

## Pranayama

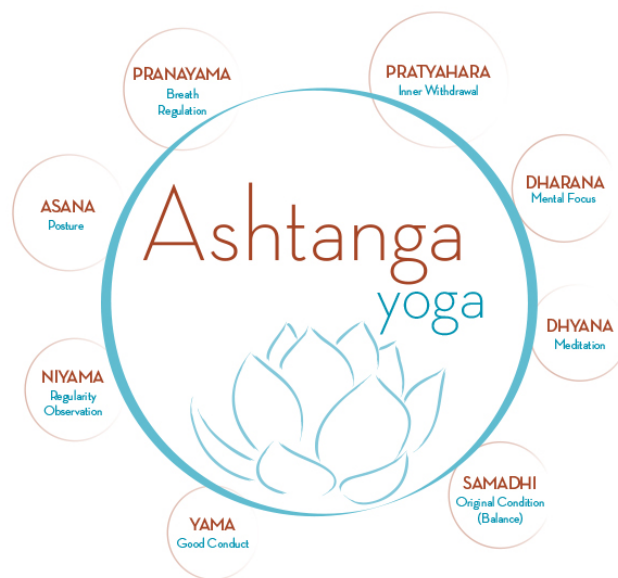


Daaji

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### ASHTANGA YOGA SERIES



What if someone told you there was a simple set of practices that could help you manage every aspect of your daily life, and at the same time take you to a level of human potential beyond your wildest imagination? Would you be interested? Most people would at least be curious.

That is in fact an accurate explanation of the practices of Yoga, but most people don't realize it. Yoga includes a holistic set of practices for overall self-development and the well-being of the body, mind and soul. A few thousand years back, the great sage Patanjali compiled the current yogic practices of that time into a simple framework consisting of eight parts or limbs, and that framework is still used today. It is known as Ashtanga Yoga.

But the practices of Yoga have evolved since Patanjali was alive, in response to the needs of the time and especially during the last 150 years. So in this series DAAJI explores each limb of Yoga in the light of the modern day yogic practices of Heartfulness. He shows us how to integrate inner spiritual practices with living in the world and refining our personality, so as to create that true state of Yoga – skill in action and integration of the spiritual and worldly as aspects of life.

# PRANAYAMA

Prana • Pranayama • Prana Pratishtha • Pranahuti

*Pranayama* is the fourth of Patanjali's eight limbs of yogic practice. Here DAAJI explains the purpose of the practices of *Pranayama* and some key dos and don'ts. He also introduces *Prana* as the base of all these practices, as well as touching upon *Prana pratishtha* in traditional worship and *Pranahuti* in the Heartfulness way of meditation, describing how the regulation and stabilization of our energy field helps us to dive deep in meditation to the center of our being.

For thousands of years people have worshipped and prayed to idols and statues, including images of gods, saints, and symbols like the cross. Often these images have very profound symbolism, and have also been charged with *Prana* or spiritual essence by great saints or prophets from the past. This process of charging an idol is known as *Prana pratishtha*. Now, here is a question: if a saint or yogi can infuse an inanimate statue, cross or stone with spiritual essence, can that same saint not also infuse the heart of a human being with the same essence? A human being who can feel the divine essence and respond directly rather than having to go through the medium of an idol? The answer will become clear later in the article.

Swami Vivekananda once said that, "*Prana* stands in metaphysics for the sum total of the energy that is in the universe. This universe, according to the theory of the philosophers, proceeds in the form of waves; it rises, and again it subsides, melts away, as it were; then again it proceeds out in all this variety; then again it slowly returns. So it goes on like a pulsation. The whole of this universe is composed of matter and force; and according to Sanskrit philosophers, everything that we call matter, solid and liquid, is the outcome of one primal matter, which they call *Akasha* or ether; and the primordial force, of which all the forces that we see in nature are manifestations, they call *Prana*. It is this *Prana* acting upon *Akasha* which creates this universe, and after the end of a period, called a cycle, there is a period of rest. One period of activity is followed by a period of rest; this is the nature of everything." This is also the nature of our breath.

