



# Pranayama

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## **Pranayama – The Practice of “Breath Control” and The Art of Listening.**

The Janeu Mantra (The Prayer of the Sacred Thread) describes the art of listening within:

“By raising the sound *Aum*, one removes suffering and gains accomplishments. The accomplished one brings the thought of sound to a point. Then the sound of the moon and the sound of the sun stay completely within the body – in the heart, in the mind, in the soul. The soul is small yet the immense is smaller than that which is the smallest. Therefore sound (*Nāda*), point (*Bindu*) and the Yogin have the same nature.... *Nāda* is the field of the body while *Bindu* is the path of the body, and the one who encompasses these two, the Yogin.”

This profound analysis has many implications for the practitioner: the first is that the practice of prāṇāyāma has little to do with the process of breathing. Prāṇāyāma is the complete cessation of respiration which brings about the rise of sound. The entire journey of enlightenment can be viewed as a step by step refinement of prāṇāyāma by practical application over a long period of time. Before beginning the practice of prāṇāyāma it is important to understand the real significance of a term so often misrepresented as merely the practice of 'breath control'. According to the Pāśupata Sūtra of Kauṇḍinya,

'Prāṇāyāma Kṛtvā – breath control is done for the purification of the nāḍīs (the body).... Prāṇa is the wind which flows out through the mouth and the nostrils. Control (āyāma) is the restraint or suppression of that breath. This breath control is to be regarded as voluntary, for it is preceded by knowledge, desire and effort. It should be practiced according to ones ability and strength.' (I.16)

After performing Sankalpa, facing either East or North, and sitting in Padmāsana one should raise the neck and begin with either inhalation or exhalation, practicing until the breath is under control and one enters the state of trance. The state of trance is attained when the body is full with its own inner life wind and no longer needs to draw in the external nor release out the internal. Only then can the breath be considered to be under control.

The root an – means to breathe. The aa – in āyāma indicates the limitations inherent in the bodily posture and the need for its continuous adjustment and the constant destruction of the impurities it generates. The root yam means to tie or bind, indicating that the vāyus (winds) must be bound. Kr means to do (practice). The suffix tva is an indication that the process is to be repeated in a reverse order. This combination of references indicates that the process referred to is the practice of Nāḍī Śuddhi by which the senses are purified and the breath controlled. When this is achieved one hears an unbroken flow of the unstruck sound, the Anāhata Nāda. Through this process the states of Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna and Samadhi are traversed and at its end the unification of NAD-BIND-YOGIN achieved (as described in the Janeu Mantra).

The purpose of the natural suspension of breathing is therefore the complete internalisation of sound since the heavenly sounds cannot be heard within while one is still reliant on the flow of respiration. The Janeu mantra goes on..

'The one who knows how to pierce the one pointed sound does it alone, becomes one with Śiva and enters his eternal dwelling, the twilight zone where the Siddhas (the accomplished ones) who are the masters of their string instruments (their bodies) are assembled through the successive ages.'

Nāḍī Śuddhi involves the gathering together of all the sounds that are scattered across the inner and peripheral bodily realms into a single point (Bindu). This explains the nature of the knowledge which (together with desire and effort) Pāśupata Sūtra I.16 states must precede breath control. This is the knowledge of the field of those sounds. This field consists of the 52 scattered sounds that reside in the peripheral body, the corresponding sounds within the central chakra systems and the sixteen important nadis or sound corridors through which these scattered sounds are gathered during Nāḍī Śuddhi prāṇāyāma.

It is of the utmost importance that the desire required for breath control is also of the right nature since the path is full of pitfalls and obstructions that result from learned habits and misunderstandings. The effort referred to here is that required to cultivate the processes of respiration – pūraka (inhalation) and rechaka (exhalation) – through the practice of asana. Specifically it refers to the attainment of the correct seat for Nāḍī Śuddhi prāṇāyāma – Padmāsana.

Without Padmāsana, the processes of Cālana, Mathana and Melana are not possible. These three acts belong to the advanced practices of Khecarī mudrā. Cālana refers to the action of the tongue when it enters the nasopharyngeal region above the hard palate and behind the uvula. Mathana is the churning action carried out using the tongue during the different phases of the breathing cycle. Melana means to gather together into a single point all the substances churned up.

Clarity about the required procedures, the appropriate tools and their use will allow one to tread the path of self-cultivation with the minimum of setbacks. Confusion will result in the multiplication of these setbacks, and the accumulation of injuries and disappointments will eventually result in the collapse of ones undertaking.

The mastery of Prāṇāyāma leads to the innermost depth of ones soul.

The next article will continue with the subject of Nāḍī Śuddhi prāṇāyāma.

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