

# Higher Consciousness through Yoga, Breath and Meditation

*“Yogis who are masters of svarodaya, the science of breath, claim to be aware of every breath they take.”*  
-Swami Rama

**BREATH AWARENESS IS PERHAPS THE MOST VALUABLE TOOL WE GAIN FROM YOGA.** We are not taught how to breathe properly in our culture, and as a result our breath is often restricted by habitual stress responses over time. Being aware of the breath helps us to reduce stress, sleep better, feel healthier, and be our best Self! What causes this phenomenon? The practice of breathing exercises improves our physical, mental and spiritual vitality, and when it is understood properly it can also enhance the practice of both Yoga and Meditation.

## UNDERSTANDING PRANA: Bio-energy or Life force

In Yoga, it is believed that breath is the vehicle for prana. The word prana is difficult to translate because there is no single equivalent word in English. The Chinese concept of chi is often compared to prana, referring to life force or all-pervading energy of the universe. Prana can perhaps best be understood as a combination of energy and breath.

It can be understood that we all have a pranic or energy field that surrounds us. Close to the skin is a measurable electromagnetic field. This measurable field gives us a link to the electrochemical psychophysical energy that is part of our existence. Yoga poses strengthen the vertebral column and the trunk of the body, and place the body in a better position for the function of the central energetic channel. As we develop inner awareness during Yoga practice, we may begin to notice the subtle influence the flow of energy has during a Yoga pose. Once we recognize that subtle influence, we can direct the flow of energy by directing our awareness, moving more and more toward a meditative state.

## THE ROOTS OF BREATHING EXERCISES

Patanjali describes the fourth step of the Eightfold Path of Yoga as pranayama or the regulation of the flow of inhalation and exhalation. This idea of control, restraint, or regulation is the meaning of the word yama. The yogis discovered that the breath is one of the few involuntary processes in the body that can also be consciously controlled. Pranayama,

therefore, refers to the conscious control of the breath, with the intention of affecting the life force and in turn, focusing the mind.

In the English language, the words inhalation and exhalation both come from the same derivative hale. It is interesting to note that hale is also the same root for the words whole and heal. Another word used to describe inhalation is inspiration. Inspiration can also mean to be inspired, and understanding this concept furthers our understanding of the power inherent in the breath. The root “spirit” is the foundation of the word “inspiration.” It is no wonder that the concepts of breath and spirit are linked in many different cultures.

## THE SHEATHS (KOSHAS)

Yoga’s philosophy of breath can be better understood by studying the koshas, or sheaths. In the Taittiriya Upanishad, verses 2-6, the sheaths demonstrate that each level of consciousness, or layer of being, is guided by a subtler counterpart. The first or outermost sheath is made up of matter, or the physical body. As we observe our bodies changing over time, we witness that we are more than just physical manifestation. Within the body sheath, and slightly more subtle, is the prana or breath. We become intimate with how the body affects the breath when we observe the subtle relationship between the breath and the body. When we breathe deeply into the diaphragm we usually feel an increased sense of relaxation in the body. When we breathe rapidly and shallowly in the upper chest, the body feels more tension. The yogis learned that they could affect their physical body by changing their breath, and this is why we study pranayama today.

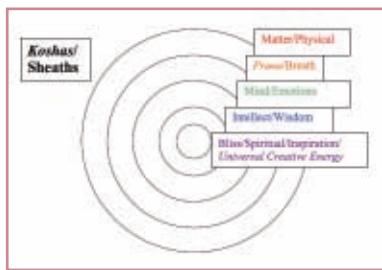
Within the prana sheath, and even more subtle, is the mind. The mind refers to sensory input and emotional feelings. When we are frightened, we gasp for breath or stop breathing altogether. The body becomes tense. When we cry heavily, breath comes in short spurts, and the body quivers. When we are content, the breath is deep and slow, and the body is relaxed. A heightened state of emotion allows us the



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opportunity to notice the effect that the mind has on the breath, and how in turn the breath affects the physical body. More subtle than the mind is the intellect. This is the Higher Self, the voice of wisdom that can say “Yes, I’m feeling sad, but this too shall pass”. Thus, when we are connected to our Higher Self, the breath is more likely to be of a pure and peaceful quality, despite emotional or external circumstances. Finally, the most subtle of the three, the bliss sheath, which rests in divine consciousness, and enables us to feel our connection to others via the universal breath. It fuels our connection to nature as we exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide in a symbiotic relationship with all that surrounds us.