What is the first thing we hope for when a baby is born? That the baby is breathing normally. And at the end of life we also check for breathing, because without it we are dead. Breathing is a sign of life, and in that sense *Pranayama* is all about breath.

But there is much more to it than that. It is *Prana* by which we breathe, by which our blood circulates, our nerves and muscles work, and by which we think. All forms of energy are manifestations of *Prana*.

*Pranayama* is a combination of two words, *Prana* and *Ayama*. The word *Prana* is derived from the Sanskrit *An*, which means 'to move' or 'to breathe' with the prefix *Pra* which generally is used to intensify the meaning of the root with which it is associated. The word *Ayama* means 'expanding, extending, stretching,' so *Pranayama* means to extend or expand the life force or breath. *Ayama* also sometimes means 'restraint or control', in which case it can also mean controlling or restraining the breath. So both expansion and contraction are there in the process, as in the process of breathing itself.

## PATANJALI'S DESCRIPTION

In his Yoga Sutras, Patanjali tells us the following about *Pranayama*:

2.49: Tasmin sati shvasa prashvsayoh gati vichchedah pranayamah.



Once perfection in the meditation posture has been achieved, then we can practice regulation of the incoming and outgoing flow of the breath and expansion of the vital energy or *Prana*.

This is known as *Pranayama*.

2.50: *Bahya abhyantara sthambha vrittih desha kala sankhyabhih paridrishtah dirgha sukshmah.*

*Pranayama* has three aspects: outward flow or exhalation, inward flow or inhalation,

and the absence of both during the stationary transition between them, which is known as retention or suspension.

These three states are regulated by place, time and number, and the breathing becomes slow and subtle.

2.51: *Bahya abhyantara vishaya akshepi chaturthah.*

There is a fourth type of *Pranayama*, which transcends the inward and outward *Pranayamas*.

It appears effortless and occurs during concentration.

2.52: *Tatah kshiyate prakasha avaranam.*

As a result, the veil covering the inner light diminishes.

2.53: *Dharanasu cha yogyata manasah.*

The mind now becomes fit for concentration or dharana.

In summary, once you have perfected your meditation posture, you can practice regulating the inflow and outflow of your breath and expansion of your vital energy. There are three aspects to your breathing – exhalation, inhalation, and the stationary transition between them. These three states are regulated by place, time and number, and eventually the breathing will become slow and subtle. As a result of these practices, the veil covering the inner light diminishes, and the mind becomes fit for concentration. The fourth type of *Pranayama* transcends these inward and outward movements, appearing effortlessly and occurring during concentration.

By now we can really start to see the flow that Patanjali envisioned in his Ashtanga Yoga. First came *Yama* and *Niyama*, because without refinement of character what good is spirituality! There would be no balance between the inner and outer states. Then when starting a spiritual practice, the first step was to establish the right posture to create the field for an inner approach – that is the third limb, *Asana*. Perfection in posture was a prerequisite for the later steps. *Pranayama* then followed directly on from *Asana*, and it also created the right field of energy for both *Pratyahara* and *Dharana*, the fifth and sixth limbs of Ashtanga Yoga.

## THE INFLOW AND OUTFLOW OF ENERGY

So the original purpose of *Pranayama* was to regulate the breath to become slow and subtle, in order to allow the attention to turn inwards, calming the mind and dissolving scattered thinking patterns. After all, what are thoughts but energy? This inward turning of the energetic field would then strengthen the link of the *Pranamaya kosha*, the energy sheath of the human being, with the more subtle planes of existence – the mind and soul – rather than always directing energy outwards into the physical plane.

The yogic practices of *Pranayama* work on the energetic field of the human being (known as the subtle body) and the associated *Pranamaya kosha*. When done well they bring mental balance and well-being, resulting in good health, because our energetic system is then resonating in tune and We can think of *Pranayama* as the expansion of vitality; breathing with the inflow and outflow of the whole. We expand into the infinite breath of the Eternal.

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When we do breathing exercises with this in mind, then we will see their effect. If the goal is just to breathe in and out, breathe in and out, in a particular rhythm then we won't enjoy it, but once we do it with the awareness that it is meant for this higher purpose, then it is different.

