

## UNIT : 1 Introduction to Yoga and Yogic Practices

### 1.10 Introduction to Pranayama and Dhyana and their health benefits.

Accessing our inner power with the help of breath is a useful tool. It will help us live life to its fullest. Pranayama is the control and extension of the breath, which awakens Prana, or the life force. Practicing the way you inhale and exhale can help you manipulate your vital energy to successfully activate or soothe your mood.

only one minute of intentional breathing work out can help you shift your mood dramatically. Simple controlled breathing exercises can allow you to channelize and redirect your energy in the positive direction, and help you achieve results you never imagined possible

#### Introduction to Pranayama :

Breathing is a vital process that starts at the time of birth and stops when a person dies. During breathing, the life sustaining oxygen is provided to all parts, organs and cells of the body. Pranayama is the formal practice of controlling the breath, which is the source of our *prana*, or vital life force. The word prana represents the vital energy responsible for life or life force, while *ayama* means “control (by stretching/expanding)”.

Hence, *pranayama* translates to “control of the life force”. This is accomplished by manipulating breathing. One can control the rhythms of *pranic* energy with *pranayama* and attain a healthy body and mind. When we breathe, we take in vital energy and remove waste products or toxins out of the body and mind.

Breathing includes inhalation and exhalation, which is called *Puraka* and *Rechaka* in yogashastra, respectively.

Pranayama or breath control involves retention of breath (known as Kumbhaka in Sanskrit), wherein air is retained internally or externally. The halt of breath or retention of air after inhaling is called *Abhyantara* or *Antara Kumbhaka*; while that after exhaling is called *Bahya Kumbhaka*. Retention of air increases the level of prana (energy) in the body, and also regulates the flow of pranic energy throughout the body.

Pranayama is thus a means to channelize energy in the body, thereby curing ailments and slowing down the aging process of the body.

In Patanjali Yoga Sutras, pranayama lays emphasis on breathing (inhalation, exhalation and retention), whereas in Hatha Yoga, pranayama is equated with *kumbhak* or retention.



### Did You Know?

In his *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali mentions *pranayama* as a means of becoming fit for doing *dharana* (concentration) practice, as also for removing the shroud of impurities covering our inner light.

## Sitting Postures for Pranayama

Pranayama and meditation can be performed in five classical sitting positions or postures. The order of the poses should be as follows:

- Siddhasana
- Padmasana and Ardha Padmasana
- Swastikasana
- Sukhasana
- Vajrasana

### Siddhasana (The Accomplished Pose):

Sit with the legs straight. Bend the left leg and place the heel of the left foot touching the perineum region. Now bend the right leg and place the right foot on top of the left calf such that the small toe and the fourth toe are in between the calf and thigh muscles of the left leg. Now, bring the big toe and the second toe of the left foot between the calf and thigh muscles of the right leg. In this position, the ankles of both the feet are placed one over the other. If it is difficult to keep the body upright or the knees do not rest on the floor, then sit on a cushion, at an appropriate height.



Fig. 9.1: *Siddhasana* Pose



*Siddhasana* is given a place of the pride among all the *asanas* in *Hatha Yoga*. As a meditative pose, it provides the widest base of support; hence, it provides maximum balance and stability. The heel touching the perineum region stimulates the *muladhara chakra*, thereby facilitating the awakening of *kundalini*. In the case of females, this *asana* is referred to as *siddhayoni asana*.

### **Padmasana (The Lotus Pose):**

Spine erect, legs outstretched on the floor or on a mat, bend the right knee and place the right foot on the left thigh. Bend the left knee and place the left foot on the right thigh. This pose can be performed with either knee first, then the other knee to follow. The soles of both feet should face the ceiling and the heels should be brought close to the abdomen.

With both the feet firmly planted on the opposite thigh in a cross, place your hands on the knees in *chin mudra*. You can also adopt *padma mudra*, with the right palm placed on the left palm rested on the heels, thumbs in contact with each other. Head, back of the neck and spine must be in one straight line. Chin parallel to the floor.



