



This article introduces the concept of Prāṇa and its place in Āyurveda within the three principles or Tridoṣa.

YOGA AND INDIAN THOUGHT

Generally the purpose of Yoga is to bring about a change within the prominence of awareness and its subsequent impact on the attitude and function of the individual.

Whether this change is a yoking of opposites or an unyoking of two aspects, seemingly inseparable, time and a process are involved. Also this notion of change may be initiated within an individual's physical body or emotional responses and mental attitude.

However, within Indian thought there is a concept that is common to the different philosophies and to the different aspects of the individual. This concept is the presence and action of Prāṇa.

Whether we are looking at change on a physical, emotional or mental level we are involved in the flow and movement of the bio-energy called Prāṇa. In fact some Yoga texts, for instance the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, define what Yoga is in relation to what Prāṇa is.

One meaning of the word Haṭha is the conjoining of Prāṇa and Apāna, two primary aspects of Mahāprāṇa.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C2 v47

apānamūrdhvamutthāpya prāṇaṃ kaṅṭhādadhō Nayet I

Raising Apāna upwards and taking Prāṇa downwards from the throat

However, the ultimate intention of Hatha Yoga is to see that Prāṇa eventually only reaches into the one channel known as Suṣumnā. The Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, defines Yoga as the ability to direct Prāṇa into the Susumna Nadi or the fire channel.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C3 v3

*prāṇasya śūnyapadavī tadā rājapathāyate I
tadā cittam nirālambaṃ tadā kālasya vañcanam II
Then Suṣumnā becomes the royal road for Prāṇa.*

Then the mind becomes objectless and free from the past.

As in the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali the importance of channelling the mind is emphasised. Yoga emphasises a close relationship between Prāṇa and mind; if you influence one, it influences the other.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C3 v123

*mārutasya vidhiṃ sarvaṃ manoyuktaṃ samabhyaset I
itaratra na kartavyā manovṛttirmanīṣinā II*

All the practices involving Vāyu (Prāṇa) should be done with a concentrated mind.

(and whilst practising) the Yogi should not allow his mind to wander.

Patañjali Yoga Sūtra II:53

dhārāṇasu ca योग्याता मन्साह I

(Moreover from the practice of Prāṇāyāma) the mind acquires a fitness for Dhārāṇa (concentration).

Also, according to Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā mind follows Prāṇa and Prāṇa can be influenced through the mind.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C2 v2

*cale vāte calaṃ cittam niścale niścalaṃ bhavet I
yogi sthāṇutvamāpnoti tato vāyuṃ nirodhayet II
When the breath is unsteady the mind wanders.*

*But when steady, the Yogi attains the empowerment of stillness.
Therefore the breath should be contained.*

We can see again that Prāṇa, breath and mind are interrelated. Whatever happens in the mind influences the breath.

That is why the pulse rate increases and the breathing becomes faster when we are excited, and why the breathing becomes very deep and the pulse is quiet when we are relaxed. The mind/breath relationship is an evident fact. In Prāṇāyāma breathing practices we use the breath to do something with the mind so that the Prāṇa increases in its intensity.

As an occidental approaching the study of Indian bio-energy systems we can have problems relating these ideas to our own belief systems.

Furthermore, texts like the Yoga Sūtra or Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā presuppose an understanding of what is Prāṇa, from where it originates and how it functions within the individual.

For an understanding of the nature of Prāṇa we must look to other texts such as the Praśna Upaniṣad and Yoga Yājñavalkya.

Āyurveda and Prāṇa

Having previously outlined the concept of the three principles or Doṣa, namely Air, fire and Water, and its constitutional and human characteristics, we can move further into Āyurveda with its view of Prāṇa and its functions within the body.

The basis of Āyurveda is that we are composed of five Bhūta or elements and the mind/spirit complex. The five elements are a physical manifestation of the three basic principles Air or Vāta, Fire or Pitta, and Water or Kapha.

When these three principles are in a relatively proportionate harmony with each other, within the body and with the external environment, then there is well-being.

Well-being is being well, being well means to have an awareness of what is going on within and without. This awareness or force works through contact between the mind, the senses, and the external world. This contact or relationship is the essence of Yoga and Āyurveda because this contact can be a cause for dis-ease or disease because of the way we choose to use or abuse that relationship.

The clarity and strength of this awareness or force is reflected in the clarity or strength of the flow of bio-energy called Prāṇa Śakti (Prāṇa Power).

Prāṇa is the force that keeps us alive and within the body. The stronger or more concentrated the Prāṇa the more alive we are, and therefore have a greater sense of well-being.

