

Deeper Awareness of the Breath

The Prana Vayus

The Meaning of Prana and Prana Vayu

Prana, as we pointed out from the outset of this work, is the Sanskrit word for the life force. The root *pra* means “first” and *na* means the “smallest (or most basic) unit of energy” – so *Prana* is the first or fundamental unit of energy. Everything living functions by virtue of Prana; all activity and change – mental and emotional as well as physical – is a manifestation of the workings of Prana. Prana is the radiance of life itself. Within us, prana is the moving force behind sensation and activity, the fire of the metabolism, the carrier of thought, and the force of will. Prana dispels impurities from the body, maintains the health of the body, and its essential nature is lightness and joy.

A smooth and unobstructed flow of prana is needed if we are to concentrate; moreover, prana restrains the mind from taking interest in undesirable objects or unhealthy pursuits. If one’s prana is obstructed from flowing to any part of the body – whether physically (e.g. from an injury), or because of mental blocks, impressions or emotions – the health of that area of the body deteriorates, and can even lose its power of action. We often have an intuitive sense of where the prana is ‘stuck’ or diminished when looking at the appearance of someone with a particular health problem, even though the cause of the diminishment is not always as obvious.

Prana is lost to a certain extent with each exhalation; just as we take Prana in through the breath, we also breathe out what we are not able to assimilate or retain. The yogic practice of pranayama is designed to minimize the loss of prana through exhalation, so that prana can be increased in the body. Prana is also depleted by excessive exercise, diminished in times of great emotion, and is lost through excessive speech, the emission of semen, the process of childbirth, and the elimination of waste from the body.

Notice that the experience of spending our prana can be exhilarating in the moment; yet afterward we feel exhausted and depleted, and take some time to recover. Yogic disciplines of moderation and self-control are meant to minimize the depletion of prana as well as to assimilate and store prana. A yogi’s experiences are all the more intense and enjoyable because he does not allow the experience to rob him of his prana; instead he spends his prana wisely, remaining alert and joyful.

As the Prana operates within the body to maintain life, it performs distinct functions and is named according to the function that it performs. In each case this specific function is called a ‘**vayu**,’ which is sometimes translated as ‘wind.’ The root ‘*va*’ means “that which flows” – and so a *vayu* is a vehicle for activities and experiences within the body, or a ‘force’ that moves in a specific way and in a specific area of the body that it governs. The practices of yoga – both asana and pranayama – are

meant to optimize the functioning of these vayus as well as bring them under our control, so that their energies can be used to uplift oneself.

There are 49 prana vayus or types of vayu in the body; ten of these are directly responsible for mental and physical activities. Of these ten, **five** are of interest to the yogi for progressing in his practice; the others govern involuntary physiological functions (for example, belching and blinking, which are of lesser interest in yogic discipline, though they certainly have their role in the mundane affairs of the body!).

Each of these five principle vayus govern specific areas of the body, and can be thought of as elemental forces in the body that are not just physical, but govern emotional qualities and mental powers that are fundamental to a healthy personality and sense of self. The practice of yoga, by working with the body and breath as well as the mind, empowers us on every level by increasing the Prana in the form of these vayus.

1. **Prana Vayu** – while ‘Prana’ is the general name of the life force, the ‘prana vayu’ is one of its specific functions. The prana vayu governs the region from the throat to the bottom of the heart, corresponding to the region in which we practice Jalandhara bandha. The ‘seat’ of the prana vayu is the heart, and the prana vayu ensures that the heart goes on beating. It is associated with the element of **air**, and has an upward motion associated with the **inhalation**. When you breathe in, you feel the ‘lift’ of the breath, which is the energy of the prana vayu in the upper body. Its movement is upward in the way the glass is filled with liquid – from the bottom to the top. The experience is of being filled with energy, which is distinct from the physical experience of the breath as a flow of air coming in through the nose or mouth and *down* to the lungs.

The prana vayu governs **assimilation** or taking into oneself – as in the process of inhalation, of swallowing, assimilation through digestion, as well as the processes of taking in sensory impressions and mentally assimilating information and experience. It works to maintain the proper temperature of the body relative to one’s environment, and sustains one’s vital organs, particularly the heart.

