

P R A N A Y A M A - An Absolute necessity in YOGA

- A dedicated homage to my father and teacher,

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Whatever be the reason for teaching Yoga, it is a certainty that the pupil, slowly but definitely, quests for the ULTIMATE REALITY. Even if multitudes of methods, school, ideas and individuation have drifted Yoga from its real value, yet, it is because of the incessant search of pupils that Yoga continues to have an important place in the inner reflections of people all around the world.

This drift from the real nature of Yoga might have many reasons. Amongst them the lack of importance given to PRANAYAMA in one's practice cannot be ignored.

Very often false reasons are invoked to keep PRANAYAMA away from one's teaching or practice. Still, there is not one teacher nor one school that does not talk of PRANA.

It is true that the Yogic way for the quest of inner Self and the Search for God Realisation through Pranayama is not a simple subject. This should not be an excuse for not introducing it in the practice sessions of pupils whether they practice regularly or not.

In fact, Pranayama maintains and keeps our spiritual life alive, just as our breath that keeps our biological one alive. For the same reason very often Pranayama is confounded with our physiological breath. Indeed, the relation between the two seems so juxtaposed that we get mixed up. It is just like a tool and the basic raw material out of which the tool is made up of. The tool is so much and so often used that we seldom think of the importance of the basic metal that give birth to the tool. Still, we know that the quality and the value of the basic material are the determining factors for the utility, value and life of the tool. Same way, in the eyes of the Yogic Masters, our physiological breath is but a tool.

The Great Masters of India used this relation to the utmost and derived great benefit in their spiritual quest. They did not use the physiological breathing merely to increase the vital reserves, but valued it more in a metaphysical sense. Since the physical breath is but a product of the basic material, this product should help us 'know' that basic material!

That is to say, by 'going beyond' the product, in which the basic material is present, one should be able to find it in its 'natural form'. This, the VEDAS and the UPANISHADS call PRANA, and that which helps go beyond is AAYAMA. So much so, the means by which the physical breath is used to 'go beyond' are termed PRANAYAMA.

PRANAYAMA is part and parcel of any Yogic approach worth its name. Moreover, it is not out of place to take note that no Hindu ritual starts without a Pranayama. This does not mean that Yoga is a religious act, but since it has its root in Hinduism, we cannot but consider it as our reference.

Coming to the practical aspects, Yogic Science has given clear cut rules for the introduction of Pranayama in any Practice Session. Later studies have given light on their physiological actions on the human body as a whole.

Here we shall content ourselves with some fundamental principles:

1. Those that act mainly on the Physiological functions,
as for eg. UJJAYI ANULOMA and SHITHALI.
2. Those that act mainly on the Nervous System,
as for eg. UJJAYI VILOMA, UJJAYI PRATHILOMA and
NADI SHODHANA,
3. Those that work on the mental plane,
as for eg. NADI SHODHANA with Bahya Kumbhaka and
SURYA BHEDHANA,
4. Those that maintain the Spiritual Quest,
like the SAMA VRITHI in NADI SHODHANA, and SURYA BHEDANA
both of them as SAGARBHA PRANAYAMA

Let us briefly recapitulate the technique of the above Pranayama, remembering that the Pranayama are done in a sitting posture (VAJRA ASANA or PADMA ASANA), and that the back should be straight, without any cushion or pillow under the hips.

UJJAYI ANULOMA: Inhalation (PURAKA) through both nostrils in UJJAYI, Exhalation (RECHAKA) through Left Nostril, without ujjayi, Inhalation through both nostrils in Ujjayi, and Exhalation through the Right Nostril, without Ujjayi. These two breaths making one Cycle of Ujjayi Anuloma.

SHITHALI: Slightly open the mouth, bring out the tongue, fold it lengthwise, to make it resemble a tube, Inhale (aspire) through the mouth. At the end of the Inhalation, draw back the tongue, close the mouth, and Exhale through Ujjayi, by both the nostrils.

UJJAYI VILOMA: Inhale through the Left Nostril, without using Ujjayi, Exhale through Ujjayi, with both the nostrils open. Inhale, again through the Right Nostril, without using Ujjayi, and Exhale through Ujjayi, with both the nostrils open. This forms one Cycle.

