



ayurveda *and the* breath

Just as lions and tigers are controlled by and by,
so the breath is controlled by degrees. Otherwise, by being hasty or
using too much force it kills the practitioner himself.
When pranayama is performed properly, it eradicates all diseases;
but an improper practice generates diseases.

—Hatha Yoga Pradipika, (2:15-16)

by Sarasvati Buhrman

An Indian student of the late Sri Krishnamacharya once told me that this asana master taught asanas only on an individual basis, designing an appropriate series for each student. My own master, Baba Hari Dass, has taught his students pranayama practices in a similar way. There are numerous pranayamas and their variants both in the hatha yoga and ashtanga yoga systems—we have probably learned at least 30 different practices during the past 20 years. Yet we have always been taught in a way that allowed us to know when to apply which practices—in the proper seasons, in the proper sequences, and according to our individual constitutions, our health needs, and our level of advancement.

For better or for worse, yoga for mass consumption is a reality today. Yet this does not mean that all practices are appropriate for all people. So how do we know, as more of the practices long reserved for serious Indian practitioners of yoga become available to Westerners, which ones to adopt? Ayurvedic guidelines provide an excellent starting place.

working with energy

Ultimately Ayurveda is based upon the convertibility of energy and matter and vice versa, a concept rec-

ognized by the ancient yogis several millennia ahead of Albert Einstein. Sankhya and tantra theory both imply that energy transforms into five states of matter: solid, liquid, luminous or combustive, gaseous or kinetic, and pure space, devoid of matter. All life contains a mixture of these elements, which in individual life forms can be functionally grouped into three *doshas*: *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. The innate or genetic ratio of these elements varies from one species to another, and within a given species from one individual to another (thus forming *prakriti*, or the individual constitution).

Externally, the ratio of doshas is always in flux, with regular changes caused by the fluctuations of seasonal weather patterns and the earth's rotation, as well as the smaller and often unpredictable fluctuations we all experience in the patterns of our daily lives. Everything in nature, including our own body processes, is in a constant state of flux, and the understanding of *tri-dosha* (three doshas) and the other tools of Ayurveda are meant to help us keep our balance within these continually fluctuating energies. Ayurvedic methods include dietary and lifestyle adjustments, internal cleansing practices known as *pancha karma*, individualized herbal and mineral formulations, and individualized yoga practices.

balancing kapha

Kapha dosha is the coordinated functioning of the solid and liquid potentials of matter. Kapha allows for the development of the body's tissues and for solidity and lubrication. It is described as heavy, cool, wet, stable, receptive, and inert.

Balanced kapha creates calmness, gratitude, commitment and responsibility, attention to detail, patience, good humor, and a feeling of fulfillment. It makes the body strong and stable. But when kapha is in excess in our bodies, some of the following symptoms result: heaviness; coldness; dullness; complacency and denial; whitish color of skin, tongue, and body secretions; excess mucus or water retention; sluggish metabolism and bowel movements; low appetite; dull aches and pains; headaches relieved by heat; and excessive sleep or drowsiness. When uncorrected for a period of time, excess kapha can manifest as identifiable diseases: obesity, certain forms of diabetes, chronic mucous flux or asthma, atherosclerosis, benign tumors, seasonal affective disorder, and organic clinical depression.

When kapha is provoked it is best to choose courses of action which warm, dry, and stimulate. We need to

together), manifesting as the body's metabolic process. It tends to be hot, sharp, penetrating, oily, and intense.

Balanced pitta creates a keen intellect and logical thought processes, courage, inspiration, the confidence to overcome obstacles, and the desire for knowledge. It provides warmth and energy for our life process. Excess pitta often manifests as inflammation, irritation, and soreness; excessive body heat; redness, yellowness, and acidity of skin and body secretions; acne or skin rashes; burning eyes and headaches relieved by cold; belching or hyperacidity; loose stools; excess bleeding; and emotional tendency to criticism, irritability, frustration, anger, arrogance, or resentment. If unchecked, excess pitta can result in a host of inflammatory and stress-related disorders, such as hay fever, rheumatoid arthritis or gout, peptic ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, hypoglycemia, hypertension, heart attacks, hyperthyroid, compulsive behavior, violence, an excessive drive for achievement, and behavioral habits of manipulating and controlling others.

When we discover that pitta is provoked, we must abandon hot spices and oily, acidic, and salty foods;

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exercise more, sleep a little less, eat spicy and bitter food, and prune fatty and cold foods from our diets. Our yoga practice should also change to emphasize asana styles that are more aerobic, heating, or strenuous; standing poses; and those which put pressure on the chest (the seat of kapha). Our daily pranayama practice should shift to include practices which tend to be heating and drying, such as *ujjayi*, *kapalabhati*, and *agni sara dhauti* or *navli*. For intermediate practitioners, *surya bhedana*, which is warming, and the *mahamudra* series and *bhastrika*, which help to move energy, are also good choices.

