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## An Introduction to *Prāṇāyāma*

### 1. *Prāṇāyāma* Preliminaries

*Prāṇāyāma* is simply conscious breathing that may or may not be regulated in some way as it has been developed over the last few millennia within various Yoga traditions in India with the main purpose of steadying the mind and gaining a deeper insight into Life that is constantly breathing us. The most important reason for doing *prāṇāyāma* in the first place is to get intimately connected with the breath, not to modify it in accordance with some arbitrary pattern or force it in any way, obsessively controlling it or breathing in the „correct way”. The key point is to gently approach the breath through an appropriate movement of the body (that is through an appropriate *āsana* practice) and then learn about yourself by feeling the breath, listening to the breath and closely following the breath in some static comfortable posture, preferably in some cross-legged position with the back kept straight without tension, but also in any other comfortable position on the floor or sitting on a chair. This is the signature Yoga approach to systematic conscious breathing with the idea to work with the breath first indirectly through the movement of the body and then directly in *prāṇāyāma* proper. While breathing and moving the attention is divided into observing the movement of the body and the movement of the breath in synergy with each other. In *prāṇāyāma* proper, however, all the attention is given to the breath, to a continuous uninterrupted observation of the breath while sitting still or lying in a stable and comfortable position in which this observation is actually possible. Without preparing the body and mind for this careful observation of the quality of the breath in a state of heightened attention through the preceding *āsana* practice, it is immaterial to talk about *prāṇāyāma*.

There are, of course, certain techniques that can be useful in doing this and they are mostly based on carefully prolonging the inhalation (*pūraka*) and exhalation (*recaka*), and then, if and when appropriate, suspensions of the breath (*kumbhaka*) can be carefully introduced either at the end of inhale (*antara-kumbhaka*) or at the end of exhale (*bāhya-*

*kumbhaka*), or both. This regulation of the breathing components is traditionally called *prāṇāyāma* if observed with special attention given to some anciently defined parameters that are very helpful in doing it safely, joyfully and effectively. And *prāṇāyāma* can be learnt safely, joyfully and effectively only from a competent and experienced Yoga teacher who knows how to adapt the techniques to each and every practicing individual. The three main parameters that were already mentioned in the influential Yoga classic, the *Yoga-sūtra* attributed to Patañjali, are the following: 1) the place (*deśa*) in the body where the attention should be focused while doing *prāṇāyāma*, 2) the duration (*kāla*) of the respiratory components and 3) the number (*saṃkhyā*) of breaths done in one session. Originally, the techniques of *prāṇāyāma* were probably invented to facilitate the practitioner's being present with the breath without getting bored, distracted or tired, but were later on elaborated into very precise tools for dealing specifically with certain respiratory and health problems or achieving some special results, either in terms of prevention/therapy or psychological/spiritual development.

*Prāṇāyāma* is undoubtedly the essential Yoga practice, but nevertheless rarely practiced either in the so called „modern postural yoga“ (mainly or exclusively focusing on *āsana*) or the so called „modern meditative yoga“ (mainly or exclusively focusing on different forms of meditation). Actually, it is often not practiced at all, and even if it is practiced, it is usually something elementary, superficial or mechanical. Unfortunately this is so for many reasons, two most important ones being the lack of competence on the part of most „yoga instructors“ to teach *prāṇāyāma* and the second one being the general misperception that *prāṇāyāma* is dangerous, ineffective or boring. The misconception that *prāṇāyāma* is dangerous is very old and it is partly based on ignorance and partly on the fact that it can indeed be dangerous if taught and practiced inappropriately. It can also be ineffective and boring if practiced without proper guidance, excessively or mechanically. Additionally, the breath cannot and should not be forced under any circumstances or pretexts, and a lot of experience and sensitivity on the part of both teacher and student is the basic precondition for starting a *prāṇāyāma* practice in the right way. And this, unfortunately, often is not the case.