UJJAYI PRATHILOMA: Inhale through Ujjayi, Exhale by the Left Nostril, Inhale by Left Nostril, Exhale by Ujjayi, Inhale by Ujjayi, Exhale by Right Nostril, Inhale by Right Nostril, and Exhale by Ujjayi. These 4 breaths make one cycles, and to be of any value, a minimum of 4 cycles or 16 breaths is needed.

NADI SHODHANA: This is a Pranayama where no ujjayi should ever be used. Inhale by the Left Nostril, Exhale by the Right Nostril, Inhale by the Right Nostril, Exhale by the Left Nostril.

It is to be noted that a Pranayama can have KUMBHAKA: either after Inhalation (called ANTAH KUMBHAKA) or after Exhalation (called BAHYA KUMBHAKA)

SAMA VRITHI: Sama Vrithi is a Pranayama imperatively practiced in NADI SHODHANA. In this Pranayama, while following the technique of Nadi Shodhana, the time allotted to Puraka, Antah Kumbhaka, Rechaka and Bahya Kumbhaka should be the same. For eg. Puraka = Antah Kumbhaka = Rechaka = Bahya Kumbhaka = 5".

SURYA BHEDHANA: Once again, this Pranayama should be done only in Nadi Shodhana. Here, the Puraka, Antah Kumbhaka and Rechaka would have a proportional time measure. The Antah Kumbhaka should be 4 times the measure of Puraka, while that of Rechaka should be of twice the measure of Puraka. To cite an example: Puraka = say 8", the Antah Kumbhaka = 32" while the Rechaka = 16".

It goes without saying that a Practice session has to have a Pranayama at the beginning and one at the end, and a minimum of 12 breaths in each.

1. UJJAYI ANULOMA or SHITHALI are the Pranayama that is to be introduced at the start of any Practice Session. Ujjayi Anuloma is more congenial in Autumn and Winter, whereas Shithali is better suited to Spring and Summer. Ujjayi Anuloma removes weariness coming from excess of mental or physical work, sentimental or emotional shock, fatigue coming from improper digestion in the small intestines leading to unwholesome assimilation. It also stabilises the mental state. Moreover, it has the possibility of providing and maintaining continuity in the mental states obtained in different Sessions.

SHITHALI is more a Pranayama that establishes the digestion, maintaining an 'acide-base balance'. It soothes the sense perception, has a tendency to remove the weariness of the sense organs.

If ANTAH KUMBHAKA is more complementary to Ujjayi Anuloma, Shithali goes generally well with Bahya Kumbhaka. In Ujjayi Anuloma, the duration of Kumbhaka should not exceed half the time of Puraka, while in Shithali, either Antah Kumbhaka or Bahya Kumbhaka should not exceed 5".

The specificity of the 2 Pranayama is that they can be given at the beginning and or at the end of a Session.

2 UJJAYI VILOMA is a Pranayama, acting more on the nervous system, even though the practitioner finds relief in his mental state. It soothes the nervous irritations, or excitements coming mainly from emotional, affective or sentimental overcharge in one's life. Its action is very fast, so much so, it should be practised for a short duration say, for a continuous period of 15 days, followed by Ujjayi Anuloma which stabilises the results obtained through Ujjayi Viloma. As the technical word Viloma indicates, the 'movement' of the mind in this Pranayama is transcendental but 'intensified', it is not advisable to practice Ujjayi Viloma at the end of a session, if the practitioner is to have a social life immediately after his practice. Care should be taken in not introducing Ujjayi Viloma in case of mental depression, or in depressive tendencies. Ujjayi Anuloma is the Pranayama for all sorts of mental depressions.

UJJAYI PRATHILOMA acts both on the nervous systems and on the thought processes So much so, it removes all nervous excitement, bringing back to normalcy the nervous impulses, removes the interferences of superficial thought processes thereby providing a clear mental space. We can say, that Ujjayi Prathiloma suits to those who live under such extreme emotional stress that they are unable to forget it,

neither are they able to do anything else. Once again this Pranayama is to be practised for 2 weeks, replaced by Ujjayi Anuloma. It is to be remembered that Ujjayi Prathiloma should be practised for a minimum of 16 breaths. It works very well in the beginning of a session. If practiced late in the evening, it induces sleep. If this Pranayama is introduced, care should be taken to see that Ujjayi Anuloma finds its place in the end of the session. This Pranayama is very suitable to get oneself free from the after affect of emotional shocks.

While Bahya Kumbhaka is more suitable to Viloma, no Kumbhaka is advisable in Prathiloma.

