

Pranayama

“Cultivation of the Breath”

Everyone knows that breathing is essential to life. Life begins when we inhale our first breath and ends when we exhale our last breath. It's an autonomic function we seldom think about. However, both Yoga and Ayurveda place strong emphasis on bringing awareness to the breath.

Breathing serves numerous important functions. It is the only means to supply our bodies with the supply of oxygen which is vital for our survival; it provides a means for getting rid of waste products and toxins from the body; and it serves as a bridge between body and mind.

Consider what happens when a person concentrates very hard to hear an indistinct whisper; the breath stops. The mind and breath are inseparable. Consider also what happens when one becomes agitated; the breath becomes irregular. Similarly, when the breath is slow and regular, the mind responds by becoming calm.

Pranayama is the term used in Yoga and Ayurveda for bringing the breath under conscious control, and may be simply defined as ‘cultivation of the breath’. The word *pranayama* is comprised of two roots: *prana* plus *ayama*. *Prana* means ‘vital energy’ or life force’. *Ayama* is defined as ‘extension’ or ‘expansion’. Thus, the word *pranayama* means ‘extension or expansion of the dimension of life force’.

Prana is the force that exists in all things, whether animate or inanimate. Although closely related to the air we breathe, it is subtler than air or oxygen. Therefore *pranayama* should not be considered as mere breathing exercises aimed at introducing extra oxygen into the lungs. *Pranayama* utilizes breathing to influence the flow of *prana* in the energy channels (*nadis*) of the energy body (*pranamaya kosha*).

The breath is the most vital process of the body. It influences the activities of each and every cell and, most importantly, is intimately linked with the performance of the brain. Human beings breathe about 15 times per minute and 21,600 times per day. Respiration fuels the burning of oxygen and glucose, producing energy to power every muscular contraction, glandular secretion and mental process. The breath is intimately linked to all aspects of human experience.

Practice Tips

- Always breathe through the nose.
- Best time to practice is in the early morning.
- Find a quiet, clean and pleasant space.
- Assume a comfortable, sustainable posture.
- Practice on an empty stomach.
- Great after *asana* (yoga postures) and before meditation.
- Never force the breath.

Most people breathe incorrectly, using only a small part of their lung capacity. The breathing is generally shallow, depriving the body of oxygen and *prana* essential to its good health. Rhythmic, deep and slow respiration stimulates and is stimulated by calm, content states of mind. Irregular breathing disrupts the rhythms of the brain and leads to physical, emotional and mental blocks. These in turn lead to inner conflict, imbalanced personality, disordered lifestyle and disease. *Pranayama* establishes regular breathing patterns, breaking this negative cycle and reversing the process. It does so by taking control of the breath and re-establishing the natural, relaxed rhythms of the body and mind.

Although breathing is mainly an unconscious process, you may take conscious control of it at any time. Consequently, it forms a bridge between the conscious and unconscious areas of the mind. Through the practice of *pranayama*, the energy trapped in unhealthy, unconscious mental patterns may be released for use in more creative and joyful activity.

References:

“Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha” by Swami Satyananda Saraswati and *“Meditation and Mantra”* by Swami Vishnu-Devananda

SHANTI AYURVEDA

www.ShantiAyurveda.com • 909/896.2004 • Marisa@ShantiAyurveda.com