However, all this can be corrected quite easily if *prāṇāyāma* is practiced and taught precisely, attentively and with feeling. So, beginners should only do a little *prāṇāyāma* after an appropriate *āsana* practice, mostly *ujjāyī* and *nāḍī-śodhana-prāṇāyāma*, followed by some relaxation or simple meditation, sitting or lying on the back. More experienced practitioners can do more of *prāṇāyāma* and can choose among many different *prāṇāyāmas* as needed

while simultaneously experimenting with breath suspensions and other intricate technicalities. Experienced practitioners can do long and complex *prāṇāyāmas* that include long breath suspensions, the application of *bandha-mudrās*, the silent chanting of certain *mantras*, appropriate visualizations and so on. There are many reasons why *ujjāyī* and *nāḍī-śodhana* should be given priority in practicing *prāṇāyāma* in the beginning, one of the most important being the fact that they teach how to regulate the breath in the throat and the nostrils, respectively, without creating any tension anywhere in the body or mind, and simultaneously calming the mind. The right guidance of a truly competent Yoga teacher is of course indispensable here, just as it is in all other aspects of Yoga practice. And this cannot be overemphasised enough since Yoga is a form of sophisticated traditional knowledge carefully transmitted through dedicated work of generations of practitioners directly from teacher to student.

And finally, *prāṇāyāma* is never done in isolation, but always within its natural context of *āsana* done as a preparation for it and *dhyāna*, or meditation, as its natural continuation happening right after it. If this is not fully understood and consistently practiced, *prāṇāyāma* can never be fruitful and it is better not to do it at all. But, not doing it as part of your regular Yoga practice will make your practice fragmentary, incomplete and much less effective, which is quite illogical, disappointing and unnecessary. Also, sometimes the exact opposite is done and too many different or even opposing *prāṇāyāmas* are done in a sequence within some modern styles of Yoga, often promising some spectacular results, but usually only increasing confusion about *prāṇāyāma* in general and causing all kinds of health problems in particular. So, find a competent teacher who can teach you the whole of Yoga, including *prāṇāyāma* that is properly adapted to you. Also, all Yoga techniques are truly meaningful and fully effective only in synergy with all other techniques, and so all authentic Yoga teachers teach the full spectrum of all Yoga practices as it is appropriate in each particular case, at a pace that is appropriate for each individual and in the quantity that is appropriate for each concrete practitioner. So, find the teacher who can actually teach you the Yoga that is right for you, and in this practice, the right kind of *prāṇāyāma* will immediately or quite soon find its proper place and bring with it the benefits that probably only Yogic *prāṇāyāma* can bring. And, of course, there is no any other *prāṇāyāma* but the Yogic *prāṇāyāma*.

## **2. Prāṇāyāma Essentials**

*Prāṇāyāma*, as already pointed out, is conscious breathing as it is done in a wider and appropriate context of the whole of Yoga. It can be regulated in some way, usually by making breathing long and subtle in various ways or not regulated at all, just observed. It is usually regulated by interrupting it through holding the breath at the end of inhale or exhale or both, or it can be stopped any time in the breathing process. The primary goal is soothing the mind, preparing it for meditation. The secondary goal is securing good health, boosting vitality and achieving longevity. Progress in *prāṇāyāma* is always made in careful steps, and is measured by the ability of the practitioner to be intimate with the breath and really feel the breath. The capacity to do *prāṇāyāma* is developed slowly over time so long sessions of *prāṇāyāma* (15 minutes and longer) are not recommended for beginners. They should have short sessions up to 12 breaths per session and only gradually introduce breath retentions. More experienced practitioners can gradually do twice as much (24 breaths per session) and hold their breaths longer (usually not longer than 64 seconds after inhale and 16 seconds after exhale). The maximum of 36 breaths per session with long holds can be useful only to very experienced practitioners, and anything more than that can hardly be useful to anybody, although the traditional limit is 80 breaths per one sitting. A few shorter sessions of *prāṇāyāma* done throughout the day are often more useful to most practitioners than one long practice, especially when applied as therapy.