The model of the Koshas expands our understanding of how the breath can be an instrumental tool for



self-awareness and transformation. The breath becomes a reflection of the spiritual self, mind, emotions, and body.

It is reported that ancient yogis were able to read the

mind of a person just by observing the breath, as the breath can be so reflective of a person’s inner state of being. The conscious control or changing of the breath can change the other sheaths of being, and create a general feeling of well-being in the body. The yogis observed people who were vital, healthy and lived long, only to find that those with the most vitality knew how to breathe slowly and deeply. Through self-observation they also noticed that if they slowed down and deepened their breath, they too experienced increased vitality, health and longevity. Ancient Yogi’s observed that animals with a slow deep breath, such as the elephant or tortoise, had long life spans. Animals with short, rapid breathing patterns such as a mouse or insect, lived relatively short lives. There is a yogic saying that we are given a certain number of breaths in life, and in order to live to an old age we have to be sure to make each breath as long as possible!

### BENEFITS OF BREATH CONTROL

The koshas enhance our understanding of the benefits of yogic breathing. Breathwork can be examined from the more gross physical body to the subtle layers of the spirit body. In regards to physical health, modern scientists are now rediscovering truths about breathing that Yoga has known for more than four centuries. Inhalation and exhalation are the mechanisms used to draw oxygen to the lungs and expel the waste product of carbon dioxide. Conscious deep breathing develops the respiratory organs and aids in the circulation of blood.

Yogic breathing enables more oxygen to enter the body, namely because it brings oxygen to the lowest part of the lungs where, due to gravity, most of the blood vessels are located and available for absorbing the oxygen and transmitting it throughout the body. When we are in stressful circumstances, we predominantly breathe into the upper chest and limit oxygen metabolism. Increased oxygen metabolism, allows the body to better burn the food taken in, and produce energy for the body.

When we are talking about the benefits of breath and meditation, there are couple direct correlations that we can consider.

### Breathing ↔ Relaxed Nervous System ↔ Balanced Mind

Thoughts and emotions can bring a state of imbalance, and our mental and breath patterns are often linked. We can automatically shift the emotional response by changing the breath to a slower and deeper pattern. Deep breathing can balance upset thoughts, which can otherwise cause erratic breathing and exacerbate mental stress. Ultimately, the breath anchors and steadies the mind.

Because pranayama has a relaxing affect on the nervous system, the frontal lobe of the brain is enabled to function, thereby increasing the capacity for higher consciousness and reasoning, the intellect sheath. More commonly, when we are under stress or in some kind of emotional imbalance, the reptilian brain is activated, in order to prepare us to fight the situation. All of our blood (and therefore oxygen) is sent to the muscles in preparation for battle. If we learn to practice relaxed breathing in these situations, we can gain greater access to the Higher Self, our source of inner wisdom. Where the mind goes, the breath follows. If we feel anxious, the breath will follow and be choppy. If we feel calm, the breath follows in a smooth rhythm.

### BREATHING ↔ CLARITY OF THOUGHT ↔ CONNECTION TO HIGHER SELF

Remember to view the breath not as a cure-all, but as an essential element of the Yoga lifestyle. The breath is the most common focal point used in meditation techniques across cultures and traditions. It is seen as a vehicle for bringing the mind to a one-pointed stillness - the entryway into meditative states and ultimately a state of highest consciousness. It is well known that focusing on the breath is no easy task! It is said that the average mind can focus for about 3.5 seconds before wandering to another thought or sensation. Over the centuries, countless terms have been assigned by a variety of cultures to describe higher consciousness - nirvana, bliss, ecstasy, union and one-ness. Regardless of individual background, if one is able to keep the mind truly still, a state of higher consciousness can be achieved. The path of stilling the mind and merging with the Infinite is one of the supreme benefits we can reap from the practice of Yoga and Meditation. ▲