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**Fig. 9.2:** *Padmasana*

### **Ardha Padmasana (The Half Lotus Pose):**

Sit erect, bend the right knee and place the right foot close to the left thigh on the floor. Bend the left knee and place the left foot on top of the right thigh. Try to bring the left heel as close to the abdomen. Alternately, the left knee may be bent first. Both the knees should be grounded. You may even place a folded blanket under the bottom to give the spine a lift. Hands in chin *mudra* or *padma mudra*. This pose may be adopted by those who cannot do *Padmasana*.

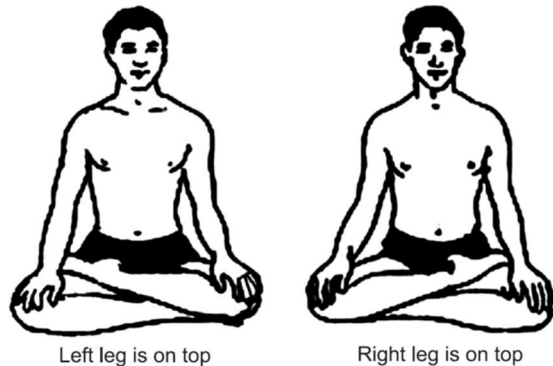


Fig. 9.3: *Ardha Padmasana*

### **Swastikasana (The Auspicious Pose):**

Sit on the floor, bend the left knee and bring the sole of the left foot in contact with the inside of the right thigh. Bend the right knee and place the right foot between the left thigh and calf muscle. Ensure that both the heels do not touch the pubis. The toes of the left foot must be pulled up slowly to rest in between the right thigh and calf. Place your hands on the knees in chin or *jnana mudra*. Spine must be erect. Close the eyes and observe the breath.



Fig. 9.4: *Swastikasana*

### **Sukhasana (Simple comfortable cross-legged pose):**

Sit down on a mat and place the right foot under the left thigh and the left foot under, or in front of the right calf on the floor. If it is difficult to keep the body upright then sit on a cushion at an appropriate height. This posture is recommended for those who have difficulty in sitting for a long period of time in *Siddhasana*, *Vajrasana* or *Padmasana*.



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**Fig. 9.5:** *Sukhasana*

### **Vajrasana (The Adamantine Pose):**

Fold both the legs, keeping your hips on the heels. Let your toes point out behind you; the big toes should be touching each other. Sit over the gap formed by the parted heels. Keep the head, neck and spine in a straight line. Place the palms on the thighs.



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**Fig. 9.6:** *Vajrasana*

## Important factors during Pranayam practice:

1. Eyes should be closed
2. Upper portion of the body be straight
3. Head, Neck and back straight in one line
4. Hand on knees in any mudra like : Jnana, Chin or Bhairav
5. Keep body in this position steady and motionless.
6. State of mind calm and quite.

## Benefits of Pranayama :

Pranayama practices have benefits at all levels for human beings – physical, physiological, mental and spiritual. Some of these benefits are described below :

1. Every organ in the body, including heart, brain, lungs, digestive organs, endocrine glands, and excretory organs have rhythms. Breathing, too, has a specific rhythm. Pranayama gives the breath a natural rhythm by controlling the process of inhalation, exhalation and retention. Breathing influences almost all the systems of the body. Hence, it helps to maintain the natural rhythm of all body organs, and allows their functions to go a long way.
2. Increased energy level : A technique for the control of *prana*, *pranayama* practices result in increasing the stock of *prana* in the body.  
Increased awareness level : The frequency of *pranic* vibrations too increasing.
3. With pranayama, one can master the process of breathing though slowly but deeply. Reduced breathing rate has multiple benefits for the body, like slowing down the heart rate, minimizing the wear and tear of internal organs, improving blood circulation lowering blood pressure, and slowing down the aging process.
4. Pranayama increases lungs capacity. It is actually helpful for those suffering from respiratory disorders such as asthma and emphysema that they can overcome the fear of the shortness of breath.
5. Pranayama controls the fluctuations of mind and prepares it for meditation. The combination of Pranayama and meditation makes the body feel light. It provides inner peace, improves sleep, sharpens the memory and refines concentration.
6. Pranayama helps in increasing oxygen supply to the brain and provides complete relaxation to the nervous system. A fitter and calmer mind is a path to deep relaxation, which also increases the mental and physical powers of endurance.
7. Research suggests that manipulating the breath can alter how we feel. Breathing has a significant impact on our emotions, like anger, fear, joy or sadness. Right breathing not only calms the body and mind down but also helps to control negative emotions, such as anger, depression, jealousy, hatred, greed and arrogance.