Also, an appropriate *āsana* practice (moving the body in close coordination with the breath so that the breath initiates and envelops each movement) is a must before *prāṇāyāma* as an adequate preparation for it. And, if a person breathes well during *āsana* practice by producing the hissing sound at the back of his/her throat while deeply inhaling and exhaling (so called *ujjāyī* type of breathing), there is usually no need to do much of *prāṇāyāma*, since they are essentially one and the same practice. Therefore, divorcing *āsana* from *prāṇāyāma* is missing the point of both. *Ujjāyī-prāṇāyāma* (producing a hissing sound by constricting the vocal chords gently while breathing deeply and consciously) and *nāḍī-śodhana-prāṇāyāma* (alternate nostril breathing done by using the digital pressure on the nostrils while breathing deeply and consciously) are the ones that are usually learnt first and can be done daily for longer periods of time. Almost all other *prāṇāyāmas* are done occasionally or temporarily for specific purposes, usually as prevention or therapy. And, most importantly, all *prāṇāyāmas* must be done very gradually and under a close supervision of a competent teacher. Otherwise, there is a great chance that something will go wrong or no results achieved. When *prāṇāyāma*

is practiced appropriately, it is always pleasant and never monotonous or exhausting. And then, there is absolutely no reason to be afraid of *prāṇāyāma*.

Also, *prāṇāyāma*, or conscious Yogic breathing, was and is practiced differently according to the context in which it is used and depending on the purpose for which it is used. And it should always be adapted to the individual and preceded by an appropriate practice of *āsana* understood and practiced primarily as a moving *prāṇāyāma* preparing for a static *prāṇāyāma* proper, usually done in a seated posture with the legs crossed, or any other stable and comfortable position in which the back is straight, with or without the use of appropriate props to support the optimal posture. The eyes should be closed throughout the practice and the whole attention given to the movement of the breath being carefully followed and the mind being progressively soothed. An appropriate light diet is a must and some other important guidelines must be respected like the appropriate time and place for doing the practice, the season of the year and stage of life, the intensity and frequency of breathing, and many other details must all be there for any *prāṇāyāma* practice to be functional for a particular practitioner.

Although originally it might have been practiced as a psychosomatic purification or even as a religious ritual to atone for the past sins, that is as a form of penance, or *tapas*, *prāṇāyāma* soon evolved into a very subtle method for calming the mind and later on even into a preventive/therapeutic practice. But, essentially, it is a devotional practice as the whole of Yoga: giving yourself totally to that which inspires you. In this case literary to the breath that literally in-spires you with life and with spirit. In *haṭha-yoga*, *prāṇāyāma/prāṇa-saṃrodha/prāṇa-saṃyama* is therefore the central practice because respiration is the most critical function of the human organism, even more critical than the heartbeat. *Nāḍī-śodhana* (alternate nostril breathing) and *ujjāyī-prāṇāyāma* (throat breathing) are considered to be the most significant types of *prāṇāyāma*, the first one being very old and predating *haṭha-yoga*, and the second one being relatively new and invented by *haṭha-yogīs*. When combined into three distinct *prāṇāyāmas* – *anuloma-ujjāyī* (inhaling *ujjāyī* and exhaling through one nostril), *viloma-ujjāyī* (inhaling through one nostril and exhaling *ujjāyī*) and *pratiloma-ujjāyī-prāṇāyāma* (connecting *anuloma* and *viloma* into one practice) – their benefits are combined, enhanced and deepened. Unlike *nāḍī-śodhana* and *ujjāyī* that mostly work on the mental and physiological level calming the mind and toning the nervous system, these three *prāṇāyāmas* affect your emotional core as well and help you deal with your emotions more creatively. The other two important *prāṇāyāmas* that are derived from *nāḍī-śodhana* are *sūrya-bhedana* and

*chandra-bhedana*, and can be used in opposition to each other. Generally speaking, the first one energizes the organism, and the second one calms the organism. The right hand forming *mṛgī-mudrā* is usually used to control the flow of the air through the nostrils (with the tip of the fingers pressing the nostrils right below the nose bone, using the thumb on the right side and the ring and small finger on the left side) and the left hand rests on the left knee with the palm turned upward using the thumb to count the breaths by touching the 12 knuckles of the first four fingers. That is the reason why one round of *prāṇāyāma* is usually considered to consist of 12 breaths. One such round done in one sitting is considered enough for a beginner. The advantage of counting the breaths by touching the fingers instead of mentally counting them is precisely because it eliminates all mental exertion.