If we are successful in our attempt to bring kapha into balance, our minds will be alert during meditation instead of falling asleep or going unconscious. If we are not successful today, more of the same is indicated for tomorrow!

soothing pitta

Pitta dosha refers to the functioning capacity of the luminous or combustive factor of fire (or in some schools of Ayurveda, the luminous and liquid factors

arrange our schedules so as to minimize stress; take walks alongside bodies of water in the evening; and avoid the sun except in the early morning and late evening. Heating and strenuous styles of asana practice should be replaced by less intense styles, but doing poses which put pressure on the navel area (the seat of pitta) can help move obstructed pitta out of the body. After asanas, it is important to do a long corpse pose practicing *shithalakarani mudra*, where one releases thoughts and tensions on exhalation, and then allows the body to totally relax and the mind to sink into emptiness in the space before the next inhalation.

Pranayama practice should include at least 20 rounds of one of the four cooling breaths: *shitali*, *sitkari*, *kaki mudra*, or *bhujangini mudra*. For intermediate practice, *chandra bhedana* is also effective, and in general, all simple and doshically moderate calming breaths such as *nadi shodhana* (alternate nostril breathing) and the *eight kriyas* series are helpful. If, when we meditate afterwards, we notice that the grip anger, attachment, and desire exert on our psyche has loosened, even if only a little, and we feel more peaceful, then our

EIGHT KRIYAS (Swasa Yam)

breathing practice has been effective.

calming vata

Vata dosha is the coordinated functioning of the gaseous and space potentials: it allows for the functioning of the nervous system, and for movement, cognition, and speech. It is light, spacious, expansive, cold, dry, rough, mobile, changeable, and empty or insubstantial in nature.

Balanced vata manifests as enthusiasm, curiosity, liveliness, artistic and creative abilities, empathy, sensitivity, and intuition. It gives lightness and flexibility to the body. But when vata is in excess, some of the following symptoms appear: chilliness; dryness and dehydration (causing lack of lubrication in the skin, joints, sinuses, mouth, and digestive tract); constipation and gas; disturbed sleep; inner trembling or tingling; ringing in the ears; feelings of weakness or exhaustion; or headaches that are relieved by oil or massage. Mentally, excess vata generates spaciness, poor concentration, and the mind spinning with unwanted thoughts; difficulty completing tasks; mood swings and lack of emotional resilience; feelings of insecurity, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Uncorrected, vata excesses can rather quickly manifest into a bewildering array of neuromuscular, skeletal, autoimmune, and mental disorders which may include features such as heart palpitations, insomnia, malabsorption, emaciation, chronic

This is a series of simple breathing exercises that are safe for anyone. They are a preparation for *pranayama*, and are also used before meditation as a practice of *pratyahara*. The word "kriya" means "method" or "action." Here it means a method for calming the mind.

Sit with head, neck, and spine in a straight line. The breath should be slow, deep, and gentle—do not force or strain. These exercises involve two types of breath: a chest breath, used when inhaling through the nostrils, and a stomach breath, used when inhaling through the mouth. In the first, the chest expands fully and the abdomen presses in slightly; in the second, the chest does not fully expand and the abdomen pushes out. Note: Do the Eight Kriyas after pranayama or right before methods of concentration and meditation.

Kriya 1: Inhale into the chest slowly, gently, and deeply through both nostrils, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Exhale slowly and gently, also through both nostrils. Do this five times.

Kriya 2: Inhale into the chest slowly, gently, and deeply through both nostrils, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Exhale slowly and gently through a partially-open mouth. Do this five times.

Kriya 3: Inhale into the stomach slowly, gently, and deeply through the mouth with slightly extended lips, letting the abdomen push out. Exhale slowly and gently through both nostrils, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Do this five times.

Kriya 4: Closing the right nostril with right thumb, inhale into the chest through the left nostril, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Lift the thumb, close the left nostril with right finger, and exhale slowly and gently through the right nostril. Do this five times.

Kriya 5: Closing the left nostril with right ring finger, inhale into the chest through the right nostril, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Close right nostril with thumb, exhale slowly and gently through the left. Do this five times.

Kriya 6: Exhale slowly and gently through both nostrils, completely emptying the lungs. The abdomen sucks in. Let the following breath through the nostrils come in as a natural reflex (a normal, not a deep breath), as the abdomen is released. Do this five times.

