



Prāṇāyāma within Rāja Yoga and Haṭha Yoga

According to the Yoga Kuṇḍalinī Upaniṣad verse 1 - the activity of Citta or psyche has two causes, the movement of Vāsana or latent impressions and the movement of Vāyu or Prāṇa. If one of them is active so is the other, equally if one of them is influenced so is the other.

These are the primary foci within the principles and practices of Rāja Yoga around Citta and Haṭha Yoga around Prāṇa. In terms of primary practices common to both we have Prāṇāyāma.

However as with Āsana within either Rāja Yoga and Haṭha Yoga (a topic for a future post), there are different priorities in the viniyoga (application) of this common primary tool.

In the Rāja Yoga approach, as delineated in texts such as the Yoga Sūtra, the practice of Prāṇāyāma is focused around developing and refining the principles of ratio, attention, timing and number of breaths.

The fruits of this approach are a reduction in confusion (Yoga Sūtra C2 v52) and fitness for the first steps in the meditative process (Yoga Sūtra C2 v53) towards cultivating an experience of being filled with a subtle sense of stillness (Yoga Sūtra C1 v3).

However no practices are mentioned or discussed around working with the contrasting aspects of the two channels (īḍā and piṅgalā).

In the Haṭha Yoga approach, as delineated in texts such as the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, the practice of Prāṇāyāma is focused around developing and refining the principles of using two primary channels (īḍā and piṅgalā) through a variety techniques to effect a Śodhana (clearing of blockages) of the Nāḍī (channels for Prāṇa).

The fruits of this approach are an intensification of the personal field of Prāṇa in anticipation of utilising the tools of Mudrā in order to direct this build up of Prāṇa towards breaking through the blockage in the Suṣumṇā Nāḍī caused by Kuṇḍalinī.

In this case a much more active and potentially destabilising situation, hence Haṭha practices were developed within a more restrained life environment, often at odds with today's lifestyle Yoga amidst the detox/retox flows of modern Western society.

Although obviously complementary, as affirmed in the opening quote, we must consider our priorities in choosing to cultivate the practice of Prāṇāyāma within

our personal practice or professional application.

It would be great if we could integrate both aspects into a single practice, however I would suggest that, along with Yoga Dhyāna (Yoga meditation), the practice least practiced and least taught these days (any connection between the two?) is Prāṇāyāma.

Given that one is concerned with stabilising the mind and the other concerned with forcing (Haṭha) a flow through blockages (sort of energetic dyno-rod) and that many of today's students are starting from 'wired and tired' with very little time, energy or aptitude for a consistent, even if not intensive home practice, questions must be raised over priorities.

Furthermore it appears that in earlier days one had to be fit to start Yoga, whereas today people start Yoga to be fit. Equally in times past one had to be stable to start Yoga, whereas today we go to Yoga to 'find' stability.

So where to start with this and how to set a priority for our direction?

Personally I feel that our primary need today for most going to Yoga classes is Rāja or psychic stability, rather than even the more popularly perceived version of Haṭha, to allow us to be more skilful within our daily interactions.

Given that the ancient practices of Haṭha Yoga had a different priority to this and perhaps one that is questionable within today's society, the only realistic starting point is the Prāṇāyāma as outlined through Chapter Two of the Yoga Sūtra.

A further advantage of adopting this approach is that all the preparatory aspects in the cultivation of this wonderful art can be learnt and refined within the practice of Āsana.

Equally through freeing the student from all the 'fiddling' around with the nostrils, often to the detriment of quality of breath and attention, the practice of Prāṇāyāma links the student to the more refined aspects of Dhāraṇā (concentration) and Dhyānam (meditation) as a seated practice.

This was the priority, ere to the days of Haṭha, as seen in texts such as the Bhagavad Gītā where stability of mind through seated meditation was the focus (see chapter six aptly called the Yoga of Dhyānam).

Of course if the student has embraced this aspect of Prāṇāyāma and has time, energy and psychic space to explore and skilfully accommodate the outcome of disturbing blockages within the demands and relationships of daily life within the areas of family, work, and 'me' then great.

If not then perhaps better than doing neither or getting stuck on the sticky or wondering how to begin to meditate, learn how to embrace to breath through Āsana and let that use flow into seated practices where the focus is mindful breathing free of the complexities and potential pitfalls of Haṭha.

Obviously here I mean Haṭha in its original sense rather than the popularised version of body work that is often 'sold' today under the guise of Haṭha Yoga.