

Prāna and the Path of Tantric Yoga

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Introduction and Philosophical Framework

Prāna has several interrelated meanings: the life-force, the breath of life, the vital energy, spirit, respiration, and vigor. The etymology of the word means the original (pra) breath (ana), or, in another derivation, breathing (ana) fully (prā). Prāna is the subtle energetic matrix within that weaves the tapestry of embodied life.

Prāna is like a prism that reveals the spectrum of colors hidden in pure light. The world of living things is essentially the play of prāna revealing itself in diverse forms and qualities. At both the individual and universal levels, prāna connects our body, mind, and spirit, like pearls on a thread of breath, and causes them to live and act together as one.

Because Prāna takes many forms it is given different names: to name something is to give it form and know its function. The way we understand anything is in a sense defined by the language we use to explain it; therefore, linguistic flexibility is a virtue. When speaking of prāna at the ultimate or universal level it is called shakti, which means both divine Power and the Goddess. The rhythmic flow of prāna is an aspect of spanda, the universal pulsation of Consciousness.

Shakti, “energy, power”, is the universal form of prāna that transcends and yet includes our individual awareness. One way to understand the expansion of awareness that yogic practice brings is to see it as the experiential realization that one's own life-force (prāna-shakti) is an expression of the universal life-energy (parā shakti). Like a great-grandmother whose unconditional love extends to innumerable grandchildren she has brought into being, shakti is the feminine principal of dynamic consciousness that is identified with the entirety of creation and non-creation. It is the unified energy behind the web of life, the one in the all.

"The Divine Shakti, celebrated as the life force behind all manifestation, animates the whole universe just as the vital force (prāna) sustains the body through all of its [life] phases and flows most powerfully from the heart to the crown of the head." – sage Rāmakantha, commenting on the Kālottara Tantra (350 verse version); c. 8th century [trans. C. Tompkins]

As shakti coagulates and differentiates she becomes identified with increasingly limited and circumscribed forms and activities. The different names for shakti (e.g. prāna shakti, kundalinī shakti, mātrikā shakti, etc.) represent this shift of expression towards particular forms and functions (e.g. life-force, liberative power, linguistic power, etc.).

When shakti begins to manifest as a force of creation she is called *prakāsha*, which means the Manifesting Light of Consciousness. When She expresses herself as a liberating power, she is called (among other things) *vimarsha-shakti*, the Power of Self-awareness. On the level of the human microcosm, each breath expresses these divine powers: the out-breath is associated with objective awareness, and each in-breath is a recognition that the "object" is a form of our own awareness. Therefore, with each cycle of breath, we not only sustain our own life, but we express the natural process of divine consciousness--and we have the opportunity to recognize this with each and every breath.

A central yogic exercise is that of pausing and retaining the breath, called *kumbhaka*. Just as the out-breath aligns with the divine action of *shrishti*, emanation, and the in-breath with *samhāra*, dissolution, *kumbhaka* is an expression of *sthiti*, the "divine pause" where one has the possibility of recognizing the resolution of these contrasting qualities. The term "hatha yoga" refers to this process of fusing these apparently opposing energies: solar and lunar, in- and out-breath, objective and subjective, extroverting and introverting. Tantrikas spoke of the rhythm of the breath as the unconsciously repeated mantra (*ajapa-japa*), repeated 21,600 times a day, that we can become aware of with the sacred breath syllables "ham" and "sa" or alternately "Om" and "Hrīm".

Prāna is the energy within living beings. For humans it is the power that animates and protects the body, enlivens the mind, creates the ego. It is life's inspiration and

foundation, the urge to health and harmony that provides shelter from the storms of the world.

"Prāna dwells in the living (being) by way of inhalations and exhalations.

Prāna is to be celebrated, for it allows for the continuation of life."

--Kālottara Tantra, Chapter 10.8 [trans. C. Tompkins]

The Anatomy of Prāna

Tantric sages articulated the exquisite intricacy of prāna's role in enlivening the human body and activating consciousness (**please see the chart on page XX, an outline of the five prānas and their functions, drawing on the original Sanskrit sources**). Through yogic practices they realized that prāna acts as a power source; it enables our personal awareness to "turn on" and activate the subtle circuitry that links the body and mind.

According to the texts of yoga the human body is a complex energetic system. Here is a description of how this system works, from the outside in.

The gross anatomy of the physical body

The bones, connective tissues, joints, muscles, organs, and glands are the most condensed expressions of prāna. The physical body is supported by the flow of the prānic force through the nādīs, the "arteries" of prāna that spread throughout the body. In these pathways the prānic force divides into five primary and five subsidiary vāyus ("winds" or mobile energies) that circulate in different areas of the body to carry out the functions and activities of the physical, physiological, energetic, sensory, and mental levels of our being. These prāna-vāyus also play important roles in the activation of the kundalinī shakti.

