

Prana and Pranamaya Kosha

What is Prana and why is it relevant to our existence?

Prana is an energetic force that exists within all beings and things. Prana is not simply the breath as most individuals believe. Prana exists independent of the breath, yet breath control can help to increase or decrease the quanta of prana in the body, and that is why breathing techniques and attention to the breath is so important.

Pra-Na denotes constancy, a force in constant motion, energy that drives action. Science describes prana as multidimensional energy: a combination of electrical, magnetic, electromagnetic, photonic, ocular, thermal and mental energies. Yogis believe that prana is independent of consciousness and that prana + consciousness is what the Light manifested when it had the desire to become many (i.e., the Big Bang). Without prana, the Light would not have been able to explode and manifest itself as the Universe, while expanding and contracting, taking its present form. .

Yogic Practices on Pranayama have been known for over 4000 years, but detailed practices primarily appear in writing the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita and Hatharatnavali, between the 5th and 6th Centuries. There are many practices. In fact, there are so many practices that one could easily become overwhelmed and confused. However, a good starting point is to build a foundation utilizing first, an attention to breath, and then progressing the attention through to different breath techniques which may or may not include engaging bandhas (locks), working with the koshas (energy sheaths) and/or chakras (energy vortices).

Simply, a beginning practitioner would be advised to become aware of the breath either at the nostrils or at the belly. Breath is the medium of pranayama and goes through inhalation (pooraka), retention (kumbhaka) and exhalation (rechaka). We take approximately 21, 600 breaths per day, or 900 per hour, although many of us are not even aware of this involuntary process. To bring awareness to this process, transforms it from involuntary to voluntary. This transformation alone generally has an effect of calming one's nervous system, reacting on the sympathetic nervous system. Short, shallow or sharp breathing indicates an active, anxious or depressed mind, whereas long, deep breaths indicate a calm mind and attitude. By controlling the breath, we learn that we can condition and control the mind as well.

Prana travels along energy meridians in the body. It is believed that there are 72,000 nadis, energy pathways, in the body. The main energy channels are the Ida (moon) channel, the Pingala (solar) channel and the Sushumna Nadi, the main energy meridian that travels from the base of the spine up and out through the crown of the head. The Ida and Pingala criss-cross along the Sushumna Nadi, at seven different points, denoting a convergence, resulting in a chakra, or energy wheel. Each chakra is characterized by individual traits, including color, vibrational sound, mantra, yantra and body parts affected. One can remove blockages associated with each chakra with enough pranayama practice and concentration.

Pranayama also helps to clear the nadis of the samskaras, conditionings in seed form, through purushartha, self-effort and anugraha, grace. With Pranayama, the nadis are gradually freed so that prana moves more smoothly, and a greater amount of energy is released from the chakras.