

Yoga Breathing Technique - Postures, Breath Work and Meditation

by Georg Feuerstein and Gary Kraftsow

Georg: What do you mean when you say you are using the breath in the execution of asanas?

Gary: There are different ways of controlling the flow of the breath that will increase a certain structural potential or have a certain physiological effect. Breathing can be controlled through both inhalation and exhalation, and I always find it amusing that there should be a controversy about all this.

Georg: What is the controversy?

Gary: There is this notion in Yoga of inhalation as filling a bucket from the bottom up, and yet air doesn't behave like water. It is possible to use this kind of breathing for certain purposes, such as controlling high blood pressure, but in general inhalation is more from the top down during asana practice, because then you can maximize the effect of expansion and extension.

A little bit of personal experimentation will quickly demonstrate that inhalation into the abdomen brings one's attention and energy down, whereas inhalation into the chest opens the chest and encourages one's energy to rise.

(* Please see post-script at the end of the interview.)

Georg: Do you consciously work with the energy flow and the pranic flow in the body?

Gary: Well, you could say that the pranic flow is the movement of attention. In adaptation there is the adaptation of the form of the posture, there is the adaptation of the style of breathing, and there also is an adaptation related to moving attention in different ways.

Of course, terms like 'pranic flow' can mean various things. From my perspective, we can move prana by means of breathing technology or just by shifting attention itself. For instance, if you mentally focus on your hand, you can actually raise the temperature of your hand. Is that what you are taking about?

Georg: Yes, something like that. Whether there is a measurable physiological reaction depends on how deep the energy flow is. There may not be such a reaction. In fact, you could have a strong prana flow that does not register on any instruments at all. Are you actually having students focus on a particular somatic locus (desha), such as a cakra, during asana practice?

Gary: Yes, sometimes.

Georg: What would the purpose be?

Gary: There are now contexts in which I recommend that. One is for therapeutic

reasons, and the other is in the context of a personal ritual, which can also be therapeutic. For example, if you are suffering from indigestion, I might ask you to focus your attention on the region below the navel or on the solar plexus and the area of the liver, kidney, spleen, and pancreas.

Georg: Do you combine this with visualization, or do you recommend simply paying attention?

Gary: Both. I use visualization for visually oriented individuals. If work needs to be done with emotional problems, I might use a very different kind of visualization than in the case of someone who is very 'kaphic'.

Sometimes I also use a technique called nyasa, which means 'placement'. This involves touching certain parts of the body, such as a specific cakra, while chanting a mantra.

For example, I might ask a student to extend his arms and while chanting a particular mantra during exhalation bring his hands down to the heart. In the context of ritual, I might recommend this technique in order to help a student develop a personal meditation process.

In other words, nyasa can be used for emotional therapy or as part of a process of spiritual growth.

I use asana, pranayama, mantra recitation, visualization, and nyasa in an integrated way to help students realize their own personal dharma. Of course, if someone comes with neck pain. I don't use all that, but focus on structural adaptation instead.

If a physiological problem is obviously connected to emotional difficulties, however, then I might use a combination of these techniques.

Georg: Traditionally, a mantra is only a mantra when it has been received from a guru. Have the mantras you are using with students been transmitted to you?

Gary: It is my understanding that the potency of the mantra has very much to do with the link between the person who gives it and the person who receives it, as well as the context in which it is imparted.

In my book I tell the story of a woman who had a lot of emotional problems. One day, after we had been working together for a couple of months, she had a very deep dream.

In the dream, she was nestled in the arms of her grandmother, who was reading a biblical story to her. In fact, it was Psalms 23 - her grandmother's favorite psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will feel no evil: for thou art with me..."

I had her read this psalm before her practice, and spontaneously the phrase "thou art with me" became a mantra for her which she used in her pranayama practice. That was pure therapy for her.

Sometimes I use actual Sanskrit mantras. At other times, students use English words or

perhaps Greek expressions - whatever helps them unlock certain neurotic patterns in their own mind. Sometimes people come to me who have been given a mantra that they like, and I show them how to integrate it into their practice.

Georg: Do you also use mantras in the traditional sense? Have you been given mantras that you can pass on to others?

Gary: Certain mantras, yes. My comments were in the context of therapeutic usage, but I also use some classic mantras.

Georg: I believe it is not very common to use mantras in asana practice. So what we are really talking about here is an asana practice that is fully integrated with the psychological and spiritual context of a person's life.

Gary: That's the intention. Yes, definitely.

Georg: This is rare, isn't it?

Gary: Rare maybe, but it is Patanjali's Kriya Yoga: tapas, svadhyaya, and ishvara-pranidhana. That is the Krishnamacharya/Desikachar approach.

My second book with Penguin will be about that. But I want to be clear that if people come to me with back problems, I don't put all this on them. I just work with their back.

Often that's it, and I never see them again. But some do come back, and over time they become more and more interested and perhaps go on to meditation practice.

Georg: What role does meditation play in the Krishnamacharya/Desikachar approach?