The vāyus can be influenced on the surface of the body at "essential points", called marmas (see diagram). These junctions are like electric switches that enable a yogin to unblock and direct the flow of prāna during yoga practice. The 108 marmas appear at the intersections of different muscular patterns, joints, arteries, veins, nerves and subtle energy currents. They are places where the prāna is vulnerable to blockage or

dissipation via the influence of the mind, breath, body movements and gravitational forces from the earth and the moon. Each marma relates to specific prāna-vāyus, nādīs, tissues, and channels. They serve as the basic tools of physical and energetic alignment by revealing the interconnectedness of the gross and subtle body. Learning to work with the marmas during yoga practice reveals ways to reduce the muscular effort required for postures and develops the ability to influence the internal organs and brain by shifting our focus from the physical to the energetic level of our being. This kind of development is essential for in-depth practice of prānāyāma and mudrā, and meditation.

"Only after understanding the marma-sthāna (marma-locations), the junction of nāḍī and the location of vāyu, must one proceed with the understand of the Self (ātma)."

– Yogayajñavalkya Samhitā 9.4

The Ten Indriyas

There are ten "indriyas" or organs of sense and action are the portals through which our prānic force can be conserved or dispersed. They are the five sense organs (the ears, skin, eyes, tongue, and nose) and the five organs of action (the mouth, hands, feet, genitals and anus). All of these correspond to the five elements (see below). In the practice of Tantric yoga one of the most important ways that we build our prāna is by focusing our attention through the sensations, sounds, images, feelings (emotional "flavors"), and smells that arise during practice. This is one of the deep meanings of the term "mūlabandha" which means "root binding" because our senses are the way our mind grounds itself in experience and focuses our energy.

Hatha Yoga Schematic of the Subtle Body

<i>Element</i>	<i>Subtle element</i>	<i>Organ of sense</i>	<i>Organ of action</i>
<i>Earth [solidity]</i>	<i>Smell</i>	<i>Nose</i>	<i>Anus [elimination]</i>
<i>Water [liquidity]</i>	<i>Taste</i>	<i>Tongue</i>	<i>Genitals [reproduction, pleasure]</i>
<i>Fire [transformation]</i>	<i>Form, Appearance</i>	<i>Eyes</i>	<i>Feet [locomotion]</i>
<i>Air [mobility]</i>	<i>Touch</i>	<i>Skin</i>	<i>Hands [manipulation]</i>
<i>Space</i>	<i>Sound</i>	<i>Ears</i>	<i>Mouth [speech]</i>

The role of the mind in yoga

The ten indriyas (and their nine associated "gates") are the windows through which we perceive the world, and they are ultimately controlled by the mind or "inner instrument". The mind has its seat in the heart *cakra*, and gives rise to the experiences like pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. The various chakras (power centers, meditative focal points) are largely dormant until the awakening of kundalinī-shakti which represents the initiation of the deepest stages of spiritual transformation. Until they are fully awakened they may act as *granthis* or knots that block the shakti from moving and bind the mind to ordinary states of consciousness with its habitual patterns of thought, feeling, likes, and dislikes.

Yoga practices are designed to create harmony in the body and mind for the purpose of tracing our prāna back toward deeper and subtler layers of our being. This yogic 'journey' is meant to bring us to our spiritual source, the lotus of the heart. (It is important to understand that on a relative level, yoga understands the seat of consciousness to be at the heart center, but on an ultimate level, consciousness is without location, it is all-pervasive.) Without this alignment the insights that arise may only be experienced intellectually and fail to fully deliver the liberating wisdom they contain for the journey of living and dying.

The awakened masters realized that the greatest influence on prāna comes from our minds. According to the *Mṛgendra-tantra* (8th cen.), the ego (*ahankāra*, literally "identity-constructor") is the faculty of consciousness through whose functioning the five prāṇas become active. Prāṇa means "to breathe (-ana) fully (pra-)", to be alive. Prāṇa is said to be life itself. It is the cause of discernment (*tarka*) and self-reflection (*vimarsha*), for "consciousness can reflect only if it is carried on the chariot of prāṇa."

Our mental habits create the rhythms of the internal and external movements, as well as the concentrations of the prāṇic force within the vāyus and nādīs. When we change our patterns of perception, breathing, or movement the circulation of prāna also changes. **Yoga practice works with prāna to systematically transform the physical, energetic and mental/emotional conditioning that binds our prāna in fixed and limited rhythms.** The goal is to create a state of balance so that we can experience prāna in its liberated form, known as kundalinī.

