

## ASANA AND PRANAYAMA

Yoga is a generic word that covers a wide range of schools and practices. One of these practices is pranayama, which is part of the method in such schools as classical yoga and hatha yoga (and here we'll be talking only about the latter). Pranayama is often defined as "breath control," but that's somewhat misleading. First of all, as Lama Govinda notes, prana can't be solely "equated with the physical breath, though breathing (*prana* in the narrower sense) is one of the many functions in which this universal and primordial force manifests itself" (*Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 137). It's better to conceive of prana in terms like consciousness, life or force or energy, or even spirit or soul.

Then too, "control" has nowadays a somewhat negative connotation, as when we complain about "control freaks" who try to dominate the people around them. You can't really control prana in that sense—and if you try to, you're asking for trouble. Actually *ayama*, the second element of the word pranayama, literally means "to lengthen and restrain," though we might qualify this phrase with the word "consciously." So pranayama is more accurately defined with the somewhat long-winded definition, the "conscious expansion and restraint of the vital force." We'll look at what all this means a more closely below.

You might be surprised to learn that traditionally pranayama is considered *the* central practice of hatha yoga. Of course when we in the West hear the word yoga, we tend to associate it largely with asana or posture. For a variety of reasons, among all the myriad practices of yoga—selfless service, open-hearted devotion, repetition of mantra, intense meditation—asana has emerged over the last half-century as by far the most popular in the West. For us, asana has become an end in itself, whether that end be physical fitness, stress relief, or some form of therapy. Ultimately though it's pranayama, supported by practices like asana, that gives us access to our authentic self.

Mind you, our appreciation of the physical benefits of asana isn't anything new. Several old texts, like the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* and *Gheranda-Samhita*, cite a number of ways in which asana promotes the well-being of the body-mind. Gheranda, for example, mentions over and over again that this or that asana "destroys disease" and "gets rid of fatigue or dullness." The old yogis valued these results because, as Patanjali observes in the *Yoga-Sutra* (1.30), illness (*vyadhi*) and lassitude (*styana*) are serious obstacles to practice. Hundreds of years later, modern students still wholeheartedly affirm that asana is conducive to good health and mental acuity, necessary components of a happy life.

As a stepping-stone to pranayama, asana aligns and tempers the body so that it can sit and breathe comfortably and steadily. Prana is said to circulate through the body along currents, called *nadis*. There are supposedly tens (even hundreds) of thousands of these nadis penetrating into every nook and cranny of our body. They're sometimes compared to the physical veins or arteries that transport our blood, but this again is misleading: nadis, like the prana they carry, exist in the subtle realm beyond the ken of our everyday senses. Because of the misalignments that inevitably develop in our body as we go about the business of daily living, these nadis become obstructed and the flow of prana

stagnates. Asana is said to re-align the body and unblock the pranic currents, an obvious desideratum as a prelude to pranayama practice.

Then too the yogis compare the body, at the outset of yoga practice, to an unbaked clay pot. What happens, they ask, if you pour water into such a vessel? You end up with a clay blob. By analogy, if you “pour” too much spiritual energy into an “unbaked” body, you risk serious injury. So the second role of asana is to “fire” or “bake” the body and ready it for the enormous surge of spiritual energy promised by pranayama.

This energy is known as kundalini, which you may have heard about in your yoga class or read about in a book. According to hatha yoga (which was strongly influenced by Tantra), the world is the creation of, and is sustained by, a feminine power called Shakti. She has two complementary “poles” or sides: her active side is our friend prana, her inactive pole the kundalini. Kundalini, literally the “coiled one,” is typically represented as a sleeping serpent, a symbol of our own unrealized spiritual potential. As Gheranda writes (3.50):

So long as she slumbers in the body, the soul is like an animal and  
Wisdom does not arise, though one may practice ten million Yogas.

With the help of the refined and channeled prana, the goal of hatha yoga is to awaken this energy and re-unite it with her soul mate, the passive masculine principle, called Shiva, our witnessing consciousness.

The old texts describe around 10 different types of pranayama or breathing strategies, to which modern instructional manuals add about a half-dozen more. Probably the most common pranayama is nothing more complicated, at least initially, than slow, smooth, spacious breathing. Called the Conqueror (*ujjayi*), no doubt because the puffed-up chest resulting from this breath is reminiscent of a proud and presumably victorious warrior, it’s accompanied by a distinctive hissing sound made by partially closing the glottis (the opening between the vocal cords). The yogis call this sound the “unspoken” (*ajapa*) mantra; we all, in fact, repeat a whispered version of this mantra with every breath we take throughout our lives.

But the active phases of breathing, the inhales and exhales, are only half of the pranayama picture. The other half, just as important to the goal of the practice, but which is often missed by many students, is the resting phases, the pauses between the inhales and exhales. Like the active phases, these rests are purposefully extended, particularly after the inhales. This breath-holding is technically called kumbhaka, which is sometimes used as a synonym for pranayama. Commonly rendered into English as “retention,” kumbhaka literally means “pot-like,” the pot here being a metaphor for our torso, which serves as a container for the restrained breath. The image of the pot is a vestige of the early influence of Indian alchemy on hatha yoga, which analogizes the torso to a vessel in which the remarkable transformation from the mundane to the divine occurs.

Kumbhaka is facilitated and intensified through various muscular contractions called seals

(*mudra*) and locks (*bandha*). Like pranayama, these techniques aren't widely taught in the West, but they're indispensable to the success of the practice. Gheranda devotes an entire chapter of his text to them, outlining 26 in all. But only three are considered primary: a contraction of the perineum and a pressuring of the chin against the sternum are used to seal off the "openings" of the pot-torso at the anus and throat and prevent a pranic "leak"; and a contraction of the abdominal muscles, which is used to concentrate and "heat" the retained prana, which in turn stimulates the dormant serpent power.

All this might seem rather bizarre to the uninitiated, but truly it's an archetypal story the yogis tell about their own process, kindled by the breath, of self-transformation and self-realization. It's how they relate in words and pictures what's essentially an ineffable and unimaginable experience, consummated in the full-fulfillment of their authentic self.

#### RESOURCES

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