Though its seat is in the heart, the functioning of the prana vayu can be experienced in different parts of the body. It gathers at the navel and from there is distributed throughout the body; yet it can also be experienced strongly as it moves within the head in practices of pranayama and meditation. An effective way to focus on the prana vayu is to focus on the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose during breathing practices. Another focus is at the navel. By the same token, the strength of the prana vayu can be experienced throughout the body, right down to the toes.

The prana vayu is the energy of the **Anahata** chakra, the ‘heart’ chakra, which expresses that energy, summarized in the familiar phrase, ‘open-hearted.’

- 2. *Apana Vayu*** – while the prana vayu is the moving force behind the inhalation, the apana vayu is the moving force behind the **exhalation**. The apana vayu is the aspect of the prana that governs the ability to eject or eliminate what is not needed to the system. Just as with the breath we exhale what is not needed after assimilating the inbreath, the apana vayu is the force behind the elimination of waste in general, working in the kidneys, colon, rectum, bladder and genitals. It is also the moving force in the process of reproduction – which essentially moves new life ‘out’ into the world – from insemination to childbirth.

The healthy functioning of the apana vayu is as vital as that of the prana vayu. If waste is not eliminated from the body, there is no room for assimilation of fresh energy, and toxins build up. This slows the body down – and slows us down on the mental level as well. Without the healthy functioning of apana vayu, one lacks motivation and determination; one feels lazy, dull and even confused, indecisive and befuddled.

In a subtle but vital sense, the apana vayu has much to do with our power of decisiveness and self-determination, both of which turn upon our power of choice. Choice demands not only the affirmation of one possible good, but also the elimination or exclusion of other competing goods – choosing one good over another. Clarity in defining oneself demands decisiveness in eliminating what doesn’t work for us, what is not needed, or what conflicts with our highest goals. It’s not surprising that the apana vayu is associated with the element of **earth**, and is the energy of the **Muladhara** Chakra, which is concerned with having a strong, sure and reliable foundation, especially in fundamental matters of survival.

The seat of the apana vayu is in the core of the pelvis, and it governs the lower body, from the navel down through the legs, corresponding to the area in which we practice Mulabandha. It’s worth noting how our language reflects this awareness; a person whose decisiveness is rooted in real possibilities and clear intentions is said to be very ‘grounded’, or to have his ‘feet on the ground.’ The clearest expression of decisiveness and self-assertion, in fact, is to ‘put your foot down.’ This kind of language expresses the power of the apana vayu.

The functioning of the apana vayu is enhanced by the rooting or grounding action of Mulabandha in seated postures for pranayama; this is one reason why seated pranayama can be more powerful than a reclining practice. Moreover, emphasis on the exhalation – expression of the apana vayu – works to enhance grounding, extension and clarity or strength of purpose in one’s practice. Clarity begins with a good exhalation, making room for fresh energy and focus.

- 3. *Samana Vayu*** – this is the power of the metabolism or ‘digestive fire,’ which controls the functioning of the abdominal organs and glands. It governs the area between the bottom of the heart and the navel – centralized in the area

of the solar plexus – and its seat is said to be in the navel. It corresponds to the area in which we practice Uddiyana bandha. While the prana and apana vayus have to do with assimilation – or taking-in – and self-determination – or grounding – through choice, the Samana Vayu is concerned specifically with the **power of discrimination**.

In its work with food and digestion, this is the force that separates nutrients from toxins: when it is not functioning well, one may retain toxins, leading to shortness of breath and gastric disorders. In the case of the mind, the Apana Vayu is the power by which to separate out or discern good from bad, which allows us to assimilate information for the sake of making choices. When there is a disorder, one can be delusional or of unsound mind. For this reason, in the yoga tradition the power of digestion is very closely linked to the power of the mind – particularly regarding discrimination and judgment.

Samana vayu is associated with the element of **fire**. It is associated with the **Manipura** chakra, and when *imbalanced*, its fiery energy can be used to assert one's will or to dominate, especially through anger. In the yoga tradition, anger is the direct result of a combination of desire, delusion and lack of discrimination. When the energies and functioning of the vayus are brought into balance to support clarity of mind, the qualities of Samana Vayu take on the humble yet expansive self-awareness expressed by the soft opening to the breath at the back body with Uddiyana bandha. The actions of Uddiyana bandha support in particular both efficient diaphragmatic breath and the healthy functioning of the organs of digestion.