The Yogic Lifestyle

The Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā (HYP), a 16th century (late Tantric) summary text that outlines the prānic path to liberation, states in the second chapter:

“After mastering the āsanās, the yogī--possessing self-control and eating a suitable, moderate diet should practice prānāyāma as taught by his or her guru. When the breath is unsteady, the mind is unsteady. When the breath is steady, the mind is steady and the yogī becomes steady. So one should control the breath.” HYP, 2.1-2 (trans. Brian Akers)

It is important to note that the term “breath” does not merely refer to the process of inhalation and exhalation but to the rhythmic movements of prāna throughout the body. The suggestion that preparing to do *prānāyāma*, literally “breath control”, is based on first “mastering the āsanās, possessing self-control and eating a suitable, moderate diet” refers to the first three limbs of the eight-limbed path (Ashtānga-patha) of classical yoga. These limbs are *yama* (restraints), *niyama* (virtuous observances), and *āsanās* (posture). These three cultivate the necessary qualities in the mind--and therefore the prāna--for all of the practices of yoga.

The Yamas: disciplines (according to Patanjali)

Ahiṃsa- **non-violence**

Satya- **truthfulness**

Asteya- **non-stealing**

Brahmacarya- **continence, sexual restraint**

Aparigraha- **non-covetousness, non-grasping**

The Tantric *Shāradā-tilaka* (12th cen.) adds five more Yamas:

Kṛpā - **compassion**

Arjavam - **sincerity**

Kṣhamā - **patience, tolerance**

Dhṛti - **steadiness, constancy**

Mitāhāra - **moderate eating, moderate consumption**

The Niyamas: virtuous observances (according to Patañjali)

Shauca- **internal and external purity and cleanliness**

Santoshā- **Contentment or satisfaction**

Tapas- **effort, austerity, discipline**

Svādhyāya- **Chanting and study of sacred texts as a form of self-reflection**

Īshvara Pranidhāna- **Dedication to the Lord, Offering the practice to the Divine within**

The *Shāradā-tilaka* adds five more Niyamas:

Āstikya - **piety; faith in oneself, the practice, and the goal**

Dāna - **giving**

Hrī - **humility**

Mati - **reflection**

Japa - **mantra repetition**

T. Krishnāmchārya, the father of modern (physically-focused) yoga, remarks that when the yamas and niyamas are well established, the mastery of the āsanās comes easily. If someone is indifferent or has not engaged with them fully then āsana and meditation becomes very difficult and even dangerous.

Food Intake and Digestion

Of all the yamas and niyamas the hatha-yoga texts place a special emphasis on *mitāhāra*- the controlled intake of right foods. This is because all of the yamas and niyamas are engaged through this practice. It also reflects the influence of Āyurveda on hatha-yoga with its viewpoint that our food choices are the single most important factor for determining the health of the body and the mind.

The Chandogya Upanishad (600 BCE) analyses the process of digestion in the following way:

The gross part of solid food becomes feces, the middle part flesh, and the subtlest part becomes mind.

The gross part of fluids becomes urine, the middle part blood and the subtlest part breath.

The gross part of fire (digestive fire) becomes bone, the middle part becomes bone marrow, and the subtlest part speech.

From this perspective we can appreciate how food intake affects our prāna at every level of the body and mind. The yoga texts generally recommend the following foods and spices: rice, wheat, barley, mung beans, root and juicy vegetables, sweet fruits, butter, ghee, fresh milk,* honey, rock sugar, maple syrup, and spices like ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, coriander, cloves, and black pepper. It should be noted, however, that some of these are more or less appropriate for different constitutions or body types.

*The term "fresh milk" refers to milk that is less than three hours old which is said to be the time limit for its healthful consumption.

The texts recommend that heavy foods such as meat, alcohol and excessively spicy, salty, sour, or bitter foods are to be avoided. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but serves as a guideline. Each person must experiment with foods to find the ones that are pleasing to both their body and their palate. While the yogic diet is ideally vegetarian the process of arriving at this state cannot simply be imposed forcibly. Discovering what constitutes a "suitable and moderate diet" is a gradual process that requires patience, sensitivity, and humility because it differs from person to person and changes depending on a person's constitution, health, activities, where they live, the seasons, and their age.

Altering our food intake, even temporarily, can produce strong mental and emotional reactions that reveal predispositions in one's character. If taken in the spirit of self-inquiry this is a powerful way to become aware of very basic psychological tendencies within ourselves. For those who have a strong reaction it can trigger anxiety, fear, and obsession about their food regime, for others depression, resistance and/or anger. Some will zealously adhere to the "rules" in the name of spiritual purity while others will feel suffocated and shamed by the imposition of restricting their diets.

Mitāhāra is a useful, and ideally, a relatively benign practice that can improve the health of all the tissues and serve as fuel for sincere reflection about how a person's likes and dislikes, desires, attachments and personal agenda for yoga practice affect their ability to integrate theoretical information into practice. This is a very important

step before one moves deeper into the more powerful practices of hatha yoga which are by definition intense (*haṭha*) for body and mind.

