

The art of pranayama

By Pixie Lillas

Pranayama is the art of breathing according to yoga principles and techniques. It is the beginning of the more inward journey on the path of yoga, and a more subtle and refined form of self-awareness and exploration is both developed, and required, for its practice.

Often ignored by those western adaptations of yoga which only emphasise *asana* (posture) practice, *pranayama* is one of yoga's most ancient arts, probably dating back more than four thousand years to yoga's very origins. Yoga's most important historical text, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* written two thousand years ago, describes the practice of *asana* in such a manner as to suggest that at that time *asanas* were seen as a necessary preparation for *pranayama*, but not widely practised for their own sake.

Pranayama is both outwardly quiet and abstract and inwardly precise and powerful. It is a long and challenging voyage which involves a different approach from *asana* (posture) practice. Whereas the postures can initially make use of willpower and determination, pranayama cannot be done with strength or force.

It is a practice even more subjective and personal than that of *asana*. In some ways, no one can really teach *pranayama*; as teachers we serve as guides, giving reference points and techniques for the pupil to use as they experience the breath and its effects when channeled according to yogic techniques.

If this sounds a little daunting, and perhaps excessively mystifying, remember that most classical yoga texts suggest that the practice of *pranayama* is only to be undertaken when the yoga postures have been mastered, and under the guidance of an experienced teacher. In turn, sustained practice of *pranayama* over many years is an element of, and a preparation for, the art of *dhyana* or yogic meditation.

This runs somewhat contrary to the modern Western concept that everything should be available to everybody at all times. Most yoga schools receive frequent phone calls from people with no previous yoga experience asking if they offer lessons in *pranayama* and meditation, and if not, why not.

The Path to *Pranayama*

The Iyengar tradition takes a classical view of yoga breathing and meditation. According to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, these aspects of yoga come as later stages in the eight steps, or limbs, of yoga. First an understanding of the yoga postures must be achieved through keen and conscious practice in order to refine the senses and hone the body and mind to become more perceptive instruments of self-observation.

Asanas help explore concepts of stillness and inner action, focus and reflection, firmness of body and alertness and steadiness of mind, essential prerequisites for the practice of *pranayama*. If we were learning to play a musical instrument, we would start with the foundational skills and progressively learn more difficult techniques; some more complex pieces would be unavailable to us until we had reached a degree of accomplishment in the basic forms. Some music teachers will not allow their students, however gifted, to play certain passages until they are mature in age and/or mental and emotional development. A good yoga teacher will exercise similar restraint with their pupils and teach first a foundation of posture, body awareness and stability before introducing work with the breath.

In earlier, more rigorous times in India, aspiring yoga practitioners had first to demonstrate their worthiness as a pupil before being taken into apprenticeship with a teacher. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1.16) discusses certain habits that undermine yoga practice: over-eating, over-exertion, useless talk, undisciplined conduct, bad company and restless inconstancy. The Yoga Upanisads mention other obstacles such as bad physical posture and self-destroying emotions such as lust and anger, fear, greed, hatred and jealousy.

How then does one begin to overcome these most common of habits to make our way along the path of yoga?

Today, many yoga schools, and certainly those teaching the Iyengar tradition, understand that mindful practice of *asana* becomes a major factor in creating the discipline, personal ethics, energy and firmness of intention required to move further along the path of pranayama to inner awareness. In *Light on Pranayama*, BKS Iyengar writes that "as an earthen pot is baked in a furnace, so should the body be baked by the fire of asanas to experience the true effulgence (efficacy) of pranayama."

To begin *pranayama*, he says, we must first learn how to move the intercostal muscles (rib-cage muscles) correctly, and also the pelvic and thoracic diaphragm, by practising the relevant *asanas* that bring elasticity to the lungs. Consistent performance of the *asanas* in all their variations and for extended lengths of time keeps the nervous system clean and clear, thus aiding an uninterrupted flow of energy (*prana*) while doing *pranayama*. If health is a balance between mind, body and spirit, then the practice of yoga postures can help to eradicate physical ailments and mental distractions, thus clearing the way for the spirit.

The Challenge of *Pranayama*

Yoga as a system is perhaps unusual, if not unique, in that its practice both highlights the problems, mental and physical, that are hindrances to our progress, at the same time as providing us with the very tools we need to overcome them. The second chapter of the *Yoga Sutras* is a practical outline of how, with all of our human frailties and imbalances, we can use yoga to refine our intelligence and move beyond the self-limiting, habitual illusions and tendencies of everyday life to embrace a more unified understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us.

