

PRANAYAMA

What Is Pranayama?

Pranayama is the fourth limb of Patanjali's Raja Yoga, which was first outlined in his *Yoga Sutras*. It is also an important part of Hindu asceticism and a vital part of any yoga practice. *Prana* is the vital energy (breath) in all of us; *pranayama* is the control of that vital energy. Control of the breath means refusing to breathe as people normally do. Under normal circumstances, breath is non-rhythmic and shallow. However, in *pranayama*, the breath is deep, even, and controlled by the practitioner (Eliade 55). "A Yogi measures the span of his life not by the number of years but by the number of breaths. One can take in only a certain amount of energy or *prana* from the air along with each breath. The vital capacity is measured by the greatest amount of air one can inhale after the deepest possible exhalation (Sivananda 269).

Early Textual References

Yoga, one of the orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy, is the psychophysical system of attaining union with Absolute Reality (Brahman). As an integral part of the Hindu philosophy, yoga is mentioned in many influential Hindu texts. *Pranayama* is identified in the *Rg Veda* with Brahma as inhalation, Visnu as suspension of the breath, and Rudra as exhalation. In the *Upanisads*, there is the mention of "obtaining "ecstasy" through concentration on sounds [and] such concentration is acquired only by the application of yogic technique (*asana*, *pranayama*, etc.) (Eliade 133) In the *Bhagavad Gita* also mentions yoga, presenting it as a practical means for attaining *moksa* through meditation (Eliade 159n).

Preparation

One of the most important aspects of the practice of *pranayama* is said to be the preparation for practice. It is said that one must be firmly grounded in *asanas*, as well as preparing the body by purifying it through the following six *kriyas* (Sivananda 292). First, one must complete *dhauti*, or cleansing the digestive track. Then the bowels are cleansed through *basti* and the sinuses through *neti*. The eyes and mind are cleansed through steady gazing or *trataka*. *Nauli* cleanses abdominal churning which eliminates constipation and increases digestive fire. *Kapalabhati*, which is heavy, fast breathing, destroys excess phlegm.

There are other preliminary considerations for practice. These include a place that is pleasant, quiet, beautiful, private, where there are no disturbances or distractions. The time of day *pranayama* is practiced is also important, it is best to practice in the spring or fall. In the summer season, the cool early morning hours are the best time of day. The food that the body consumes is also considered and important consideration. Light, moderate, substantial and nutritious food – there are three categories of food which must be balanced. *Sattvic* foods (i.e., milk, fruit, cereals, butter, cheese, tomatoes, and spinach) make the mind pure. *Rajasic* foods (i.e., fish, eggs, meat) stimulate passion. *Tamasic* foods (i.e., beef, onions, garlic) make the mind lethargic and angry. The practice is best approached with passion and earnestness. It is said that the student must have a calm mind, faith in his Guru's teachings, believe in God, live a life of moderation, and be eager to attain *moksa*. The final step of suggested preliminary preparation is the purification of the *nadis* which is done through alternate nostril breathing and creates harmony in the body (Sivananda 296-314):

Practice

After preparing physically with your *kriyas* and *asanas*, mental preparation can begin. The first part of practice is the three-part breath. First is *puraka* (inhalation), followed by *rechaka* (exhalation), and finally *kumbhaka* (retention). The time unit used to measure the breath is a *matra*, usually the syllable Om. It is also suggested that the suitable *asanas* for *pranayama* are *padmasana*, *siddhasana*, *svastikasana*, or *samasana*.

When first starting to practice *pranayama*, Sivananda recommends that you practice only *puraka* and *rechaka*, without *kumbhaka* for a month or two. Once comfortable with the slowing down of the breath, retention can be added. At first a ratio of 1:4:2 is recommended which gradually will be increased to 16:64:32 (377). This ratio refers to inhaling for one *matra*, retaining for four *matra*, and exhaling for two *matra*. The three types of *pranayama* discussed by Sivananda are inferior *pranayama*, which is 12 *matras*, middling *pranayama*, which is 24 *matras*, and superior *pranayama*, which consists of 32 *matras*. These numbers refer to the number of *matras* for inhalation only.

There is more than one way to practice *pranayama*. Sivananda outlines various exercises which include alternate nostril breathing, deep breathing exercises, *pranayama* during meditation,

while walking and during *savasana* (deep relaxation of the muscles and nerves), and *ujjayi pranayama* (breathing while partially closing the glottis) to name a few.

Sivananda also identifies four stages that accompany *pranayama* practice. The first is *arambha avastha*, which is for the destruction of former sins and often consists of profuse perspiration that should be rubbed into the body with the hands. The second stage is *ghata avastha*, which is obtained through the regular practice of suppressing the breath. In order to pass through the *ghata* state one must constantly keep up their yogic practice. The third stage is *parichaya avastha*. "Through steady practice and concentrated thought the breath now pierces the Kundalini Shakti along with the Agni and enters the Sushumna uninterrupted" (328). The final stage of *pranayama* is *nishpatti avastha*, the state of consummation where all of the karmic seeds have been destroyed and the practitioner becomes immortal.

Goals

"The yogic practitioner seeks through a careful process of spiritual exercises to reach a state of "isolation", of the complete separation of spirit and matter" (Embree 195). It is through practicing *pranayama* that this goal becomes attainable. The goal of *pranayama* is very much the same as the goal of yoga. There is a reciprocal relationship between breath and the mind. Once able to control the breath, one is able to control the mind and control of the mind allows control of the breath. "If the mind and *prana* are both controlled, one becomes liberated from the rounds of births and deaths and attains immortality" (Sivananda, 268).

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