

# Pranayama, Energy, and Meditation

Anyone who has ever tried to meditate knows the challenge of trying to tame the mind. Even when faced with the simple task of following the breath, for example, meditation can feel a bit like trying to ride a bucking bronco. We may be able to stay focused for no more than a few moments before being unseated.

While we can develop skill in working with the mind in this way, the Tantric path, in which the Kripalu tradition is embedded, suggests an alternative: using the body as a vehicle for taming the mind and tapping transcendent states. The key to utilizing the body in this way lies in *prana*, the life force energy, which provides the critical link between body and mind.

*Pranayama*, or yogic breathing, is one of the most powerful tools for working with this energy. The Sanskrit word *prana* actually refers to both the breath and the life force energy itself. While there are many factors that can influence the quantity and flow of prana in the body, the breath is perhaps the most direct and powerful. Pranayama is, thus, not merely breath control, but a process by which the pranic store of energy in the body is increased and channeled.

The power of pranayama to tap transcendent states lies in the complex interrelationship between the mind and prana. The two are intricately linked. When one fluctuates or is disturbed, the other follows. Conversely, when one is balanced or stabilized, the other follows. We express our intuitive understanding of this process when we advise someone who is anxious or angry to “take a deep breath” in order to regain composure.

This interrelationship between prana and the mind has been understood for thousands of years, but different traditions use this knowledge in dramatically different ways. Some emphasize using meditation to control the fluctuations of the mind in order to overcome the restlessness of prana. Others, such as the Hatha Yoga tradition, focus on stabilizing prana as a means of restraining the mind. Control the flow of prana in the body, the yogis tell us, and the mind will still itself automatically. Self-realization will unfold naturally.

This interrelationship between energy and consciousness, pranayama and transcendent states is described in detail in many of the Hatha Yoga texts from the 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, for example, describes the culmination of the yogic path, the transcendence of ego-consciousness in ecstatic unity or *samadhi*, as a particular energy configuration in the body. *Samadhi* occurs, it states, when the usual flow of alternating current through the *ida* and the *pingala nadis*, or energy channels, is intercepted and redirected through the *sushumna*, or central energy channel. This occurs only after the *nadis* in the body have been purified and the pranic level in the body elevated. The practice of pranayama serves all these ends.

While it is both fascinating and helpful to reference the ancient texts in order to gain a theoretical understanding of the role pranayama plays in the transformation of consciousness, cryptic references to mystical states such as *samadhi* can often feel far removed from the realities of our own personal practice and teaching.

We can, however, empirically test the premise that pranayama alters the flow of energy in the body and directly effects the mind. Swami Kripalu used to advise his students to meditate when their energy level was high. We can create this heightened level of prana in the body through the use of pranayama. Try preceding your meditation with 20-30 minutes of practice starting with *dirgha* and *ujjayi* breathing to warm up the breathing apparatus and draw the attention inward. Follow with the use of *kapalabhati* and *bhastrika* to raise the pranic level, and end with an integrating breath such as *nadi shodhana* or *anuloma viloma* to prepare for meditation. I think you will be amazed at the ease and depth your meditations will achieve utilizing this process.

This understanding of the relationship between pranayama and meditation, energy and consciousness, can then inform our teaching. To teach pranayama, we must, of course, start with the basics – the biomechanics and sequencing of the process. Yet pranayama performed without awareness can be a mechanical process which mitigates its most powerful effects. Even when teaching at the most rudimentary level, we should invite awareness, starting with awareness of the body - encouraging students to notice how air moves through the body in *dirgha* pranayama, for example, exploring how to fill and empty the lungs more completely. When practiced in this way, pranayama becomes more than just a breathing technique; it becomes an act of internal exploration, deepening *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses,) and *dharana* (concentration).

For our pranayama practice to evolve, that internal sensitivity has to expand. What does it mean for example, to inhale or exhale “to one’s fullest capacity,” or to hold the breath in or out “to one’s comfort level.” Without careful attunement to the body, these phrases are meaningless, and lead to imbalance, force, and strain which again undermine pranayama’s most profound effects. To deepen our practice even more, we must focus on ever subtler aspects of our internal experience, moving from the exploration of physical sensation to the attunement of energy.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* states “All the pranayama methods are to be done with a concentrated mind. The *sadhaka* (spiritual practitioner) should not involve his attention in objects other than that.” In *Asana and Mudra*, Swami Kripalu emphasizes this point when he says: “You must concentrate to receive the full benefit of pranayama.” In this way *dhyana* (meditation) arises naturally from one’s practice, and the focusing of the life force energy as well as the mind leads the yogi to *samadhi*.

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