But do we actually need to add such a subtle and complex subject as *pranayama* to our daily routine? Is *asana* perhaps enough?

The postures in yoga are indeed a means of using our body to discover our inner self. They provide us with the outer frame, the tangible and visible form, a structure to work with. The mind is more elusive and harder to know. It can deceive us so that we believe what we want to believe, such as convincing ourselves that this is the best we can or should do.

The body, on the other hand, is like a canvas on which we can express ourselves as we are right now, and on which we can see the results of our actions. A leg is straight or bent, no question of confusion there; we are balancing or not; we are on our mats or off having coffee. *Asana* practice is relatively straight forward and an uncomplicated method for helping us to see who and how we are. Only then is change possible.

Pranayama is harder to grasp and requires another approach. By using the skills of focus, reflection, stillness and refinement that we have begun to acquire through posture work, *pranayama* begins the journey inwards, when our minds and emotions can be seen more clearly. It can never be approached with force or with physical strength. If we use hardness, it slips further away.

It is like a story I once heard of a method used by a teacher of bioenergetics many years ago. He organised a sort of competition between two business men by connecting them with wires to two model electric trains. The trains were set up in such a way that the more relaxed their drivers became, the faster their alpha waves would make the carriages go. The more they tried to win in the traditional way, the more the trains slowed down. The breath is very similar.

Foundations of *Pranayama* Practice

The simple essence of *pranayama* is described in the *Yoga Sutras* (2.49) as the controlled intake and outflow of breath in a firmly established posture. Breath regulation is important because when the breath is irregular the mind wavers; when the breath is steady so is the mind. But the practice of *pranayama* must be undertaken with caution and respect. The classical text, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* says that as the lion, the elephant and the tiger are tamed gradually, so also the breath has to be tamed, otherwise it can be harmful to the *sadhaka* (practitioner).

Normal breathing in our everyday activities is irregular, sometimes described by BKS Iyengar as a zig-zag breath. It moves in different parts of the lungs at various rhythms according to what we are doing, what position we are in, our mental state, the condition of our lungs and diaphragm and so on.

But *pranayama* is more than just deep breathing; a *pranayama* breath must be regulated, steady, evenly prolonged, channelled and conscious. *Pranayama* consists of an intentional, long, sustained and guided inhalation, exhalation and retention (holding of the breath). It not only enables the body to receive an abundant supply of oxygen, but prolongs and channels this air and energy throughout, so that the body may savour and fully benefit from the breath in every possible cell. The conscious regulation and expansion of the breath brings discipline and focus to the mind.

To even begin to observe and know our own normal breath and its patterns takes time and continued practice. Our breathing patterns are deeply habitual and strongly connected to our emotions. To be able to adjust that breath and transform its rhythm, length and path at will without tension or struggle and with our bodies tuned and open to cooperate and synchronise with it is an intricate, delicate and challenging task. BKS Iyengar once said that anyone with less than 12 years of regular *pranayama* practice was still at the raw beginner stage.

Benefits of *Pranayama*

I used the word daunting at the beginning of this article. Yet the rewards are great and changes do occur, a long time before the 12-year mark. Like *pranayama* itself, the results are subtle, not as obvious as the transformations that can be observed in our bodies through the postures. It is something that occurs on an almost organic level, outside of our desire for instant gratification.

When I first started *pranayama*, I just did a very simple form based on becoming aware of the breath and trying to coax the inhalation and exhalation to be more even in length and quality. I perhaps did 15 minutes a day for about a year. I was not aware of any great difference, but I practised because the people I was living with all did. At the end of that year I traveled for a few days and didn't do any *pranayama* for that time. Only then did I notice how different I felt without it. It was its absence after a longish period of consistent basic practice that made me aware of many of its benefits; so simple and quiet were the changes that I had at first not noticed them, yet these initial small modifications also laid the foundation for other, deeper transformations in the way I felt and thought. In my experience the most profound benefits of yoga take us by surprise, with time. They are often not the ones we set out to achieve.

The breath connects our inner world with the outer, it brings our core in contact with the universe outside. It is an inbuilt form of giving and receiving which has an ancient, primordial quality, like the rhythm of the sea. Something always there, something rarely felt or noticed. It is worth spending some time with, and it is worth preparing ourselves for.

If you are beginning to practise in the Iyengar tradition, expect to spend some many months on foundational *asanas* for the body before you hear your teacher mention *pranayama*. However in each class and in every practice you will be learning something useful to prepare for it.

In a subsequent article I will describe some of the more specific postures and techniques we use in our classes for students with a minimum of one years yoga experience to prepare for *pranayama* proper.

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