

Prāṇa and the Art of Balancing



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Submission: January 29, 2018; Published: February 07, 2018

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Abstract

Mastering physical balance is the cornerstone to success in sports or gymnastics. However mastering this physical balance is better attained through proper understanding of the vital force called *prāṇa* the vital energy that permeates the whole body. The *Yogasūtras* of Patanjali are the fountainhead of the Indian wisdom that teach us how to attain the state of equipoise and equanimity in all the dimensions of human identity -the physical, mental and spiritual planes and thereby attain the *summon bonum* of human life - the self realization. They lay an array of disciplines for the whole human persona -starting from the vows to lead a focused and determined life to physical discipline to disciplining the *prāṇa* and to mastering the mind through unswerving focus. This paper examines the significance of *prāṇa*, the vital energy in gaining the balance -physical as well as mental.

Keywords: *Prāṇa; Apāna; Balance; Subtle currents; Prayatna śaidhilyam*

Introduction

Learning to balance ourselves is a skill that we begin at a very tender age and continue to practice it into the middle of our life. As a toddler, balancing the whole weight of the body on two tender legs is a challenge. As that is mastered, the child then challenges his balancing skill by running and limping on one foot. He continues to test his newly acquired skill by climbing precariously on walls, trees and rooftops. Soon he learns to balance himself on a bicycle. While many of us normally put a full stop to our adventures of balancing somewhere down there, those of us with a predisposition toward sports and games, take it to the further levels and put our balancing skill to test under rigorous conditions. Gymnasts, jugglers and ropewalkers take the idea of balancing altogether to a new height. Often this art of balancing is normally conceived in this restrictive sense and we don't appreciate the significance of balancing beyond the physical dimensions of sports and games. Occasionally we employ the term balancing to the mental plane also when we speak of somebody as being emotionally balanced. But have we ever thought of the spiritual dimensions of the act of balancing and appreciated its significance and comprehended its underlying mechanism? This paper discusses about the yogic dimensions of the art of balancing.

Prāṇa and the Art of Balancing

Whenever we try to balance ourselves, we notice that we hold our breath. When a string needs to be inserted into the needle or

when carrying a brimful of liquid in a glass, we hold our breath tight. This holding of breath we surmise, is to stop the expansion and contraction of the lungs and the subsequent peritoneal movement that causes trembling of our body which could throw us out of balance. But the wisdom practiced and preserved in eastern tradition takes the idea of balancing altogether to a very deep dimension. They believe the breath that we inhale and exhale is only an outer manifestation of a subtle energy in the body called *prāṇa*. In Tibetan parlance it is called *rLung*. In an untrained body the movement of *prāṇa* is quite erratic. It has direct correlation internally with the activities within the mind and externally with the external breath. Thus mind, *prāṇa* and the breath move in tandem and work in close correlation. Restraining one invariably brings control on the other two. When we are deeply absorbed in a very spine-chilling thriller movie or a novel we notice that our breathing has temporarily halted. In the similar vein if we begin to breath slowly, deeply and rhythmically we notice that our agitated mind gets pacified and becomes calmer. However we have not been able to understand the nature and role of the connecting link between the mind and the breath known as *prāṇa*. The ancient Easterners have meticulously studied this intermediate link called *prāṇa* and how it closely intertwines the mind and the physical breath in a braid by its intangible yet important presence.

According to the ancient wisdom that is in circulation particularly in India and Tibet, *prāṇa* is the subtle current that

moves all through the body. This has five distinct functional aspects and is classified as *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*. *Prāṇa* is the upward current that manifests from navel up to the head region. *Apāna* is its antithesis that moves from the navel up to the feet. These two currents are the primary manifestations of this subtle energy and are responsible for the pulsating movement of the body we often experience when we try to standstill on a single foot with our eyes closed. These currents are violent and unrestrained in nature in the case of an uninitiated and are completely brought to the poise at the *maṇipūra* chakra of the navel region by a trained yogi. When these currents are completely balanced at the navel region the mind experiences complete silence and the external breath becomes standstill. It is stated that with *prāṇa* as its primary manifestation, this subtle energy moves in the region of the belly when we are awake and indulged in the daily chores. As we begin to feel sleepy and tired this energy moves upwards towards the heart region where a hidden cave is described entering which we quickly go unconscious for a brief span of time. As this energy begins to ascend and reaches the throat region we begin to dream and indulge in mental reveries.