The practice of *mitāhāra* also reveals clues about how one perceives nourishment and satisfaction in general. This is because “eating” extends beyond our GI tract to all of our impressions. The inability to digest the physical, mental, and emotional experiences we have is a root cause for suffering and dis-ease.

Satisfaction as a form of mitāhāra

Satisfaction or contentment (*santoshā*) has such a potent affect on our mind and *prāna* that it is listed as one of the practices of classical yoga. Put simply, when we are satisfied our mind enters a state that is highly beneficial to our *prāna*'s ability to circulate and accumulate within us. Dissatisfaction or discontent disrupts our *prānic* field by diminishing our sense of wholeness and creates “leaks” that deplete our vitality.

While the perception of satisfaction is different for everyone it is always mediated by the mind through the sense organs and the organs of action, which are responsible for the collection and dispersion of *prāna* in our system. When we experience satisfaction, the senses have no need to go looking for “food” and our *prāna* reflects this by circulating calmly and rhythmically within our core. This is an ideal condition for anyone intending to practice yoga. When we are dissatisfied, the *prāna* is projected to the surface through the senses in the hunt for “food” and is used up in powering the organs of action. Strong emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, and manic joy are all based in some form of dissatisfaction and injure the *prāna*. For example, fear causes it to sink and stagnate, anxiety fractures it, anger causes it to rise and spread violently, sadness and grief contract and weaken it and manic joy disperses it.

Our perceptions of satisfaction are created from our life experiences and are an essential part of our psychological development. However, this conditioning also tends to prejudice, consciously and unconsciously, how we see reality and in turn how our *prāna* reacts. In the deeper stages of yoga the revelations and experiences can be terrifying for someone who is bound by their conventional definitions of what is good

or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, right and wrong. Without having cultivated the ability to remain in a state of equanimity where we can see things clearly, the yoga practices can fail to realize their potential to produce positive results; or even worse, they can increase our physical and/or psychological confusion or suffering. This is why exploring simple practices such as mitāhāra and the basic āsanas with an experienced guide is central among the first steps of approaching the path of yoga.

Āsana: posture

The hatha yoga texts introduce āsana practice as the first step toward Rāja Yoga: profound meditation or samādhi. Āsana creates steadiness, health, and lightness in the body, all signs that the mind and prāna are in harmony. The texts recommend finding a quiet, peaceful place where one can practice free of anxieties. They warn against excessive eating, overexertion, too much talking, excessive austerities (including dietary and sexual), over socializing (idle chatter), and greed. They encourage enthusiasm, openness, courage, knowledge of truth, determination and solitude. All of these suggestions further reflect yama and niyama.

My teacher, Zhander Remete, in his book *Chaya Yoga (Shadow Yoga)* makes the following comments on the role of āsana in yoga:

"Asana plays a great role in enlivening the yamas and niyamas. This occurs because in the work of asanas one is able to observe in action one's behavior, both conscious and unconscious... The innumerable variations of the five body positions of forward, sideward, backward, twists, and balances bring about different states of transformation. This is achieved through their influence over the five major winds (vayus) responsible for the basic life functions... It is of great importance that we understand the relationship between the inner and outer work in the practice. The gross body constantly influences the subtle currents... The power of the breath (vayu) should arise from the proper placement of the body and fluid movement. This is only possible when each position is performed on its point of balance without overuse or underuse of the limbs." (p. 63-64)

Executing an āsana "on its point of balance without overuse or underuse of the limbs"

is another way of saying that we are learning to inhabit our bodies naturally and gracefully. **The āsanas create a bridge between what we think and feel so that theory/philosophy and practice eventually become integrated as embodied wisdom-in-action.** This process is unique in everyone, however, the underlying principles are universal: to develop an intuitive sense of balanced activity by gradually changing the conditioning that obstructs the life force. Diligence, sensitivity, and devotion are essential to this and are expressed in the niyamas of tapas, svādhyāya, and Īshvara pranidhāna (see above).

Patanjali's well-known yoga sūtra (aphorism) on āsana: “*Sthiram sukham āsanam*” (YoSū 2:46), offers a very concise energetic description of how to act in a posture. This sūtra is usually translated as “posture should be steady and comfortable” or “stable yet easeful”. The following table gives some suggestions of how this is experienced at the physical, subtle, and mental layers.

Levels of Alignment in Practice (with reference to Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra 2.46)			
Level of Being/ Quality	Alignment [= <i>Āsana</i>]	Dhāranā/ Focus [= <i>Sthiram</i>]	Samskāra/ Refinement [= <i>Sukham</i>]
<i>Sthūla</i> (Gross/Physical)	<i>Gravity</i>	<i>Grounding and support from the bones</i>	<i>Relaxation</i>
<i>Sūkshma</i> (Subtle/Energetic)	<i>Breath</i>	<i>Rhythmic breathing with breath retention (kumbhaka)</i>	<i>Unforced deepening of the breath</i>
<i>Chitta</i> (Mind/Heart)	<i>Awareness/ Discrimination (tarka)</i>	<i>Concentrated</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>

Kumbhaka & Karana

The following passage from the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* suggests that āsana is incomplete without *kumbhaka* (breath regulation/ retention) and *karaṇa* (dynamic activity).

