

The Kumbhakas

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There are schools of Yoga which insist on Pranayama alone as the key to yoga, as they declare that control of Prana (prananirodha) inevitably brings control of mind (chittanirodha). In Yoga Vasishtha, a classic, Rishi Vasishtha explains the relationship between mind and breath and extols the efficacy of Pranayama in controlling the mind.

"Dear Rama, the body is like a vehicle. The Lord has created the mind and prana for the functioning of the body. When prana rejects the body, the mechanism of the body also ceases. And when the mind works, prana moves; it acts. The relation between prana and Manas, which are extremely close (anyonya) to the body is like a driver to the chariot.

"The way the prana vayu acts, the same way manas reacts. So the highest achievement of mind control is to be obtained by the concerted

effort of mastery over prana. The regulation of prana brings in its wake all worldly achievements (Rajyadi) and all others and leads up to the highest spiritual attainment to total independence of the indwelling consciousness from the gross, subtle and causal bodies which are operated by Prana force. Hence, study the science of breath."
—Yoga Vasishtha.

TO RESTRAIN MIND

In the previous two issues a few pranayamas and the benefits of Pranayama in general were discussed. There are a few more kumbhakas mentioned in the yoga texts which are also in vogue.

It is said:

Brahmaadayopi Tridasaaha
Pavanabhyaasa Tatparaah |
Abhoovam Antakobhayaath
Tasmaath Pavanamabhyaseth |

The gods including Chaturmukha Brahma practise the highest activity, pranayama—because of the fear of death.

It is also said that as long

as breath is restrained in one's own body, the mind is calm and steady and also when the vision (dristi) is directed towards Bhramadhya, then why should there be fear of death?

The nadis are purified by a properly regulated course of pranayama. Sage Brahmananda, in his Jyotsna or commentary on Hathayoga, details the routine to be followed by a full time yogabhyasi. It assumes importance when one really finds time heavy on one's shoulders after discharging the necessary responsibilities as an individual and the mind yearns desperately for spiritual rest.

Let us detail the routine of a yogabhyasi for achieving the result of practice.

One should wake up a couple of hours before dawn (ushatkaala)—or at least early in the morning (Pratahkaala). He should contemplate on his Guru in his mind and then in his heart his dear

deity (Ishtadevata) also. Then he should clean the teeth (danta suddhi), complete the other morning ablutions (suddhi), a bath and Basmadharanam or Pundradharanam as the case may be.

Then he should choose a clean place (sans insects, obnoxious odour etc) and pleasant room (Ramya Mata). He then should seat himself in a comfortable yogic posture on a soft (mridu) spread. Then again he meditates intently on Ishwara (Guru).

START WITH PRAYER

One then proceeds to do sankalpa as in any religious activity, mentioning the place and time (Desa, Kaala) for the particular yogic activity,

Adyetyadi Sriparameswara prasada purvakam,
Samaadhi Tatphala Sidhyartam
Assanapurvakam
Pranaayamadin Karishye |

Due to the grace of Lord Parameshwara, I now start the practice of yoga starting with Asanas, and other angas like Pranayama for attaining samadhi and other yoga benefits thereof.

Since Nagaraja is referred to as the deity of yoga, one should utter a suitable prayer and proceed with the practice of Asanas.

During the practice of asanas, when one naturally becomes fatigued, one should remain in Savasanam. If he

feels fresh thereafter, he may continue with Asanas; if still he does not feel upto the mark he is not to proceed with further practice.

Then he should practice a Viparitakarani (It is somewhat between Urdhwaprasritapadasanam and sarvangasanam) where the back of the neck is stretched facilitating the chinlock in later Kumbhakam.

The next step will be to do Achamanam, start that division of yoga called pranayamam. Think then of the great yogis (yogindra) for inspiration and proceed to pranayamam as detailed by Lord Siva in Kurmapuranam.

What form is given in Kurmapuranam? Start with mentally saluting the great yogis with their sishyas and Lord Vinayaka. Then with a calm mind he should contemplate on the Lord (siva). He then sits in siddhasana or (Baddha) Padmaasanam. He then should practice Pranayama accompanied by the great Bandhas at the appropriate stages.

To start with one should do 10 breath controls, then increase it daily by 5 numbers. This should be done until one is in a position to do eighty kumbhakams in one sitting, without any difficulty and with a positive sense of well being (susamahita).

The first pranayama should be Nadisoshanam with the

use of alternate nostrils. It is referred to as Anuloma and viloma by some (They are however differently interpreted by various schools).

A kumbhaka called Surya Bheda with the requisite Bandhas should be practised. It should be followed by Ujjayi, Sitkari, Sitali, Bhastrika and any other pranayama which is well established.

It should be followed by certain mudras, (especially Mahaamudra) as taught by one's preceptor.

Then sitting in Padmasanam, the higher yoga practises as Nadanuchintanam, which is enabled by Shanmukhimudra, should be attempted.

Thereafter one should mentally surrender all the benefits of such practice to the Lord (Iswararpanam or Iswarapranidhanam).

SATWIC FOOD

After practice is over one should bathe in hot water (ushnena vaarinaa). Then the daily duties (nitya karma) done, but briefly.

The above mentioned yoga practice should be repeated at noon time. After some rest, one should have patya (that satwic food mentioned in yogic or ayurvedic texts) lunch, but never those items prohibited. He should, immediately after lunch take cardamom (yelam) cloves or karpura, if desired, betel

leaves (Tambula) without lime, if he practises intensely the praiseworthy Pranayama.