But how can this subtle interlinking aspect called *prāṇa* be experienced in the body? For this yogic texts recommend focusing on the inner bodily movements by sitting at a place with closed eyes and practicing elongated and slow breathing. In Buddhism this technique is called *Anāpāna* *sati* and *sati* *pattāṇa*. When we begin to focus on the inner currents of the body for a prolonged period of time we realize the manifestation of this moving energy quite palpably. In deed this inner motion is the fulcrum in the act of balancing. Its movement becomes violent as we brew agitating and aggressive thoughts and becomes composed as the mind is calmed. Certain yogic texts, particularly of Tibetan Buddhism, go even to the extent of recommending sitting or reclining in such body postures that are claimed to be conducive for diverting the *prāṇa* in a certain way thus enabling the yogi to focus his mind in a particular way and reap appropriate results that would otherwise be not possible. A mummy of a sitting yogi with his head abnormally drawn to his knees was recovered in Tibet in the last century which looked almost like a living body. This yogi is now believed to have left his mortal coil after diverting his *prāṇa* to leave his body in a certain way enabling him to attain certain secret yogic attainments.

Prāṇa has been understood to be central to the balancing of mind and body since ancient times in the Eastern cultures. For example the Buddhist monks prepare what is known as *mandala* -an intricate design of brilliant colors as part of their religious practice which requires very minute control on their hand muscles. No amount of physical practice would enable anybody to attain body balance to such an extent unless movement of indwelling *prāṇa* is recognized and controlled. Similarly, the martial arts taught in the traditional Chinese country setting primarily emphasize on realizing the subtle currents of *prāṇa*

and learning to master its movement. In these cultures whether it be archery or Taekwondo, kung fu or fencing the emphasis is on attainment of the physical dexterity that is a resultant of subtle balancing of the minutest movement of this *prāṇic* energy.

Patanjali the great Indian sage of 2nd century BCE embedded the recipe for optimizing the various dimensions of human persona and the final attainment of the human life's objective in the crisp aphorism called the *yoga sūtras*. Patanjali does not speak elaborately on the nature of *prāṇa* in his aphorisms but talks of the ways and means of controlling it with a concerted effort called *prāṇāyāma*. Verses 2.49 to 2.53 of Patanjali *yoga sūtras* describe the technique of controlling the *prāṇa* through restraining the outer breath. Prior to these, in the 46th aphorism, Patanjali describes the nature of balanced body posture. He defines it as that which is stable and comfortable [1]. For attaining such perfect body posture devoid of pulsatory movement, Patanjali recommends *prayatna saithilyam* combined with *anata samapatti* in the next aphorism. This means keeping the mind devoid of any desire for activity and allowing it to become one with the vast expanse of the infinity. This, Patanjali states, results in a victory over the duality of life [2]. This duality is the result of the pulsating *prāṇa* and *apāna*.

Other yogic texts of India such as *Hathayoga Pradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita* describe five major and five minor *prāṇas* in the human body that are responsible for various physiological activities such as flickering of the eye lids, sneezing, yawning etc. *Jeevanmukti Vivekah* a yogic treatise written by the 15th century yogi of extraordinary attainments, Swami *Vidyaranya* describes the invariable relationship between mind and the *prāṇa*. He mocks the futile efforts of those practitioners of yoga who try to focus their minds without calming down their *prāṇa* and calls such efforts as futile.

It is also known that those who have practiced good physical body balance (such as break-dancers, skaters, ropewalkers, etc.) are often good at lucid dreaming, and quickly attain deep levels of meditation and are very easily hypnotized. These people also show better emotional poise than the others. It is also a recognized fact that sportsmen and gymnasts experience 'runners' high' and demonstrate better equipoise even in adverse situations than the normal people because knowingly or unknowingly they reign in on their *prāṇa* and gain mental mastery as well. In some texts of the East, unrestrained *prāṇa* is depicted as a bull that runs helter-skelter ruining its companion, the mind in the process. *Hatha Yoga*, that emphasizes on physically manipulating the internal dimensions of the self, states that a yogi who masters *prāṇa* will certainly win over his mind which finally leads him to salvation.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that we have lost the access to this traditional Knowledge on *prāṇa* in the last two centuries owing to complete

breaking up of guru-ṣishya lineage of India with the introduction of Macaulay system of modern education. Now we don't know what is prāṇa and every time a sportsman or a gymnast is trained in body balance he is only given instructions to slow down his/her breath and calm down his/her mental activity but the vital link, the prāṇa is never explained to the practitioner to experience and recognize. Unless a person becomes sensitive

enough to recognize the subtle currents and movements within his/her body, he or she cannot achieve true balance of his/her body.

References

1. *sthira-sukham-āsanam* //2.46//
2. *tato dvandva-an-abhighātaḥ* //2.48//



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DOI: [10.19080/JYP.2018.03.555623](https://doi.org/10.19080/JYP.2018.03.555623)

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