

## Prana

One path to the attainment of liberation (*moksa*) is through the union of the body and the spirit, most commonly known as yoga. This is a mystical path en route to self-awareness, with the goal to achieve enlightenment. Within its tradition, there are several aspects to the practice of yoga. One specific characteristic is *prana*. Simply put, *prana* can be defined as vital energy flow within the body. Georg Feuerstein, one of the foremost teachers of yoga and yogic teachings, defines *prana* with the origins of the word: *pra*—“on, forth” and *an*—“to breathe,” thus denoting the “vital energy, life.” The image of *prana* was referenced in the Upanishads as “breath to life.” The name *prana* was given to the “vital breath” and by extension to the bodily inhaled air (Varenne 235). *Prana* is similar to the Chinese concept of *chi*—the circulating life energy that in Chinese philosophy is thought to be inherent in all things. Several comparisons with nature are used in the description of *prana*. *Prana* is compared to a fire being formed into new life by every inhalation. The flame burns higher, devours the fuel [oxygen] brought in from the outside by air, and then expels the waste [ash] in the forms of exhaled air (Varenne 111). The rhythm of *prana* is comparable to the ebb and flow of tidal waves (Feuerstein and Miller 26). Furthermore, according to Professor H. Upadhyay, *prana* is like a knife which he carefully employs to operate on his own mind, to cut out the malicious thoughts and feelings in order to piece through to higher levels of consciousness (Feuerstein and Miller 112).

According to yogic teaching, at birth, we all receive the “vital breath” of *prana* and the function of respiration is to circulate it through the body. As human beings we need to breathe to survive making *prana* essential to our existence. Breath is not filled with oxygen, but the all sustaining life-force—*prana* (Feuerstein 236). *Prana* is a vital force of life energy which we constantly inhale as we breathe in. The complete withdrawal of *prana* from our body means

death (Feuerstein and Miller 112). It can be said that sensations of hunger, thirst, hot, cold, etc. within the body could be understood as symptoms of *prana*. Moreover, all physical feelings that flow within the body might also be interpreted as evidence that *prana* is at work. The presence of *prana* is said to be what distinguishes a living body from a dead one. When a person dies, the *prana*, or life force, is thought to leave the body. Our bodies are seen to contain a complex network of channels (*nadi*) and valves (*bandha*) that allow *prana* to flow through the body. For yoga, *prana* (breath) represents life itself in its most concrete form (Varenne 111). “By means of regulation, control and restraint of *prana*, the yogi first gains mastery over the *prana* currents, then over his body.” For breathing in yoga, “there is always a connection between respiration and mental states,” (Eliade 69). Yoga brings about the unity of the senses, the mind, and the vital force—*prana* (Joshi 57). The breath is the essential maintainer of concentration and the heart of the yoga principle. As such in practice, if a yogi has attained complete mastery over the technique of breathing [he] succeeds in “seeing” the interior of his body (Varenne 208).

Contrary to the ancient Upanisadic belief that *prana* was breath within the being; Feuerstein takes a variation of the definition. In his book, *Yoga and Beyond*, he does not think that *prana* is mere breath, but the “*spanda-sakti*” (vibratory power) that penetrates the whole cosmos and every living being and even able to exercise influence on the mind (*citta*) (Feuerstein and Miller 26). This references a very profound union between *prana* and *citta*—vital energy and mind. Furthermore, texts such as the *Yoga Sutra* have not plainly expressed *prana* as breath. *Prana* can be seen as “more akin to vital force or life energy,” (Feuerstein and Miller 111-112). On a much more spiritual level *prana* is defined as, the cosmic breath, the rhythmic oscillation effective on all levels of conditioned existence (Feuerstein and Miller 26).