8. Yogic breathing practices increase the levels of leptin, a hormone produced by fat tissues that signals the brain to inhibit hunger. Intensive yoga practice may benefit health by altering leptin and adiponectin production in the body. Leptin has a pro-inflammatory role, while adiponectin has anti-inflammatory properties.
9. By combining asanas with pranayama, intense relaxation and meditation, we can maintain the balance of our stress-regulation systems in our brain and our body. Practising various Yoga techniques including pranayama affects the activity of our genes, lowers our heart rate and blood pressure and decreases the production of “stress” hormones, which reduce the symptoms of mental and physical distress.<sup>2</sup>
10. Practising pranayama on a daily basis can benefit those suffering from respiratory or heart problems, insomnia, nervous disorders, migraines, or any disorder which occurs due to absence of proper relaxation.

### **Meditation – The Concept**

According to the *Astanga yoga* of Patanjali, ‘*Dhyâna*’ is seventh *Angâ* of the *yogangâs*. *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Prânayama* and *Pratyâhâra* are five *Angâs* which are considered to be *bahya*, external *Angâs*. These practices are called as *Bahirang Sadhana*

whereas *dharana*, *dhyana* and *Samadhi* are *antarik*, the inner *Angâs*. These practices are called as *Antarang Sadhana*

To enter into the inner kingdom and build a bridge between the inner and outer worlds, *dharana* works like a bridge, whereas *dhyâna*, the meditation is equal to a gateway to the inner world.

There may be so many traditions and paths in this world and all of them may have different kinds of practices to follow to reach ultimate goal of self realisation. But all of them have no differences about meditation. Therefore, meditation is the most essential part of the practice.

According to yoga *sutrâs* of Patanjali, following *Yama*, *Niyama*, mastering the *Asanas*, practicing different kinds of *prânayama*, one becomes able to get rid of the impurities and gets control of the senses. Then only one can attain Concentration or *Dharana*, which is the process of holding or fixing the attention of mind onto one object or place:



*desabandhascittasya darana (yogadarsana 3.1)*

देशबन्धश्चित्तस्य धारणा ॥ ३.१॥

*Tatra pratyayaikatânatâ dhyânam' (yogadarsana 3/1-2).*

तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम् ॥ ३.२॥

The concept of meditation is the most misunderstood or inadequately understood in modern times. Basically, all meditation techniques are related to the mind. They involve the controlling of the mind which finally transcends.

This state of transcendence is referred to in *Hatha Yoga* as *unmani* or *manonmani awastha*. In the wake of practising meditation, several benefits ensue as by-products, such as efficient functioning of the body, a general state of well-being and an overall equanimity.

Meditation is commonly associated with practices to still the mind. There are various forms of meditation to suit different levels of practitioners. Interchangeably referred to as contemplation, meditation practices typically involve breath observation, auto suggestion, visualization, *mantra* chanting, rotation of beads in *japa*, concentration on an object of choice and non-judgmental awareness of thoughts. These practices entail training of the senses and the mind to disassociate from the object and stand apart as a witness.

Thoughts are viewed without any identification, analysis, judgement, resistance or verbalizing. Meditation practice helps in developing concentration or of the state of being single pointed.

Meditation, in its truest sense, is a state of being. What starts off as a technique of practice, slowly evolves into a state of being. The softness and tranquility of the 30 minutes of practice carries itself forward through the rest of the day. Once perfected, the meditative stance percolates and permeates through all our thoughts and deeds, 24/7.

Naturally once the mind is meditative, the fluctuations of the mind lose their power to overwhelm and sway the individual. There is greater clarity and sharpness in seeing things as they are without the pre-conditioned colouring of memory and judgement. The reflecting medium of the mind becomes clearer and purer to reveal the light of intelligence. Muddy waters cannot reflect the brilliance of the sun, only pure and placid waters reflect the sunlight. Therefore, a mind which has been cleared of its dross through the technique of meditation, is tuned to reflect the light of awareness.