Kriya 7: Inhale into the stomach slowly and deeply through the mouth with slightly extended lips, letting the abdomen push out. Exhale slowly and gently through the mouth, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Do this five times.

Kriya 8: Inhale deeply into the chest through both nostrils in five slow sips, pulling the abdomen in slightly. Exhale slowly and gently through the mouth. Do this five times.

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For Further Information:

See the "Yoga Therapy" column for specific instructions to prepare for the practice of *agni sara*, *dhauti*, and *nauli*. This issue's "Pranayama" column gives specific instructions on the practice of *nadi shodhana*.

Instruction in some of the specific practices mentioned above is available in the Yoga International Reprint series, as follows:

Agni Sara: Agni Sara

Ashvini Mudra: Subtle Movement for the Subtle Body

Bhastrika & Kapalabhati: Bhastrika & Kapalabhati

Nadi Shodhana: Balancing Active & Receptive Energies

Ujjayi and Bhramari: Breathing Lessons

These booklets are \$2.50 each and can be ordered by calling 800-253-6243.

fatigue, cracking joints and sciatica, osteoarthritis, and weak kidneys; panic disorder; attention deficit disorders; and depression related to low self-esteem.

In times of vata provocation, it is essential that we keep warm, eat and sleep at regular times, and avoid exposure to windy, dry, and cold weather. Vata-reducing strategies are designed to warm, lubricate, and calm, so we should eat warm, soupy, mildly spiced and lightly salted dishes; take sweet, nourishing, and easily digestible foods prepared with ghee; massage our bodies with warm sesame oil; and eliminate cold and dry foods from our diet. Yoga practice can be enormously helpful when vata is provoked, but if our practice is strenuous or excessive, vata will again be provoked as a result. Therefore, in asana practice the body should be kept warm, but slow, gentle *vinyasas* are needed to calm the mind and reintegrate awareness with the physical body process. (In *vinyasa*, asanas are linked together in series and by movement on the inhalation and exhalation.) Balance poses, spinal twists, and poses which put pressure on the colon area (the seat of vata) are particularly helpful.

When vata is provoked, our daily pranayama practice should include the four purifications (*nadi shodhana*, *kapala bhata*, *agni sara dhauti*, and *ashvini mudra*) and several rounds of *bhramari* pranayama. While learning *bhramari* takes practice, it is the best beginning-level pranayama for resolving vata provocation; as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (2:68) points out, it creates "a sort of ecstasy," and a sense of warmth and fulfillment in the heart. For intermediate students, a few rounds of breath retention practices like *sahita kumbhaka* are quite helpful, because stopping the breath also stops the mind. The meditation practice which follows should involve a method which the practitioner perceives as nurturing. If after pranayama practice our thoughts have stopped racing out of control and there is a feeling, no matter how slight, of inner fulfillment and peace, then our breathing practice has been fruitful, and we are ready to proceed into meditation.

applied pranayama

The energetics of breath has three components: whether the mouth or nose is used for inhalation or exhalation; whether or not the breath used is chest breath or belly breath; and which nostril is used when breathing through the nose. It is important to under-

stand that most of the pranayamas or pranayama series which are intended for consistent daily practice in all seasons and conditions are either themselves moderate in their effects, like *nadi shodhana*, *sahita kumbhaka* and *bhastrika*, or they are grouped in a series which is balancing as a whole. The *eight kriyas* series—a simple and gentle breath series that is safe for everyone—balances the doshas by varying the four possible combinations of inhalation and exhalation through mouth or nose in combination with stomach and chest breathing.

For people in good health, Baba Hari Dass recommends practicing *nadi shodhana*, *kapala bhata*, *agni sara dhauti*, and *ashvini mudra* (a variant of *mula bandha*) in that order every day. There are good reasons why this is important. Not only does the series use four different types of breath—slow breath, fast breath, the breath held out, and the breath held in—but the series

as a whole balances the doshas. While *nadi shodhana* balances the heating and cooling currents, the other three practices strengthen and balance the seats of kapha, pitta, and vata, respectively. The three *bandhas* (locks), which are used together in a great many pranayama practices, also purify the doshas for the same reason—each works on a seat of one of the three doshas: *mula bandha* (the root lock) on the

seat of vata, *uddiyana bandha* (the navel lock) on the seat of pitta, and *jalandhara bandha* on the seat of kapha. Instructions for these practices can be found in the *Ashtanga Yoga Primer*; however, its author is quick to point out that yoga practices should always be learned initially from a teacher, not from a book.