We can easily observe what happens when we change the way we breathe; our whole energetic field changes. For example, try to observe how your breathing differs when you are angry versus calm, when you are asleep versus awake, and when you are loving versus selfish. And different patterns of breathing are also an indication of a deeper energy pattern – that of inflow and outflow. We can compare it to Newton's second law of thermodynamics about entropy: he says that in unregulated systems entropy or disorder increases. When we get angry with another person, for example, our energetic field is destabilized because our attention is drawn outwards to the periphery of our being. Our system remains unstable. In contrast, when energy flows inwards towards the center of our being, we feel refreshed and rejuvenated, and our breathing becomes rhythmic, subtler and more relaxed. At the center of our being we are one with everything – in fact there is only oneness – so when our energy moves inwards we are moving towards harmony.

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## CARE IS NEEDED

So the practices of *Pranayama* are very useful in regulating our energy system, as they provide the inputs to bring stability and reverse the increase in entropy or disorder in our system. But they can be misused, so that instead of refining our energy field they create disturbance. This happens when there is not proper guidance, so it is always better to learn the practices of *Pranayama* from an expert.

There are also many nuances to the science of *Pranayama*, and here are some that Ram Chandra of Fatehgarh advised to his followers:

While engaging in *Pranayama*, avoid cold and sour foods. Also avoid very hot foods, as they may also cause some harm.

In the beginning there may be bleeding through the nose, the ears or in the stool, which will disappear with time.

It is not a good idea to immediately start devoting a lot of time to *Pranayama*. Instead go on gradually increasing the number of breaths.

Exhale slowly and through the nostrils rather than through the mouth, as exhaling through the mouth may harm the teeth.

*Pranayama* should not be done on an empty stomach or immediately after food. The stomach should neither be totally empty nor totally full but in between.

These restrictions are for beginners. Adepts can do *Pranayama* as they like, but it is always better to avoid excessive practice, as it creates too much disturbance. Over the years I have seen that whenever there is a lot of physical disturbance during meditation, like unconscious shaking or oscillations, it is because the person has been doing too much *Pranayama*.

## THE PRANAMAYA KOSHA

The *Pranamaya kosha* is the sheath in which we experience the flow of energy, which is described according to five energetic processes (*karmendriyas*) and five energy flows (*pranas*). The five energetic processes are elimination, reproduction, movement, grasping with our hands, and speaking. The five flows of energy within the human body are known as the *vayus* or winds. They are:

The inward flow that governs respiration and the receiving of everything, from air and food to ideas and impressions,

The downward and outward flow of elimination – excretion, urination and menstruation on the physical level, and anything that needs to be removed mentally,

The balancing and integrating flow at the meeting point between the inward and outward flows, associated with assimilation and digestion,

The ascending flow that directs energy towards higher levels of consciousness and governs self-expression through communication, and

The flow through the *nadis*, the circulatory system, the nervous system, the lymphatic system, the movement of muscles and joints, and thoughts and emotions.

Even though the *Pranamaya kosha* can be regulated by breathing exercises, it is subtle and not glued to the physical system. It permeates all throughout and envelops us like an energy bubble, creating the field of the aura. The chakras of the subtle body are also associated with this *kosha*, so meditation and cleaning of the subtle body are also needed to refine the *Pranamaya kosha*.

Whenever an imbalance or illness happens, the first *kosha* to be compromised is usually the *Pranamaya kosha*. That is why acupuncture and acupressure treatments work on our energy meridians. In fact, our energy field is disturbed before any physical ailment appears. Sometimes we can predict the health of a person just by looking at the aura around their face. We feel the difference if someone is angry, in love, or it is a gentle mother with her baby, for example. This is because our attitude affects our *Pranamaya kosha* to a large extent. When this *kosha* is shining, our overall health is benefited. We radiate the state we have in our energy sheath, including joy and love; love is very palpable.

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As I mentioned earlier, when we are stressed, angry or reactive, we need more energy, and it is generally directed in an outward flow. So we activate the *Pranamaya kosha* by activating the sympathetic nervous system. Our heart

rate goes up, our breathing becomes more variable, and our body goes into its stress response. This is actually one of the reasons why *Pranayama* came into being – to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. When our sympathetic nervous system is activated by stress, we can calm ourselves by activating the parasympathetic system, for example through the *Chandra nadi*. And when we need to be more active and engaged, we can activate the sympathetic system in a similar way through the *Surya nadi*. We are able to bring about balance.