Scriptures lay great importance on meditation. They consider it as the highest vocation for mankind. Training the senses and the mind is a pre-requisite to being meditative.



Buddhist monks are known to practice mindfulness in their day to day activities. Mindfulness is referred to being aware of what you are doing at the time of doing, no matter what you are doing.

### **Practical Techniques of Meditation**

For a beginner or learner to sit in meditation without any thoughts is an uphill task. Therefore, practitioners are advised to begin with a support such as the breath or a deity of choice. By using a support, the vagrant mind is given a limited field within which it is allowed to meander, like a farm animal tied to a pole has a fixed radius for wandering.

### **Concentration Meditation**

The mind needs something to get attached to. Concentration and meditation entails focusing the mind on a single point, such as the breath, or a mantra, a candle flame, rotation of beads in *japa*, auto-suggestion for visualization of an object of choice preferably, a deity or *ishta devta*. Concentration and meditation practices take time to build up, it is advisable to practice for a few minutes initially and continue the practice with passion and determination.

The mind will wander but try to refocus the mind and bring it back to the object of meditation. Involuntary thoughts will occur, but over a period of time, the mind gets channelized and remains focused on the object of meditation for longer durations. You will notice that this practice helps in developing our ability to concentrate in our daily activities as well.

### **Mindfulness Meditation**

Mindful meditation practice entails a free flow of thoughts as and when they come. The practitioner is required to simply stand apart from the thoughts and not identify with or judge them.

Through this practice, the practitioner slowly realizes that the thoughts by itself have no power, it is the unnecessary identification with the thoughts that causes any agitation. The mind is a continuous flow of thoughts. By being mindful of the thoughts that occur, their value judgement is withheld, leading to a correct evaluation of the thought. Through mindfulness meditation, you realize that thoughts tend to flow in preconditioned patterns. Continuous practice helps in the development of a state of internal harmony and balance. You can practice a combination of both concentration and mindfulness meditation.

## Simple Meditation Techniques for Beginners

- Make a firm resolve that 'I will meditate daily'. Start off with a daily target of two minutes of sitting still. Gradually, keep increasing the time.
- Try to meditate at a fixed time and a fixed place. The body will slowly get into a groove of meditating and will naturally go to the spot of meditation at the given time.
- Ideally, one must meditate in the morning, when the cosmic rhythm is conducive to silence and stillness.
- The place for meditation must be kept clean and away from noise.
- If it is not possible to meditate at a fixed time and a fixed place, choose any time of the day that works best – try not to skip any single day of practice.
- It's only two minutes – you owe it to yourself.
- If you forget to meditate, set a reminder either on the phone or stick a post-it near your bedside.
- Please do not worry about where to sit, what mat should you use, how should you meditate.
- You need not sit on the floor – sit comfortably on a chair or on your couch, keeping the back erect. Ensure that there are minimal external disturbances. Wear comfortable clothes.
- Once you are comfortable for two minutes, then start optimizing on the posture. Keep the head, neck and back in one straight line.
- As you progress, you will notice that you can stay longer and longer in your practice.
- Observe the state of the mind – is it restless, agitated, oscillating? How is the breath – is it smooth, interrupted, deep, shallow? Simply watch and do not try to change anything yet.
- If you feel drowsy, then take a deep breath and forcefully exhale – repeat this a couple of times.
- Gradually increase the time spent in practice. You will enjoy these moments of stillness and want to practice more and more – a self-stroking cycle.
- When your mind wanders, get rid of the futile thoughts immediately.

## The Difference between Dharana and Dhyana

This difference is beautifully brought out in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. Here, *dharana* refers to confining the mind to one object and in this process, all the efforts are expended in bringing the mind again and again to the object from its continuous distractions.

When the individual becomes successful in the above process and can hold his attention continuously on the one object without any distraction, he is said to be in a state of *dhyana* or meditation.

Incidentally, when this *dhyana* becomes prolonged and intense, wherein the self nature of the meditator is as if not there, and the process of meditation is as if it is not there, and only the object of meditation shines forth, it is said to be the state of *Samadhi*.

Each time the mind evades you, runs here and there and you bring it back that is called concentration. Concentration is trying to fix the mind on one thing – single-mindedness. Meditation is when you have tried concentration and are successful.