At a higher level of doing *prāṇāyāma*, no counting is necessary; it is spontaneously felt when it is appropriate for us to stop doing it, even if the practice is structured in three phases of first taking a few simple introductory breaths, then taking a number of more complex breaths focusing on achieving a certain benefit and then finally easing out by taking a few relaxing breaths towards the end of the practice. The right measure in doing it is the key to success, and the immediate indication that our practice of *prāṇāyāma* was beneficial for us is the sensation of lightness spreading throughout the whole body turning it into a cloud of energy, the sense of peace pervading the mind and the feeling of fullness expanding in the spiritual Heart. Then meditation simply happens as abiding freely in our natural state, which is the powerful peace and peaceful power of a life lived straight from the Heart, for the Heart. In advanced *prāṇāyāma* practices involving long retentions of the breath (*kumbhaka*), various breath ratios (*vṛtti*), the application of the energy seals (*bandha-mudrā*), creative visualization (*bhāvana*) and the silent repetition of appropriate sacred utterances (*mantra-japa*) the idea is to improve concentration (*mano-bandha*) and raise the intensity of involvement into the process of being alive and going deeper into ourselves to know ourselves better. Then meditation, or *dhyāna*, arises spontaneously providing intuitive insight into Life that we altogether are. And all the knowledge and power that goes with it is then appropriately used for the well-being of all beings and the benefit of all humanity.

### **3. *Prāṇāyāma* Practicalities**

*Prāṇāyāma*, is always practiced very carefully and precisely, consciously and conscientiously, consistently and systematically. It is best done daily in good faith and with confidence. As we

have already said, there are many practical details that are important and even crucial in the effective practice of *prāṇāyāma* and they can and must only be learnt directly from the caring and competent teacher. And also, there is no such thing as “correct breathing” in the sense there is one universal and optimal way of breathing applicable in all situations. Namely, breathing is constantly changing by necessity depending on the different demands of the organism functioning in a certain situation and under constantly changing circumstances. So, the first practical step is always watching the way you breathe in different life situations, and especially when you are trying to relax/rest or are excited/aggravated for whatever reason. Furthermore, most people are prone to breathe in certain fixed patterns that are often detrimental for the general quality of their breathing and are often quite dysfunctional or barely functional. There are many reasons for that, but the most common one is the stress experienced daily in various situations causing strain, contractions and blockages in the breathing musculature, especially the diaphragm, which is the most important and most active among the primary respiratory muscles. So, freeing the diaphragm is the immediate goal of *prāṇāyāma* that can later on lead to two separate, and yet connected results: transcending the very need for breathing while practicing (*kevala-kumbhaka/sūnyaka-prāṇāyāma*) to be able to observe the mind without any nuisance, even the one coming from breathing, and slowing down the respiratory frequency in everyday activities that happens spontaneously after the practice, which has an enormous positive effect on the overall health. Since there are many serious respiratory diseases that tremendously impair the quality of life or ultimately kill many people, *prāṇāyāma* should also be practiced to prevent or cure those conditions.

T. Krishnamacharya, the “father of modern yoga”, mentions a rather big number of 128 known *prāṇāyāmas*, but described and taught not more than a dozen or so. Around 70 are described in the traditional and modern sources, but for most people around 10 different *prāṇāyāmas* are more than enough. The first step is always observing the natural flow of the breath and noticing possible patterns of breathing, aberrations or even respiratory disorders if there are any. Then the inhale is deepened and exhale prolonged first in the *āsana* practice and then in *prāṇāyāma* proper right after the *āsana* practice is done. Finally, the natural pauses in breathing at the end of inhale and exhale are carefully introduced, and the mind is being simultaneously watched, slowly forgetting about the breathing and solely concentrating on the content of consciousness. This is meditation proper, or the natural consequence of appropriate *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* practice. Or, as Krishnamacharya’s son, T. K. V. Desikachar, would put it: the breath, as the “intelligence of the body”, leads the mind naturally into a state of

calmness and clarity, where it is possible “to be with the breath, with That which is breathing us”, as his student and my Yoga teacher Mark Whitwell is fond of saying. Some knowledge of human anatomy and kinesiology, physiology and biochemistry of breathing, especially when applied as therapy, can be useful in the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, but it is by no means indispensable if the right kind of knowledge is received from the tradition. For example, Krishnamacharya insisted that the lungs are the primary pump in the body (constantly pumping the atmospheric air into the body and the used air out of the body because oxygen cannot be stored and used when needed), not the heart (constantly pumping oxygenated blood into the arteries to bring the oxygen and nutrients to all the cells of the body and pumping the blood saturated with carbon dioxide into the lungs to be released from the body). So, the proper functioning of the lungs is of primary concern, and that is taken care of in the appropriate practice of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*.