“Practice Hatha’s āsanas, various kumbhakas, and excellent karaṇas until the fruit of Rāja Yoga is won.” (HYP, 1.67)

In the practice of āsana finding the balance of tension and relaxation is what creates the "aha" moment when we discover harmony and grace on the physical level. The practice of **kumbhaka** represents this same process on the energetic level. Kumbhaka occurs in every breath we take whether we are conscious of it or not because there is a moment at the top of the inhale and the bottom of the exhale when the breath stops. This is a moment when the apparent duality between inhalation and exhalation is suspended and, when practiced consciously, creates a profound slowing or stilling of the movement of the mind where the deep witnessing capacity of our minds shines forth. It is moment of meditation.

Changing the depth and cadence of our breath is one of the most immediate ways to change the way that prāna circulates within us and concentrate our minds. A simple form of Ujjayī breathing with a gentle kumbhaka is recommended for the basic āsanas. Using this technique to make the breath long, thin, and regular is a rudimentary form of prānāyāma that teaches one how to conserve or extend the prāna received in each breath. It also has the effect of changing our perception of time and heightening our ability to notice the subtleties of our experience in a posture.

Karana is a term that has many meanings but essentially means "dynamic." In yoga practice it refers to dynamic activity where the hands and feet are coordinated in movement. The Sūrya Namaskār (Sun Salute) is one of the best known karanas though infinite varieties exist. They involve linear, spiral, and circular movements that break up stagnation or obstruction of the vayus in the peripheral channels of circulation such as the arms and legs. Karanas allow for a gradual movement from standing to seated so that one is better prepared for centralizing and internalizing the prāna in the asanas (seated postures used for meditation).

In today’s yoga culture there is sometimes an excessive use of karana without the

appropriate balance of internalizing and stilling practices and vice versa. There is a warning in some texts (including those of Sri Krishnamāchārya) that overworking certain muscle groups through one-sided and repetitive activity blocks the movement of the prāna. This can contribute to stress related illness and stifles transformation by breeding a rigid, mechanical mindset in ones practice.

Remete puts it this way:

"Karanas were used in slow rhythmic movements to gain mastery over the opposing aspects of sthiti (static) and ghati (dynamic) movmentss which are the basis of all life. Action and inaction are interwoven; motion is resolved in stillness and stillness dissolves into motion. Mastery of the karanas brings the reward of voluntary control over the hitherto involuntary functions of the body. This is a fundamental requirement for beginning the absorbtion (meditative) practices of yogāsana." (excerpt from website: www.shadowyoga.com)

In the context of the Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā, karana refers to the headstand and shoulderstand which are presented as mudrās, not āsanas, and are referred to as *vīparīta karaṇī mudrā*. These mudrās (energetic "seals") actively reverse the flow of the life force in preparation for deeper stages of practice of prānāyāma.

Other mudrās that, from the tantric perspective, are essential for āsana and kumbhaka are the three bandhas (energetic bindings)- *uddīyāna* (navel), *mūla* (root), and *jālandhara* (throat) and *nabho mudrā* (pressing the tongue behind the top teeth). Like all mudrās, they develop awareness of the subtle body, the ability to direct and conserve prāna in different areas, and internalize the senses. At more advanced stages they contribute to awakening the kundalinī-shakti.

As mentioned above, once the practices of mitāhāra, āsana, certain mudrās, and basic breathing techniques have "purified" the flow of the prāna through the nādīs, one then engages in prānāyāma (breath regulation). The HYP clearly warns that one's state of mind must be balanced and clear (*sattvik*) and the body healthy for yoga practice to be successful:

"Correct prānāyāma will weaken all diseases. Incorrect practice of Yoga will strengthen all diseases." Haṭha-yoga Pradīpikā 2:16

The Six Kriyās or Purificatory Actions

If a person suffers from excess phlegm, fat, or imbalances of the three doṣhas—vāta (wind), pitta (fire), kapha (water)—then one is instructed to practice the **six kriyās** (purificatory actions): *dhauti, vasti, neti, trātaka, nauli, and kapālabhāti*.

Descriptions of these can be found in the Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā and are generally used for particular therapeutic reasons. While they are widely known as the six purifications, they also play an important role in changing the relationship of the mind to the body. For individuals who suffer from more severe or chronic imbalances the Āyurvedic purificatory practices known as *panchakarma* (five actions) are better suited than the six kriyās for systematic and thorough cleansing. This is because *panchakarma* is more focused on balancing the physiological systems that are transformed by the kriyas. Other Ayurvedic practices that are very useful for cultivating prāna are the daily cleansing of the sense organs and professional Ayurvedic dietary advice.