As for NADI SHODHANA, it is always a Pranayama of the end of the session. For convenient practice of Nadi Shodhana, one should have had some practice of Ujjayi Anuloma, Sarvanga Asana, and if possible Shirsha Asana. The action of this Pranayama, without Kumbhaka, is not so much on the biological changes in the body. Its action is more on the clarity of sense perception, removal of sense confusions, attentiveness of the mind. It should not be practiced when there is nervous irritability, emotional shock, or fear of spiritual sentiments, particularly in those who do not believe in the value of a Divine Support, or where there is excess of fatigue. Suitable Pranayama should be practiced at first to improve one's condition before working on Nadi Shodhana. It is always conceivable to have done either Badha Kona Asana or Maha Mudra or Paschimathana Asana as the last Asana before doing Nadi Shodhana.

3. NADI SHODHANA with Bahya Kumbhaka influences more the mental plane. When we talk of mental plane, we talk of the emotions (ANUBHAAVA) and sentiments (STHAAYI BHAVA), having their physical or physiological response. A disturbed mind, is the mind whose natural functions are overtaken by emotions or sentiments. As long as these persist, mind will not be clarified, and without a clear mind (MANASSHUDHI) it is not possible to have an insight.

Nadi Shodhana with Bahya Kumbhaka breaks the link between the emotions, sentiments and their physiological response. So its action is more on the interrelation between the physical mode of emotions, and the emotional or sentimental impulse. It goes without saying that this Pranayama comes in the end of a session, that the duration of Bahya Kumbhaka should not exceed on fourth the time of Puraka, that the conditions mentioned for Nadi Shodhana (without Kumbhaka) apply here as well.

SURYA BHEDHANA in view of the important Kumbhaka it has, can be practised only when one has the physical and mental capacity and capability to assume the Kumbhaka. Here we come to some of the important Pranayama of Yoga. The technique clearly shows that this Pranayama outwits the physiological basis of the respiratory system. Yet, when well practised, does not alter the O²-CO² relations, and thus does not create any adverse reaction in the chemical imbalance in the body. Moreover this Pranayama has the possibility of maintaining the Alpha Waves at will. If the great Yoga Masters relayed on Surya Bhedhana, it should have been because they found that it works at the root of our emotions. A regular practice of this Pranayama provides a proper control of the emotional activities of the mind. This needs ample preparation and constant practice of Mudras like the Viparitha Karani, Maha Mudra, Ashvini Mudra and Asanas like Badha Kona Asana, Ardha Matsyendra Asana etc. That is to say, those that have the centre of action at the root of our emotional response -- the Naval (NAABHI). To obtain good results, this Pranayama is to be practiced sitting, facing East.

4. For any spiritual quest, one has to purify the mind, in a way as to free it from sentiments, that are against those of the Creator or God. At the same time, the Home of the Soul, the Heart (HRUDAYA) should be cleared of all emotions, except those that are Divine. This can be done only if the outward tendencies of the sense perceptions revert towards Inward Insight (ATMA AVALOKANA). Since the Mind follows the senses, the sentiments follow the mind, the emotions follow the sentiments, PRANA follows the emotions, and the Soul (ATMA) follows Prana, we have to work in such a way as to reverse these outward tendencies. That is to say, as long as the sense perceptions do not look Inward, it would not be possible to bring back the Prana, the Mind and Soul into the Heart. This is the essential role of the Pranayama of the 4th Category.

All the Pranayama under this heading belong to principle of Nadi Shodhana. They are always to be practised at the end of a session. Further, they are to be followed by Nadi Shodhana with Concentration on HRUDAYA. The practice session containing Pranayama of this category should contain Asanas like Matsya Asana, Bhujanga Asana, Dhanura Asana, Sarvanga Asana, Shirsha asana, Ardha Matsyendra Asana, Badha Kona Asana, Paschimathana Asana. Moreover, the number of breaths used in all the Asanas and Mudras put together should be inferior to the number of breaths of all the Pranayama finding their place in the same Session. All the Pranayama of this series should be done facing East.

According to Hindu Tradition, the Pranayama under this category should be SAGARBHA (= Conceivable). That is to say, during the practice of these Pranayama, the image in the Mental Space should be that of God, or a Divine Object of Contemplation, and there should be silent muttering of God's name (or a Mantra). Non believers in God, or those not having conviction in such an entity should adopt appropriate means. They can use a non-physical object like an unique Star, a Horizon Point or the Dark Hollow of the Early Morning Rising Sun. In any case, the object in the mind should be beyond the Time-Space Reality.