There are five subdivisions of *prana* connected with certain functions and distributions over certain regions of the body: *prana*, *samana*, *apana*, *udana*, and *vyana*. The particulars of these sectors are described within Vyasa's commentary in the *Yoga Sutra*. *Prana* is located through the mouth and the nose, and its changeability continues as far as the heart. *Samana* is dispersed uniformly and fluctuates from the navel. *Apana* leads downward in the body and oscillates as far as the sole of the foot. *Udana* leads upwards in the body and fluctuates as far as the head. *Vyana* is encompassing through the entire body system.

From the *Mahabharata*:

The breath called *prana*, residing within the head and the heat that is there, cause all kinds of exertion. That *prana* is the living creature, the universal soul, the eternal Being, and the Mind, Intellect and Consciousness of all living creatures, as also all the objects of the senses. Thus the living creature is, in every respect, caused by *prana* to move about and exert. Then in consequence of the other breath called *samana*, every one of the senses is made to act as it does. The breath called *apana*, having recourse to the heat that is in the urethra and the abdominal intestines, moves, engaged in carrying out urine and feces. That single breath, which operates in these three, is called *udana* by those that are conversant with science. That breath, which operates, residing in all the joints of men's bodies, is called *vyana*. There is heat in the bodies of living creatures which is circulated all over the system by the breath called *samana*.

(The Mahabharata Santi Parva, Section CLXXXIV)

*Prana* is associated with many entities and objects. One of the eight limbs of yoga is dependent on *prana*, *pranayama*. *Pranayama* is breath control and the "rejection to breathe like the general run of men...in an unrhythmic fashion," (Eliade 69). *Pranayama* regulates the flow of *prana* through the channels (*nadi*) and valves (*bandha*) of the body. Regulating the breath

then leads to the control of *prana* through the body. Through the evolution of human beings, we become tone deaf towards the “original rhythm” of the cosmos. *Pranayama* is used to “restore the primeval rhythm and cosmic harmony,” (Feuerstein and Miller 26). *Prana* is the cause of spiritual progress within the practice of *pranayama* (Varenne 158). The rhythm found in *pranayama* is divided in to three phases of *prana*: inhalation (*puraka*), exhalation (*recaka*), and the retention of air (*kumbhaka*) (Eliade 71-72). At the time of inhalation, the breath occupies internal space, which is said to be felt from the palms of the hands to the soles of the feet. At exhalation, the external space can be felt at the tip of the nose (Dasgupta 146). Also associated with *prana* (or life-energy) is the wind god Vayu. In the Vedic system Vayu is the master of life, inspirer of that breath or dynamic energy called *prana*. Vayu is seen as the “companion to the breath of life” (Feuerstein and Miller 110). All the vital and nervous activities of the human being fall within the definition of *prana* and belong to the domain of Vayu (Aurobindo 323). *Prana* is identified as the wind in the hymn XI.4 of the *Atharva Veda*: “Breath they call Matarisvan; breath is called the wind; in breath what has been and what will be, in breath is all established.”

Yoga is a traditional Hindu act towards the attainment of absolute liberation (*moksa*). On this journey towards liberation *prana* is an important aspect to the practice of yoga and to life itself. *Prana* aids in the achievement of total concentration within the yogic tradition. According to many texts and practices, *prana* is the essence of life and without it we are dead. Even though there are several meanings to *prana*, it can simply be said that it is the vital energy flow to life. *Prana* is essential to one of the eight limbs of yoga, breath control or *pranayama*. Without the proper utilization of *prana*, *pranayama* cannot be executed successfully. Furthermore, there are five subdivisions within *prana*, found throughout the body, which altogether function to bring

*prana* to the highest power. But *prana* in its explicit form is most essential. To quote the *Yoga Darshana Upanishad*: “*prana*, like the sun, travels through the signs of the zodiac; each time you inhale, hold in your breath before expelling it.” *Prana* is found in every living being, but in order to have full control over it, it must be practiced with *pranayama*. These features together in formation with the other seven limbs of yoga are the quintessential model for the achievement of *moksa*.

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## Further Readings

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