Of these six kriyas, nauli is the “king.” It is named for the circular motions of the fire stick used in Vedic fire rituals because this practice involves churning the abdomen with the rectus abdominis muscles like a whirlpool in a standing or seated position. It is useful for improving the movement of the vayu in the organs and to enkindle the digestive fire. The combination of improved digestion and better circulation lends itself to reducing imbalances because it detoxifies and rejuvenates the body. For this reason nauli is a valuable bridge between āsana and prānāyāma.

Prānāyāma

Prānāyāma is considered to be part of the external limbs or *bahiranga sādhanā* of hatha yoga practice. It might be more accurate to view prānāyāma as the axis between the external and internal practices (*antaranga sādhanā*) because when properly executed it grants one access to the deepest states of meditation known as *samādhi* or introversive *samāvesha*. From a tantric yoga perspective prāna is the link between consciousness and materiality. All states of spiritual realization are founded on the way that prāna and therefore the mind move or do not move. The simple act of breathing rhythmically in practices such as ujjayi prānāyāma is the beginning of the journey of

tracing the life-force back to its source as Shakti.

Prānāyāma is a compound of two terms “prāna” and “āyāma” which taken together mean the “regulation of life force.” This is achieved by regulating the four phases of the breath;

Puraka **Inhalation**

Rechaka **Exhalation**

Antar Kumbhaka **inhale retention**

Bahya Kumbhaka **exhale ‘retention’**

All of these phases can be practiced with even or uneven rhythms and ratios, manual or internal manipulation of the nostrils, with or without mantras (though always with mantras in Tantric practice), and in different postures.

A third type of kumbhaka called *kevala* meaning "alone" occurs when the breath stops voluntarily because the prāna has entered a closed internal circuit. This is the culmination of all the prānāyāma practices and is a form of samādhi.

Kevala kumbhaka represents the essence of hatha yoga, namely, the unification of two opposing forces into one, so that the opposing actions of inhale and exhale are no longer required for the maintenance of life. Of the five major vāyus of Prāna two are considered the most important for this process. (See **chart on page XX.**) They are *prāna-vāyu*: the warm, expansive, rising and outward-flowing wind that has its seat in the heart region and is responsible for exhalation, heartbeat and the functions of the sense organs; and *apāna-vayu*: the cool, downward, centrifugal moving wind that has its seat in the pelvis and legs and is responsible for inhalation, grounding, and elimination of all waste products including excess nervous energy. When these two energies are united by through the practice of āsana, bandha, prānāyāma and mudrā it causes an ignition of light and heat, both subtle forms of fire, in the subtle body that illuminate both our relative and ultimate nature. This experience initiates one into the internal limbs of practice.

Let us worship that Supreme Goddess who, generated by a (sudden) jolt of the collision of the two winds (prāna and apāna) as they mutually merge in

the middle pathway, is rising in a splendour of innumerable lightning flashes; who is like a new rose blossom resembling the dawn; whose form is that of flowing, blissful nectar; who has attained Supreme Shiva. --Śāradā Tilaka Tantra 25.67 [trans. by C. Tompkins]

Subtle body physiology

Because prāna is a condensation of consciousness, this experience creates analogous qualities in the mind that are mediated energetically through the nādīs (subtle channels). A passage from the (8th century) Kālottara Tantra refers to the three most important nādīs in the following way:

72,000 (nādīs) converge in the center of the navel and traverse out of it upwardly and downwardly, pervading out of the navel from all sides. Fixed in the (navel) cakra among them are 10 principal nādīs. [The most important] three among these are the lunar, solar, and gracious channels. These ten nādīs are called the carriers of [the ten] prāṇa-vāyus. -Kālottara Tantra 10.1-3.

The image of balancing solar and lunar energies is another way of saying that through prāṇāyāma, we are focusing and grounding the mind in its essential nature. The nādīs influence the mind in the following ways.

Suṣhumna (“the gracious”) central subtle channel that runs like a column of fire from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. It pierces through the various chakras which are aligned along it like lotuses. It is a sattvic channel that becomes fully active when the prāna-shakti (Kundalinī) enters it. This is the experience known as ‘kundalinī awakening.’

Idā and Pingalā -These nādīs begin at the third eye and wrap around the sushumna nādī like interwoven spirals ending at the base of the spine (*mūlādhāra chakra*). The image is similar to the caduceus of Hermes. When the sushumna is not yet awakened the prāna flows alternately in the ida and pingala nādīs giving rise to characteristic modes of thought and feeling. Their functions are complementary and relate to left-right brain activity.