The yogabhyasi should not indulge in frivolous small talks especially with women. After lunch, he should listen to the Puranas, practice namasankirtanam of Ishwara, but preferably research (avalokana) authentic texts of liberation (Mokshashastram) as yoga, samkya, vedanta, etc.

By dusk, he performs the sayam sandhya, but preceded by yogabhyasa as mentioned earlier for over an hour (Trighatika; ghatika=24 minutes).

FOUR TYPES

Well, a devout yogi practices yoga at midnight also as detailed earlier, but without Viparitakaram, which is the case for the evening session as well.

Yoga should not be practised soon after taking food.

The different types of Kumbhakas require some elucidation.

Atha Abhyaseth suryabhedam
Ujjayim chaapi sitalam
Bhastram cha sahita nama
Syaat chatusthayakumbhakah
Bandhatrayena samyukthe
Kevalaprapitikaraha.

— Yogasikhopanisad

There are four types of Kumbhakas, to be practised. Suryabhedam, ujjayi, sitalam and Bhastram, these known

as Sahita Kumbhakas. One should practice them, kevala kumbhaka facilitated by the three Bandhas.

Nadisodhana

Nadisodhanapranayamam is an extremely popular pranayamam which is normally referred to in Vaidic texts and has been described in detail earlier.

Suryabhedha

Suryabhedha kumbhakam requires as usual a proper asanam. Then the inhalation is done slowly and deep through the right nostril. According to Hathayoga, such inhalation and subsequent kumbhaka should induce pranic effect up to the hair follicles and the fingertips. Thereafter one should exhale slowly through the left nostril. The procedure is repeated for a fixed number of times.

Suryabhedha helps to relieve heaviness in the head and sinus (kapaaladosham), the four types of Vaatadosha and other diseases caused by microorganisms (krimidosha). Repeated practice according to Hathayoga and Yogakundalini, is a superior yoga practice. According to yogasikha, it also helps in cases of many abdominal (udare bahurogagham) disorders.

In general, suryabhedha is believed to 'heat up' the

system. Hence persons with low blood pressure, inertia may benefit. Some schools refer to Chandrabhedha, which is just reversing the process and has the effect of helping hypertensive patients.

Sitali

Yet another pranayama called sitali is also quite popular and the procedure followed is as follows:

1) Sit in a comfortable Asana.

2) Curl the tongue into a roll, protrude and inhale through the wet tongue, slowly stretching the neck and dropping the head back in the process.

3) At the end of inhalation, release the curl, fold the tongue and touch the top of the upper palate, touching if possible the urulla. This is called Jihva Bandha. Then stretch the back of the neck, drop the chin to about three inches below the neckpit, forming Kantabandha. After kumbhaka, exhale through alternate nostrils. Repeat wetting the tongue (before inhalation)...the "air conditioning Pranayama." Done on hot days, this helps remove fatigue.

According to Yoga Sikhopanisad, it helps to correct Pittadosha, suppress hunger and thirst. Hatayoga and Kundalini Upanisad attribute

to Sitali other benefits as eradication of disease of spleen (pliha), abdomen (gulma), fever and bodily toxins (vishani).

4) Bhasrika is like Kapala-bhati, except that there is constriction of the glottis as well so that the resounding effect is felt at the throat, nostrils and even upto the skull. The effects are similar to Kapalabhati, but more so for a potential asthmatic, as a preventive and not necessarily as a cure.

Summarising the effects, it may be mentioned that Suryabheda is heat generating. It is energising and contraindicated for hypertensive persons. Bhastrika, Kapalabhati and Nadishodhana maintain equitable heat (or temperature), whereas Sitali, Sitkani and perhaps

Chandrabheda have cooling effects.

For those who go by ayurveda, one may state that Suryabheda controls excess of wind (vata dosha), Ujjayi, plegm (Kapa dosha), Sitali, the bile (pitta dosha) the Bhastrika, kapaalabhati and nadisodhana harmonize.

VEDANTINS VIEW

It is interesting to note that the various terms used in yoga as asana, pranayama, Bandhas etc, have been given an entirely different connotation by certain vedantins. Tejabindupanisad has the following to say about Pranayamam.

Chittadi Sarvabhaveshu
Brahmatwenaiva Bhaavanam.
Nirodhaha Sarwavrithinaam
Pranayamassa uchyate.
Nishedanam Prapanchasya
Rechakakhyatha Sameerithaha
Brahmaivaasmi Ithi ya Vrithihi
Purako vaayuinchyate,

In all chittavrithis (the objective of Patanjala yoga) is Pranayama. To renounce involvement in Prapanchaa or manifest universe is called Rechaka or exhalation, making the mind full with the realization that 'I' am identical with Brahman is called Puraka or Inhalation.

And Further

Tatastadvrithinaischalyam
Kumbhakam Pranasamyamah
Ayanchaapi Prabuddhanam
Agnanam graanapidanam.

That mental state of "I am Brahman" maintained permanently is called kumbhakam (kevala). This is how Pranayama is to be understood by the wise. Mere holding the nostrils is ignorance.

The above stanzas also appear in one of the classic Prakarana grantas of Srimad Sankarcharya, Aparokshanubhuti.