4. **Udana Vayu** – while apana vayu is concerned with elimination or outward-moving energy in general, udana vayu is the specific force that expels air with the exhalation in a way that is particularly concerned with **speech and the production of sound**.

'Udana' is 'that which carries upward.'¹ It rules the region of the throat and head, and is seated specifically in the throat. Its function is expressive; it is the energetic flow that moves upward and out. When udana is imbalanced, speech is disjointed and one cannot speak or articulate ideas properly. Imbalances can also cause shortness of breath and other respiratory problems particularly associated with the throat, which can have their root in obstacles to self-expression, or emotional repression. Breaking or cracking in the voice, as well as inability to express musical pitch with the voice result from irregularities in the udana vayu.

The area ruled by udana vayu is the head and throate; its energy is particularly stimulated by **Jalandhara Bandha**. Udana vayu is related to the element

1 Udana vayu also governs vomiting, and imbalances in udana can produce nausea or the desire to vomit. Perhaps this association with udana explains the association in the mythology by which the deities produce their creation by a process that is both a speaking-forth and a vomiting – in words that share the root 'va'.

of **ether** or space, and is activated during creative vocalization. Udana is focused at the fifth or throat chakra – the **Vishuddha** chakra, and this upward moving energy continues through the upper chakra, the Ajna chakra, to the Sahasrara, and is purified during this upward journey. The feeling of movements of energy in the head during pranayama and meditation are manifestations of the rarified movements of udana vayu. It is this udana which, when purified through yogic practice, brings the blissful experience of samadhi.

5. **Vyana Vayu** – this vayu pervades the *whole* body, and is a coordinating, connecting force. It has no specific seat, but rather coordinates all the powers such as sensory awareness, and runs through the whole network of the 72,000 nadis or passageways of prana in the body, connecting the functions of the nerves, veins, muscles and joints. Its function is cohesive and is associated with the element of **water**.

Vyana vayu is fundamental to making one feel and function as an integrated whole. Though it governs and coordinates all of the senses as well as the functioning of all muscles, both voluntary and involuntary, it is felt especially in the skin. Goosebumps and perspiration, and all of the various actions and reactions of the skin to the environment are manifestations of Vyana vayu. It functions at the “surface” or outer boundary of your energy body, much like surface tension on a drop of water, and is associated with a sense of boundaries through which we define ourselves and interact with our world.

Within oneself, Vyana vayu governs our internal sense of coordination and balance. When imbalanced, one feels uncoordinated and clumsy; coordination between mind and body suffers, and one’s own thoughts can be disjointed, fluctuating and rambling. Dysfunctions in Vyana vayu can also lessen our power of sensation.

Though Vyana vayu itself has no particular locus or seat, it is associated with the energy of the **Svadisthana** Chakra, located at the root of the genitals. In general, Vyana vayu is strengthened by the practice of hatha yoga asanas, through the interplay of strength and flexibility that builds a healthy sense of self. More specifically, because of its association with the energy and concerns of the Svadisthana Chakra, the subtler energies involved are enhanced through **Mulabandha**.

The energy of the **Svadisthana Chakra** concerns your sense of self, and sense of boundaries between yourself and others as you express yourself creatively in relationships. A healthy sense of boundaries is fundamental to forming relationships, and work with this chakra concerns the formation of boundaries and sense of self, just as the surface tension on a drop of water – the ruling element of this chakra and of Vyana vayu – defines its shape.

Water is the basis of cellular life, but can only function to support life by

the mechanism of cellular walls; the basis of interaction, even on a cellular level, is strong but permeable boundaries, which define individual cells. The same is true at other, subtler levels. Water is the element or medium of the emotions, which pass between and suffuse individuals like a subtle liquid permeating the walls of self. Emotionally as well as physically, one can be too open or too closed. Any organic system of relationships is healthy only when the walls are strong enough to allow discernment and choice, where choice and discrimination is a process of positive affirmation.

Weakness in the energy of this chakra – which can be due to disorders in Vyana vayu – leads to a weak sense of self, low self-esteem, problems in forming relationships, and even problems with the immune system, all of which concern interaction and exchange with our world through the medium of a strong and healthy set of boundaries – both physical and emotional. A lack of boundaries – as well as overly rigid boundaries – depletes and diminishes life. Thus these are the concerns of how we express ourselves and relate to others at the level of the Svadisthana Chakra, which is strongly influenced by the flow of Vyana Vayu.

