

cool as a Cucumber

BY SHANNON SEXTON

Are you irritated by the summer heat? Flushed with anger? Plagued by hot flashes? Long ago, the yogis discovered a cooling breath 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 hissing 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.

Besides building breath awareness, this practice is said to calm hunger and thirst and cultivate a love for solitude. *Sitali* is also great for cooling the body, adding moisture to the system, and soothing a *pitta* flare-up. And it can reduce fatigue, improve bad breath, activate the liver and spleen, and lower a fever.

The practice

Sit in a comfortable position, keeping the head, neck, and spine in alignment. 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 $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch). Making a hissing sound, inhale deeply across the tongue and into the mouth as if drinking through a straw, letting the abdomen and rib cage expand. Then withdraw the tongue and close the mouth, exhaling completely through the nostrils.

Continue this practice for 2–3 minutes, return to diaphragmatic breathing for several more, and then repeat the hissing breath for 2–3 minutes longer.

Sitali is most helpful during hot weather. It may not be appropriate during winter time, especially if you have a *vata* or *kapha* constitution. If you are doing this practice in cold weather, 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 shockingly cold, it may aggravate the lungs. ●