Gary: Meditation is very important. American Yoga practitioners don't always seem to understand this, which is perhaps why they are turning to vipassana, dzogchen, and other practices outside the Hindu Yoga tradition.

Georg: Apart from being unaware of meditation within the Yoga tradition, people also tend to rush into higher meditation practices without having the necessary preparation. They seem to be especially drawn to meditation practices that, like dzogchen or mahamudra, which involve realizing the nondual state.

If one can actually engage such meditation practice from the point of view of what the Buddhists call 'emptiness', then there is no problem. But if an individual doesn't have the ability to suspend mental constructs, then meditation easily becomes just fantasy and wishful thinking.

Gary: Right. As with asana, people do make icons out of their meditation practice as well.

Georg: Sometime ago, I was asked to write a foreword to a book describing the author's experience of emptiness. I had to decline mainly because the author put forward the notion that there is no need for spiritual practice, which I think is a profound misconception.

Gary: I feel that there has been a similar distortion of Sri Ramana's teaching.

Georg:..because some people think that all they have to do is presume their prior enlightenment and it is true of them here and now, whereas Sri Ramana's approach of Self-inquiry is a very profound method that needs to be properly cultivated.

Otherwise, one merely deludes oneself. It is possible to walk around for the rest of one's life affirming that "I am the One," but if this is just an intellectual affirmation, it won't accomplish anything. There will be no realization, no inner freedom, and no true bliss whatsoever.

Gary: Practice has to penetrate to make a real difference in our spiritual life. I use the kosha model of the Upanishads according to which practice must penetrate to the level of the heart, or the ananda-maya-kosha. Otherwise it remains superficial.

Georg: David Frawley made a good point in a recent article published in Yoga International: If you don't experience pratyahara, or sensory inhibition, you aren't meditating quite yet.

Gary: Deep sadhana always has two aspects. One relates to what you want to eliminate, the other concerns what you want to cultivate. As Patanjali states very clearly in the Yoga-Sutra, [2.28], the light of knowledge or understanding dawns upon the removal of the impurities by means of the practice of the limbs of Yoga.

If there is toxicity in the body, it must be eliminated first, and then the body can be nourished properly. The same is true of spiritual practice. By the way, the word 'spiritual' always seems a little odd to me. I am a samkhya-yogin, and from the point of view of Samkhya-Yoga, the Spirit or purusha is completely unchanging. So the practices are clearly not designed for the Spirit. 'Spiritual practice' is something of a misnomer.

Georg: I agree, the entire process of transmutation happens at the level of prakriti.

Gary: So the practice is for the mind, for the person.

Georg: That's why the Buddhists speak of 'mind training' rather than 'spiritual discipline'. For me, the word 'spiritual' is just a convenient expression.

Gary: Well, people understand it when you use it, but strictly speaking spiritual practice is mind training. As Patanjali affirms, we must become ever more empty of our own form, or sva-rupa-shunya.

My understanding of this is that, as you mature on the path, the object of meditation becomes more refined, more subtle, until it becomes sort of transparent, and then all it does is reveal the Self. Krishnamacharya said that the only object worthy of meditation

is....

Georg:purusha.

Gary: No, he actually said ishvara, the Lord.

Georg: Ah, a true samkhya-yogin.

Gary: Whatever the object of meditation, its purpose, in the words of the Bhagavad-Gita [6.23], is to disconnect Yoga practitioners from suffering, or dukkha, and to connect them to their higher potential.

The disconnection is called viyoga and the connection samyoga. This is a gradual process. Some Western Yoga teachers try to right away establish a meditation practice for their students, perhaps because it makes them feel important, but my view is that it generally takes a long time before a person is ready for meditation.

So in the Kirishnamacharya/Desikachar system, we start with simple things, and then slowly, as a student matures, introduce him or her to the more profound practices of Yoga.

* "When we speak of inhalation as a downward or an upward movement, or both an upward and downward movement, we are not really speaking about the movement of the breath (or air in the lungs) but rather the method of controlling the breath (the way we use our respiratory musculature and our attention).

In fact, there are multiple ways of controlling inhalation, and each way has distinct effects on our system at structural, physiological, and psycho-emotional levels.

In my training, we teach at least five different methods of controlling inhalation. Our teaching is that the practitioner should adopt the technique that maximizes specific desired effects.

We may choose to use the breath for diverse purposes: an excessive thoracic kyphosis, a recurring digestive problem, or a state of chronic anxiety. In each of these cases, we will adopt a slightly different technique of controlling the breath.

The context of my original comment was in reference to the use of inhalation in asana practice, where we usually want to emphasize the expansion of the chest and extension of the spine on inhalation.

We pick the technique of inhalation that maximizes this effect: controlling the breath from the top downward. I want to stress that this-or any-directional image relates to the method of muscular control and flow of attention, and not to the way the breath moves.

The breath always moves down into the lungs and then expands the lungs in all directions simultaneously."

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