The Krishnamacharya-Desikachar of Yoga also insists on a special way of breathing while doing *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, and that is the so called “top-to-bottom” type of breathing in which the chest is first engaged into expansion while inhaling, and the belly is relaxed and can secondarily protrude a bit at the end of the inhalation. The exhalation is done by first contracting the lower abdominals and the chest collapsing secondarily while keeping the contraction engaged until the very end of exhale. In this way the whole spine and trunk robustly participate in the act of breathing making it maximally effective. It is exactly the opposite of the so called “bottom-to-top” breathing advocated by most of other modern schools of Yoga based on some anatomical misconceptions and preventing the spine to extend and the chest to expand fully on inhale. Krishnamacharya also introduced the *ujjāyī*/thorat type of breathing into the practice of *āsana* to make it maximally effective, which is also counter to how *āsanas* are done in most other Yoga traditions. He also pointed out that *prāṇāyāma* is fully effective only if the three *bandha-mudrās* (*jālandhara*, *uḍḍīyāna* and *mūla-bandha-mudrā*) are properly applied in it, which requires a high level of subtlety rarely found in modern Yoga. And essentially, *prāṇāyāma* is a form of meditation, awareness of the breath, and a devotional spiritual practice of merging with the Source of Life, which is that Primordial Power breathing you right now and as long as you live.

To get the most out of your practice of *prāṇāyāma* it is important to know, understand and consistently apply all the important principles of *prāṇāyāma*. The first principle is that your breath is your life! The second one is that *prāṇāyāma* is conscious breathing done to connect intimately with your own breath. The third is that being conscious of the breath is to

be conscious of the mysterious power behind the breath, which is the Life Force (*prāṇa-śakti*) breathing you. The fourth says that the breath is first deepened and strengthened in *āsana* (which is essentially dynamic *prāṇāyāma*!) and then it is suspended and steadied by making it subtle and long in *prāṇāyāma* proper. The fifth states that a strong breath is a solid basis for good health, vibrant vitality and sustainable longevity. The sixth is the simple fact that a steady breath supports a steady, meditative mind. And finally, the seventh principle is that *āsana* prepares for *prāṇāyāma*, *prāṇāyāma* prepares for *dhyāna*, or meditation, and meditation prepares for deeper, really satisfying human and humane living. The idea is to respect the life in you with gratitude realizing that it is the same Life in everybody. So *prāṇāyāma* is not just “breathing exercises” that you do if you know a little bit more of Yoga; it is the very essence of Yoga because breathing is central to life, to paraphrase Krishnamacharya once again.

In the last two decades or so human breathing got a bit more attention both in modern biomedicine and in alternative therapies, and even phrases like “breath work” and “breath centered yoga” have been coined. However, serious interest in *prāṇāyāma* is still missing. And although modern western medicine has been studying Yoga and *prāṇāyāma* quite systematically for a hundred years both in India and all around the world, *prāṇāyāma* is still somewhat of a mystery and many of its processes and effects still cannot be explained by modern science. However, the importance of good breathing for good health and a good life in general is more than obvious and more attention should progressively be given to studying, practicing and teaching *prāṇāyāma*. When breathing is good, a person is not aware of his or her respiratory process and takes it for granted, never or almost never paying attention to the way he or she is breathing although each human life hangs on the thread of the breath at any given moment. Yoga says you don’t have to wait until you develop some problems with breathing to start practicing *prāṇāyāma*, but instead is prompting you to pay attention to your breath right now and listen to the messages that are constantly coming from within and are reflected in the breath, revealing many secrets of human existence and bringing you repeatedly back to your Heart. Translated from Sanskrit, the word *prāṇāyāma* literally means “extending (*āyāma*) the breath (*prāṇa*)”, but it also means drawing the life energy throughout the body and finally protecting, strengthening and prolonging life. So, let your breath be your inner teacher and may we all be healthy and happy with the help of *prāṇāyāma*!