breaths, before returning to the V-3 practice.

Continue these cycles for several minutes. Five minutes may be plenty to begin with. Iyengar (for some reason) suggests a somewhat longer V-3 practice (“eight or twelve minutes or for as long as no strain is felt”) than he did with V-1 or V-2. This puzzles me because I find V-3 rather more

challenging than either V-1 or V-2 by itself. In any case, the most important idea is surely to discontinue the practice if any “strain is felt.”

At the close of your viloma practice, take a few easy breaths and then lie back in Savasana.

Viloma 4.

Once you have developed an open, comfortable seat, working with an interrupted inhale breath is generally easier sitting up than lying down. And so at this point I am going to introduce two versions of a Viloma 4 (V-4) practice. These I will call for convenience regular V-4 and enhanced V-4. The latter introduces a new ingredient into the interrupted inhale practice.

(1) Regular Viloma 4.

Given what we have already done in prepping for the reclining interrupted practices, this V-4 practice (we may hope) will be rather readily available to us.

In a supported seated posture, take a couple (or more) breaths in which to adjust the architecture of your Jalandhara Bandha as appropriate for you today, and then begin an easy ujjayi breath. When you are ready, move into a three-part viloma inhale. Using a count of two as before, inhale, gently; pause; inhale, just touching the inhale valve; pause; inhale, more fully through opening the inhale valve; pause – then easy, full release of the exhalation. Repeat the cycle after the natural pause at the bottom of the exhale.

If this is your viloma practice for the day, you may wish to continue with these cycles for ten minutes or more, as long as you retain the rhythm and relaxation of the practice. Then, as before, give yourself a few easy, unpatterned breaths and take Savasana.

(2) Enhanced Viloma 4.

A. Preparation.

The additional ingredient we will incorporate into this V-4 practice involves the drop (better: the cupping, as with your hand) of the perineum.

The perineum (pelvic floor) you may visualize as occupying the space between the inhale valve and the exhale valve and between the two sit bones at the base of the pelvis. For our purposes, however, imagine it as somewhat more of a circular membrane about the size of a quarter, or a bit larger. Then when I speak of dropping the perineum, it is the center of this membrane that recedes, with the “sides” moving proportionally with it – a bit like one hemisphere of a balloon that is being inflated. The rim of the membrane remains stationary.

Our preparation for enhanced V-4 will proceed in five steps, the first two of which are already familiar. At each step of the way, maintain an easy, full exhalation. First, begin your ujjayi breath. Second, when that is smooth and familiar, begin to lightly touch the inhale valve somewhere around the middle of your inhalation, and then continue your inhalation to its natural completion. (Don’t require this to be an especially full inhalation.) When you have this, continue with that inhale breath and then, third, somewhat after you touch the inhale valve, also add to this a light touch of the *exhale* valve, as the inhale continues to completion. This employment of the exhale valve on the inhale is new, so you may need to stay with this pattern somewhat longer to get a feel for it. Then we come to step four. This builds on step three. We now add an additional ingredient to our inhale breath: begin the inhale; touch the inhale valve; touch the exhale valve; and then – right between the two valves – drop, or relax down, the perineum. Imagine this circular membrane subsiding, evenly extending and opening down from its rim.

It may, to begin with, be helpful to simply locate the perineal area as a sensation of coolness on the inhalation (or in some other way). If, however, this idea of cupping the perineum is something that is completely foreign to you (which is quite possible), you may want to come back to it over the course of several practice sessions, not requiring too much of yourself at any one time. But when you’ve got the hang of it, the one, two, three of inhale valve—exhale valve—perineum, then (and this is step five) eliminate the touches of the inhale and exhale valves and explore by itself the release of the perineum on the inhalation. Simply begin the inhalation, and then somewhere about midway see if you can trigger that drop or descent of the perineum, as you continue with the inhale to its completion.