This energy *kosha* is quite forbidding to refine, because here consciousness mixes with ego, and that can be like sodium metal exposed to moisture in the air – explosive. All our energetic processes and cognitive senses derive their energy from this sheath, our waking consciousness is regulated by this sheath, and the natural emotions of passion and anger are nourished by this sheath. Fights and conflicts at work and at home with dear ones are due to imbalances here; when it is spoilt we can be terribly egotistical, whereas when it is rightly used it supports Self-Realization.

Always running after pleasure and an excess of materialism can also distort the finer balance of this energy sheath. In contrast, moderation in emotions and other faculties harmonizes the *Pranamaya kosha*, and this in turn helps to harmonize the physical body also. The Heartfulness practices of meditation on point A and cleaning of point B<sup>1</sup> are very helpful in refining this sheath.

The play of opposites is very strong here. Attitudes of likes and dislikes, attraction and repulsion, make this sheath even more formidable. Moderation is not so easy when these things are at play. It is important to remain vigilant in the way we speak, our body language and our inner attitude. It means being humble and respectful towards everyone, including young ones and elders. Constantly nurturing a state of insignificance and curbing the ego are the surest ways to refine this sheath. It finds its true natural luster only when the ego is totally refined to its original purity.

## PRANAHUTI

Reaching that state of insignificance is already a high achievement, however, as the true refinement of the ego comes only with the journey of the higher regions of the mind and beyond. Until that work has been done, *Pranayama* can

always potentially inflame the ego. So in Heartfulness, we instead use something so superfine to direct the energetic flow inwards in a highly potentized way, and that is *Pranahuti* or Transmission. Transmission is an offering of *Prana* directly from the Source, which is directed by a Guide of calibre into the heart of a seeker – *ahuti* means offering. While *Prana* is all around us everywhere, just like air, the Guide acts like a fan, directing the essence of *Prana* into the heart of the seeker. When we meditate with Transmission, our attention naturally flows inwards and so does our breath, so our system becomes highly stable, leading to lower and lower entropy. Our breathing is regulated naturally as a result of the inward flow of *Pranahuti*. This also leads naturally to *Pratyahara* and *Dharana*, and in fact helps us dive deeper into *Dhyana* so that we often attain the state of *Samadhi* during the first meditation sessions. The practices of Yoga have evolved considerably during the last century, thanks to the subtlest flow of *Pranahuti* that is the specialty of Heartfulness.

## PRACTICES OF PRANAYAMA

As with *Asana*, the science of *Pranayama* has evolved a lot since the time of Patanjali, when the purpose was simply to gather the life force inwards and expand it to merge with the infinite whole. Nowadays there are practices of *Pranayama* for many purposes, to balance the energetic systems. Simple breathing practices are very beneficial for overall health and well-being, and some of these exercises are available. For more information, please contact us at [wellness@heartfulness.org](mailto:wellness@heartfulness.org).

I find this advice given by Swami Vivekananda to be very beneficial: first hold yourself straight; then think of your body as sound and perfect, and healthy and strong; then throw a current of love all around, thinking that the whole universe is happy; then pray, if you believe in God; and then breathe.

Also, it helps to include the idea of *Yama* and *Niyama* when you are breathing. With every breath you take in, think that you are drawing goodness and nobility from the existence all around you (*Niyama*), and with every breath you breathe out, think that you are expelling unnecessary complexities from your system (*Yama*).

<sup>1</sup> Ram Chandra, 2014. *Efficacy of Raja Yoga in the Light of Sahaj Marg*. Shri Ram Chandra Mission, India.

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Daaji

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Kamlesh Patel is known to many as Daaji. He is the Heartfulness Guide in a tradition of Yoga meditation that is over 100 years old, overseeing 14,000 certified Heartfulness trainers and many volunteers in over 130 countries. He is an innovator and researcher, equally at home in the fields of spirituality and science, blending the... [Read more](#)

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