The Presence and Influence of the Vayus in the Breath

In a single hour we breathe, on the average, 900 breaths. Each element, according to the text the *Shiva Svarodaya*, predominates periodically in the body for a specific period of time, activating the concerns of the corresponding chakra and thus influencing the flux of our thoughts and moods.²

1. For 20 minutes (300 breaths) the Earth element dominates, activating the concerns of the Muladhara Chakra.
2. For 16 minutes (240 breaths) the Water element dominates, activating the concerns of the Svadisthana Chakra.
3. For 12 minutes (180 breaths) the Fire element dominates, activating the concerns of the Manipura Chakra.
4. For 8 minutes (120 breaths) the Air element dominates, activating the concerns of the Anahata Chakra.
5. For 4 minutes (60 breaths) the Akasha element – ‘ether’ or ‘space’ – dominates, activating the concerns of the Vishuddha Chakra.

² This calculation of the duration of elements in a one-hour cycle of breath is presented in the *Shiva Svarodaya* and *Jnana Svarodaya*. Harish Johari points out that experiments by neurobiologists suggest that the duration in the United States is between two and three hours. Neurophysiologists discovered in their research on circadian rhythms a 2-hour cycle of ‘nares’ in adults, which may be due to differences of climate between the US and India, as well as differences in historical periods (– we live in a different age). *Breath, Mind and Consciousness* by Harish Johari, p. 52-3

The last ten breaths of the sixty breaths of Akasha are transitional moments before the other nostril takes over, during which the breath is active in the Sushumna or central channel, drawing one's attention inward. This lasts a bit longer at sunrise and sunset, the times of transition or '*sandhi*' in the outer environment, and so these are especially good times for meditation and spiritual practice, because one's attention is naturally and strongly drawn inward when the breath moves in the Sushumna. When the breath moves in the Sushumna, none of the five elements exert their influence, and our physical and mental desires are momentarily suspended in this transitional period of inner silence.

We experience mental fluctuations when either of the two nostrils are operative – more so when the right nostril predominates. Once we understand how the energy of the nostril is coupled with the influence of the elements at any given moment, we have something of an insight into the complexity and variety of our shifting moods and interests, and the profound influence of our physical existence over our inner mental world. Yet with that understanding, we also begin to appreciate the importance and power of our awareness of these influences as manifested in the breath, our ability to synchronize our breath to the task at hand, and the importance of meditation and prolonging the period of Sushumna breath flow to return ourselves again and again to our center and to a state of balance.

One way of becoming aware of the predominance of a particular element is to watch the flow of the breath through the nostrils. When the breath is felt primarily at the

1. Center of the nostril – Earth element
2. Lower part of the nostril – Water element
3. Top of the nostril – Fire element
4. Obliquely or through the side of the nostril – Air element
5. Rotating in the nostril – Akasha or Ether element

The breath also has varying strength – the exhalation extends out further – according to the predominant element, indicating how outgoing our energy is at that moment.

Chakras

As this discussion of the vayus points out, the energies of the various pranas of the body express themselves in and through the energy of the chakras. A chakra is a plexus of pranic energy in the body that expresses our individual consciousness and energy in particular ways distinctive of our individuality. We are familiar with expressions such as a 'gut feeling,' an 'open heart,' 'fire in the belly' and so on, all of which are colloquial expressions of the energy of the chakras.

Our expressions also reflect our recognition that these energies can be 'open' – expansive, expressive, inclusive – or 'closed' – tight, narrow, self-absorbed. Our maturity and evolution as individuals and as spiritual beings depends upon how much these energies are 'opened' as we progress through life, bringing us into higher levels of harmony with the generous, inclusive and expansive energy of the universe, the creative Shakti.

Each chakra has its own symbol, representative of its energy; it is also directly related to the energy of a specific element and prana of the body. Moreover, through practice we can see how the principles of Anusara Yoga applied in hatha yoga poses relate directly to working with the energy and 'issues' of each chakra, bringing us into emotional as well as physical harmony with the universe.