Iḍā – The "lunar channel". It has a cooling, feminine, receptive, pluralistic effect on mood and thoughts. It carries *apāna*, the 'downward' moving breath, or inhalation (*pūraka*), which is cool and soothing (*saumya*) like the moon at night after a hot day. It is related to *tamo* guṇa and inspires creative imagination, speech, and vision. It creates a tendency toward devotional feelings of loving and caring. This *nādī* nourishes the body with *prāna*. Similar to "rest and digest" response.

Pingalā - The "solar channel". Heating, masculine, active, egocentric effect on mood and thoughts. It carries *prāna*, the breath that 'flows out,' or exhalation (*recaka*), which is hot (*ugra*) like the sun during the day. It related to *rajo* guṇa and provides will-power, motivational drives, and determination and orients us toward pursuit of knowledge and clear perception. This *nādī* mobilizes the *prāna* of the body. Similar to the stress response.

Prāṇa is the day; [it moves] upward through the right [solar] channel. The 'sun' is said to rise through the course of the [right] nostril Apāna is said to be the night; it is said to move downward through the path of the left [lunar] channel.
-*Kālottara Tantra* (trans. by C. Tompkins)

Hatha yoga prepares the *sushumna nādī* to hold or fuse together *prāṇa* (exhalation) and *apāna* (inhalation). It is important to understand the distinction between "sun" and "fire" in the analogy of *pingala* and *sushumna nādīs*. The solar quality of *pingala* is inherently one-sided and therefore destructive if over-activated. In America the prevalence of stress related illnesses is an example of a culture that suffers the pains of an excessively solar approach to life. The term *fire* for *sushumna* refers to the transformative power of the direct realization of one's spiritual nature. When *prāna* successfully and stably fuses into the central channel, it is called *kundalinī*.

Here the role of *kumbhaka* becomes clear—by retention of the breath, either after the inhalation (when the 'lunar breath,' or moon, is held in the heart or the navel center), or after the exhalation (when the 'solar breath,' or sun, is held at the crown of the head), a fusion of *prāṇa* and *apāna* can occur in the central (*sūṣumnā*) channel via the functioning of the *samāna-vāyu*. As *kumbhaka* is held, the yogin chants specific mantras in order to stimulate—via *udāna-vāyu*—the awakening of *kundalinī*, the

'coiled power', which is really a purifying sound resonance that floods through the entire subtle body via vyāna-vāyu, causing the spiritual awakening of the yogin.

"Kumbhaka is the 'grasping of the moon' in the heart lotus [the holding of apāna, the 'cool' inhalation, in the heart]. Then there is the holding of the sun, in the dvādaśānta [top of the head, where prāṇa, the 'warm' exhalation, is held]. The juncture of those 'auspicious times is what is meant.'" -Kālottara Tantra 10.9 (trans. by C. Tompkins)

Fire is an ancient symbol of reality and balance. Of the five elements, fire functions in the body and mind to balance the kinetic and potential energies and endows the mind with *tarka* or discernment. The yoga texts all warn that improper prāṇāyāma will “burn” the tissues as a reference to the dangers of overdoing or forcing the process. This is a reference to pingalā nādī. This is also true for other means of activating kundalinī shakti. It can't be stressed enough that preparation and skilled guidance with the simple and relatively safe practices of yoga are essential for the beatific experience of awakened kundalinī. This is what is meant by improper yoga “strengthening all diseases.” Like any mind-altering experience, a “bad trip” is possible if something surfaces within a person that causes their prāṇa to move in an imbalanced way. When kundalinī rises it is an irresistible force that if thwarted by mental, emotional, or energetic resistance can rupture the very fabric the body, prāṇa, and consciousness. Patient cultivation of the preliminary practices reconstructs body and mind to integrate the experience gracefully.

Conclusion: The Path of the Servant and the Exemplar of Hanumān

The Sanskrit phrase “idam na mama” means “not for me or by me”, uttered at the beginning and end of practice, immediately sets a tone for whatever you intend to do after. If we approach yoga with the ambition of a hero who will conquer dragons to get the treasure of enlightenment it is totally different than if you approach as a devoted servant of the divine singing songs of praise and offering your time and energy for the joy of it. Ninety-nine out of 100 heroes get fried by the dragons in the myths and it is no different with yoga. The hero's journey is fast, terrible, and potentially fatal while the servants path is slower but steady and sure. An appropriate analogy is that of the

race between the tortoise and the hare with the stakes being much higher.

Because yoga is the reversal of the life process it is said that we can not act with yoga the same way we act in life. Traditionally, the four aims of life are *dharma* (virtue), *artha* (material success), *kāma* (pleasure), and *mokṣha* (liberation). The first three have to do with creating a good life and the last one addresses spirituality. The first three require a well developed ego and will and the last is about preparing to drop our limited identity and yield to universal will which, at the very least, is required at the moment of death. Yoga, from this perspective, is about gaining insight into letting go of everything before we die so that the journey of life becomes spiritually enriched.