As a yoga student begins to learn the science of breath and dosha, other patterns of breath can be used to alter the body's process as needed to help address the kinds of physical and emotional imbalances listed above. There are several classical pranayamas which are specifically intended for this purpose. The normal breathing pattern of nasal inhalation and exhalation is moderate; that is, it does not reduce or increase one dosha more than any other. That is why it is the optimum breath for most of our daily activities, and why pranayamas which are moderate in effect most often use this type of breathing. Inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, however, is warming, and increases pitta. I used this breath a great deal in former years when Colorado's winters were more harsh; walking half a mile to the university in -20° weather, inhaling through my nose and exhaling

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through my mouth, my body would have begun to perspire by the time I arrived.

By contrast, inhaling through the mouth creates a breath which is cooling. If the exhalation which follows is also through the mouth, kapha is increased; if it is through the nose, vata is increased. All four of the simple cooling pranayamas—*shitali*, *sitkari*, *kaki mudra*, and *bhujangini mudra*—use the pattern of mouth inhalation and nose exhalation, which increases vata. Because this is coupled with tongue positions which promote the drawing of maximum moisture inward, increasing internal kapha, both cooling doshas are increased as a result. These cooling practices are intended to be done in times of pitta provocation: in summer, in the latter part of the premenstrual period and the first three days of bleeding, and whenever we find ourselves suffering from excesses of physical or emotional pitta.

In addition, the classical pranayamas use the principle of chest versus belly breath. When both components of the breath are used together on inhalation and exhalation, as in the full breath pattern used in *sahita kumbhaka*, the effect is neither heating nor cooling. By separating these two components of breath, the yogis developed pranayamas with different energetic effects. Belly breathing, also called stomach breath or natural breath, is the most efficient breath we can use when the body is relatively inactive. The belly simply expands forward slightly on inhalation and pulls back inward slightly on exhalation. It is slightly cooling in its effect, which is why the four cooling pranayamas listed above are done with belly breath only.

Chest breathing, by contrast, is heating. In chest breath, the belly is relatively inert, and inhalation is directed so as to expand the chest, rib cage, and upper part of the lungs. Both *ujjayi* and *bhramari*, which are classed as heating, use chest breath. When the normal position of the throat is altered, creating friction, as in these two practices, the heating effect of the chest breath is enhanced. Ujjayi variations, which use a gamut of rasping and sobbing sounds, dislodge or dry out excess mucus, thus reducing kapha and enhancing clarity and concentration. Bhramari, which uses a more refined sound above the normal vocal range, warms the body, creates peace in the heart, and dissolves the mind into inner sound (*nada*) or light. In practicing bhramari, vata is calmed. Ujjayi and bhramari are normally done in the cooler months of the year, or when the doshas of kapha or vata are in excess.

Finally, as any diligent hatha yoga student knows, the seed syllables “ha” and “tha” relate to the energies of sun and moon for which the discipline is named, and are often thereby extended to refer to the heating nadi, *pingala*, on the right side of the body,

and the cooling nadi, *ida*, on the left side of the body. All of the pranayamas which use alternate nostril breathing patterns, such as *nadi shodhana* and *sahita kumbhaka*, act not only to balance heat and cold in the physical body and regulate metabolism, but also to increase *sattva guna* in the mind, so that meditation becomes easy.

However, under conditions of imbalance, the alternate breath pattern can be shifted according to need. Although pranayamas are usually contraindicated during illness, an intermediate practitioner with a mucousy cold but no fever can do *surya bhedana* (“sun piercing”) pranayama, in which the breath is inhaled through the right, or heating, nostril; the warmed breath is then held internally using the bandhas, and then exhaled through the left nostril. The opposite practice, *chandra bhedana* (“moon piercing”), is cooling. The count of inhalation and exhalation is not regulated in these two practices; it is adjustable according to need. Similarly, when practicing the “sobbing child” variant of *ujjayi* pranayama, if the body is cold when one begins the practice, one simply exhales through both nostrils, allowing the heating breath to warm the body. On the other hand, if the body temperature is comfortable, one exhales through the left (or cooling nostril) in order to enjoy the other benefits of the practice without overheating the body.

All pranayama practices have as their main goal the quieting and calming of the mind needed for deep meditation. Because sustained concentration is necessary in order to achieve *samadhi*, the goal of yoga practice, the ancient yogis developed the science of pranayama to help us overcome the imbalances in our bodies and our minds which distract us during sitting practice. By practicing pranayama before meditation, the mind can go much deeper much more quickly. For the student who is willing to persevere in pranayama practice, I can attest that Patanjali's words are true: “By the practice of pranayama, the covering which veils the inner luminosity is removed.” (*Yoga Sutra* 2:52)

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