This may require some practice and investigation. However, once this preparation goes well, I think that you will find the enhanced V-4 practice smooth sailing.

B. Practice.

There is not much to say about the enhanced V-4 practice that hasn't already be said. The key is to become familiar – in general, and on any given day – with the releasing down of the perineum. So if this is still a mystery, then wait for this idea to take hold and content yourself with a more standard V-4 practice for the time being. When this release acquires some reality for you, then the enhanced practice goes like this. Begin an ujjayi breath and stay with it until you are quite comfortable. Then begin the following three-part inhalation, again using a count of two for the breath portions and the pauses: inhale to an easy, normal two-count inhale; pause; then on your second portion of the inhale introduce a bit of the inhale valve opening; pause; and then on the final portion of the inhale release the perineum down to more fully (but in an entirely unforced manner) complete the inhale and more fully fill the upper reaches of the lungs. Pause. Easy, complete exhalation. That's one cycle.

What can be especially sweet, when this breath is working well, is that after you initiate the release of the perineum you can have the sense that you can continue to draw down the perineum as the inhale continues and completes. In this way you may find a coordination between the perineum dropping towards the floor below you and the breath rising higher and higher up in the body. Indeed, it may come to be possible for it to feel as natural to continue to draw the perineum down on the inhalation as perhaps it has become to open the inhale valve on the inhalation.

Five minutes may be a lot for this pattern initially. Don't push it. There's always another day. Take a few easy breaths. And then Savasana.

Interruption: A Word on Savasana.

Most of us collapse somewhat in the area of the heart when we lie back in Savasana. This is not terrible. It is no more needs to be pointed out and discouraged than does falling asleep in Savasana. Relaxation is foremost. And if that means a tendency to drift into sleep or to lie in a bit of a collapsed position, so be it. But particularly after a pranayama practice there

is something to be said for lying in Savasana with a supported opening in the upper chest and lungs.

Here are two tips for achieving this. The first concerns the feet and legs. When one lies in Savasana the feet fall laterally, towards the outside of the body – more so in some people than others; almost always more with one foot than the other. The effect of this is that the hips spread somewhat apart and rotate a bit forward. This tends to roll you somewhat off your sacrum and to drop your mid-thoracic back somewhat into the floor. To feel this, lie in Savasana but have your feet in Tadasana, about hip width apart. Feel how your back body meets the floor in this position. And then simply let the feet drop open as they will and feel the difference in your back body.

A simple way to address this is to use a widely opened blanket. Lying in Savasana with the feet about hip width apart, cover yourself so that the blanket covers at least the feet and legs. Then, one leg at a time, lift the leg so as to swing the blanket in and underneath the foot and leg. Then when you lower the foot down, the blanket will hold it more or less in a Tadasana position. One side done, do the other. That's the first adjustment.

The second is with the arms and shoulders. Think of how you are probably accustomed to positioning your shoulders for Setu Bandha (bridge pose). One side at a time, draw your shoulder a little up toward your ear, rotating it somewhat externally; and then place it evenly down. This will eventuate in your hand on that side spiraling externally so that the thumb moves laterally more towards the floor. Do one side and then the other. The trick here is to position the shoulders so that the shoulder blades (scapulae) are both rather flush to the floor, but that there is no pinching or congestion in the space between the shoulder blades. This may require a little adjusting. It can be helpful to feel the shoulders in external rotation and as if they were spreading along the floor away from each other.

Once both adjustments are made you should have something of the feeling that you are lying more firmly on certain bones of the body. These are the heels of your feet (evenly), the base of your sacrum (evenly), your shoulder blades (evenly) and the back of your head. (Your hands may retain something of the external spin so that they might rest between the base of your first and middle fingers.) The rest of you should feel supported by the position of these bones on the floor. You may feel a little bit as if you were

expanding and floating off of this support, particularly in the area of the openness of the heart.

Then give yourself up to Savasana.

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That's it for now.