The colorful imagery and stories of yoga all hold clues about how to successfully walk the path. The image of Hanumān, the monkey god, is particularly appropriate here because the great hero of Rāmāyāna is *prāna*. As such he is indestructible, can take any form, travels at the speed of light, can move mountains, and possesses an unswerving devotion to Sītā and Rāma, the divine feminine and masculine principles of embodied reality. There is, however, a clause in his contract as the monkey god; *he only has these powers when he is in service to something greater than himself*. His heroism is that of the archetypical servant.

Hanumān also represents the heart chakra which in some texts is considered to be the root chakra. In the Tantric schools of Buddhism for example, aspiring yogis were not considered to be fit for the deeper teachings of yoga until they had thoroughly developed *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings, through the cultivation of such qualities as the Four Immeasurables (love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). The Buddha said that he ultimately taught the Four Immeasurables to assuage fear in the hearts of the monastic community who would take dangerous journeys through the jungle on pilgrimages. Fear is often the very thing that motivates people to hanker for spirituality. In some it motivates them to want to move quickly and heroically on the path in others it creates a wish for the path to be peaceful and comforting. No matter what our inspiration and expectations about yoga it reflects a heartfelt urge to be free. Yoga is designed to strengthen our weakness and as the Sufi poet Hafiz put it:

Break all our teacup talk of God...
Ripping from your grip all those toys in the world
That bring you no joy.

Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly
And wants to rip to shreds
All your erroneous notions of truth

That make you fight within
yourself, dear one,
And with others,

Causing the world to weep
On too many fine days.

-Excerpted from *Tired of Speaking Sweetly*

Hanuman is also an incarnation of Rudra-Shiva, the destroyer God who grants the most precious gift—freedom even from the obsession to be free. From the non-dual perspective of Tantra, our consciousness, prāna, breath, and body are Shiva and Shakti, and yoga is simply *recognizing* this as a living experience. If we view our body as the Goddess incarnate all of the practices and disciplines, no matter how simple or mundane, can be seen as offerings and the path as a celebration. The rigorous and sometimes humbling practices such as mitāhāra and yoga āsana and meditation are time honored ways to cultivate this perspective in our minds—that when we see our will as a part of universal will there is nothing that isn't yoga. The texts all say that once this realization is established within a person the rules no longer apply because the person has become a servant to the divine. Or to quote a prayer from the bible that was favored by Vimalānanda the Aghori, the guru of our dear friend and guide Robert Svoboda and a passionate devotee of Hanuman: “Thy will be done.”

हरिः ॐ तत् सत्

The Five Prāṇa-Vāyus with the bodily functions they control and yogic practices to attune and balance them.

Prāṇa-Vāyu	Location(s)	Color	Temp & Direction	Functions	Yoga practices
Prāṇa	Chest, throat, tongue, mouth, nose.	Sapphire	Warm & Up	Exhalation; spitting, sneezing, belching; taking food into abdominal cavity.	Backbends, Inversions, Sūrya Namaskar; Nāḍī Shodhana, Bhastrika, Sūrya-Bhedana, Uḍḍiyāna-Bandha Kriyā
Apāna	Navel, viscera, sex organ, bladder, groin, anus, thighs.	Evening clouds	Cool & Down	Inhalation; Expelling feces, urine, semen, menses; giving birth. Moving food from stomach to intestines.	Standing postures (esp. squats), Forward folds, Inversions, Ujjayī with extended exhalation, Sighing, Pratiloma Ujjayī, Uḍḍiyāna-Bandha Kriyā
Samāna	Beside the gastric fire	Milky white	Neutral & Centrifugal /Centripetal	Distributes nutrients from food and drink equally everywhere; controls distribution of sweat, water, oxygen, and the doṣhas. Responsible for <i>kumbhaka</i> and the equalization and fusion of prāṇa and apāna.	All āsanās, esp. Twists, Sidebends, Standing, and Inversions, Samavṛtti Ujjayī, external kumbhaka, Kapālabhāti, Uḍḍiyāna-Bandha Kriyā

Udāna	Navel ⇒ chest ⇒ throat.	Fiery red	Hot & strongly up	Gives rise to speech (by differentiating the inner resonance); exertion, strength, vigor, complexion.	Postures that engage the arms, Backbends, Inversions; Ujjayī Prānāyāma, Kapālabhāti
Vyāna	Everywhere, esp. heart and limbs.	Silver or many- colored	Expansive & pervasive	Causes flexing of the limbs, locomotion, opening and closing the eyes, etc. Controls sweating, horripilation, colic, fever. Transmission of nerve impulses.	Standing postures esp. wide-legged and wide armed poses, Vinyasas, Samavṛtti Ujjayī, Kumbhaka Inhale, Bhastrika