The SAMAVRITHI, to be effective should have a minimum of duration of 8 sec. at each phase (or 32 secs for one breath), and it is always practised in Nadi Shodhana. This Pranayama works at the base of our Verbal Expressions. This, in the Manifested State (VYAKTHA) is located in the Perineum (MULA), while at the Unmanifested state (AVYAKTHA) it is situated in NAABHI, considered as the Link between the Creator and Man. From the Manifested Sound Expression, the Shabda (the sound) assumes 'colour' through the emotions, which find their root at Naabhi. (It is to be noted that the SHIRSHA or the fontanelle becomes the link between Man and the Creator, in his transcendental path). So much so, Naabhi has a dual role: That of linking the creator with man, and that of 'shading' the manifested sound through emotions. This manifest sound, is what is at the basis of expression--spoken or otherwise, and when used through words, becomes language or as the Indian Psychology calls ALAMKARA (= Aesthetic Language). All our reactions -- sentimental or emotional -- raise from the interactions or the disequilibrium amongst these various localisations. As long as a perfect balance is not acquired between these, man is subject to emotional disturbances and they will not provide him Peace of Mind (CHITHA SHANTI). SAMAVRITHI PRANAYAMA acts in this direction. Its main centre of action is at Naabhi, and its aim is to delay the emotional activities, a delay sufficient for the mind not to follow the emotions. The actions of this Pranayama is not felt immediately, but in our daily life.

It is imperative to have had long practice of the Pranayama of the 3rd Category, before putting into practice those indicated in this last category. Moreover, this Pranayama is efficacious only if the mind is in concentration with some Vital Points like Naasagra, Kanta, Hrudaya, Kurma Nadi, Naabhi. The Points to be chosen depends on the psychological constitution and emotional set up of the student. This Pranayama has a good complementary if Ujjayi Anuloma 16 breaths is introduced at the beginning of a session. Similarly, Samavrithi is not to be practiced when one is under an emotional stress or in a depressive mood. Also, it is advisable not to practice this Pranayama when one is not used to Concentrate on Vital Points. The above mentioned actions of this Pranayama reside mainly on the Concentration Points introduced (SAGARBHA PRANAYAMA). If practiced as a respiratory exercise, it has every chance of bringing to surface emotions with their physiological response. The importance of this Pranayama in Yoga is to be measured from the fact

that it is one the very few Pranayama with Kumbhaka as long as Rechaka that the Yogic Literature describe.

We now come to the Pranayama that has already been reviewed under the 3rd Category (SURYA BHEDHANA). Technically speaking, this Pranayama is the same as the one we studied before. But in this category the aim is to render Prana its natural and original function of being in close association with ATMA, and to show ATMA the path of the Supreme soul (PARAMATHMA) or the Creator. (It is here that we understand the meaning of Prana Aayama: extending Prana towards the Creator). In this Surya Bhedhana, concentration is an essential factor. The concentration during Puraka (Inhalation) is used in such a way as to centralise all the mental faculties including the sensorial ones in HRUDAYA, to stabilise them in HRUDAYA during Antah Kumbhaka, so that cleared of all influences with regard to the external world, the mind reflects itself, during Rechaka, its Original Nature of revealing the qualities of Atma.

This Pranayama is also called ABHYANTARA VRITHI (or the Inner Movement), because the Sense and the Mental activities instead of going outward, turn inwards. In this Pranayama, the Concentration Points applied are: Naasagra, Bhrumadhya, Lalaata, Kanta, Kurma Nadi and Hrudaya.

Yet another Pranayama, which should be practised facing East. The effect of this Pranayama, is increased if followed by a Prayer. It would not be a repetition, if it is said that a Practice Session having this Pranayama should have only the Asanas and Mudra as is indicated under Sama Vrithi. Moreover, the only occasion when Nadi Shodhana, can be introduced as a Pranayama at the beginning of the session, is when Surya Bhedhana as mentioned here finds its place in the end of the session, and the Asanas and Mudra are those that are mentioned under Sama Vrithi.

Here are but some indications for the application of Pranayama, and it is beyond doubt that if properly used, under the keen observation and guidance of a Teacher, any student of Yoga will find the real value and benefit that Yoga Stands for.