Factors such as clarity, understanding and memory as well as the strength and efficient action of the various body functions are dependent upon the power of Prāṇa.

According to Āyurveda the improper use of the mind, senses and body will disturb or diffuse the flow of Prāṇa and therefore affect our sense of well-being and ultimately lead to disease of dis-ease.

Āyurveda aims at maintaining the Prāṇa Śakti because to lose the power of Prāṇa is to lose the power of life. Death in Āyurveda and Yoga is seen as a dispersion of Prāṇa from the body.

This is why both Āyurveda and Yoga say there should be resonance of the movement of Prāṇa throughout all of the channels of the body.

The subtle channels in which Prāṇa flows, if obstructed in any way, cause the obstruction of Prāṇa, and the result is the same as for the disturbance of Vāta or Air principle in its physical channel, ie there is disharmony, disequilibrium and disease.

Health is harmony, disharmony of either the three principles or of Prāṇa means disease. Deranged Prāṇa deranges the principle of Air, Fire and Water. Derange the principles of Air, Fire and Water and you derange the flow of Prāṇa.

This is why Yoga places such emphasis on the clearing of the channels through which Prāṇa flows, and Āyurveda on the harmony between the three principles. Also, both respect and include the other's ideas in working with the refinement of well-being and awareness of the factors that limit it.

The Three Principles or Doṣa and their Functions

Previous articles have looked at the characteristics and “seat” or place of natural concentration of each of the three principles within the body.

We saw that each principle has a primary action and different interactions within the body. This can be summarised in the chart below.

Principle	Guṇa/Quality	Seat	Effect	Force
Vāta/Air	Rajas/Movement	Pelvis	Catabolic	Nervous
Pitta/Fire	Sattva/Light	Abdomen	Metabolic	Digestive
Kapha/Water	Tamas/Obscurity	Chest	Anabolic	Cellular

Taking the above chart as a base, the functions and interaction of each of the three principles can be expanded. Āyurveda tells us that Air, Fire and Water each have five forms governing the various functions of the individual. This can be developed through a further chart, taking each principle in turn.

We can see from the chart below that the three Principles, although having a seat of natural concentration, pervade and interact all over the body.

For example a digestive problem may be due to a problem with too much Air causing the digestive fire to burn too brightly bringing indigestion or heartburn. Or the Fire may be sluggish which could be helped by stimulating the digestive fluids.

Doṣa/Principle	Vāta/Air	Pitta/Fire	Kapha/Water
1.Type	Udāna	Ālocaka	Tarpaka
Location	Head	Eyes	Head
Function	Speech	Vision	Senses
2.Type	Prāṇa	Sādhaka	Avalambaka
Location	Heart	Heart	Lungs
Function	Breath	Memory	Energy in Limbs
3.Type	Samāna	Pācaka	Kledaka
Location	Stomach	Stomach	Stomach
Function	Air for Fire	Digestive Fire	Digestive Fluids
4.Type	Apāna	Rañjaka	Bodhaka
Location	Colon	Liver/Spleen	Tongue
Function	Excretion	Blood Formation	Taste Enzymes
5.Type	Vyāna	Bhrājaka	Śleśaka
Location	Body	Skin	Joints
Function	Circulation	Complexion	Lubrication

We can also see that each principle needs to be strong otherwise a weakness could occur within the part of the body associated with its function. However, this strength must not be over dominant. If this is so then problems occur because it is in excess.

For instance the function of Apāna is the discharge of stools, urine, menstrual fluids, gas, ovum, sperm, foetus. The role of Apāna is to move downwards, an imbalance, aggravation or vitiation reflects in an increase or decrease of its natural tendency. It will become overactive or under active.

This in turn can disturb the other aspects such as Vāta or Air principle. So when Apāna is controlled or balanced this helps to balance the other aspects of the Air principle. Apāna is sometimes called the scavenger of the body, so its efficient function is vital for health.

In Yoga we have postures such as Apānāsana to help balance Apāna. This efficient function of Apāna also reflects in the verse quoted earlier in this article from the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C2 v47, in that the onset of old age is deferred and health maintained by controlling Apāna and Prāṇa.

Summary

The “wholeness” or “intensity” of our bio–energy field is the concern of both Āyurveda and Yoga. Āyurveda concerns itself more with the physiological factors that disturb this wholeness or intensity.

Yoga concerns itself more with the psychological factors that distend our bio–energy field. Each overlaps and regards the two areas as inseparable.

Hence the third axiom of Āyurveda “Whatever affects the mind affects the body and whatever affects the body affects the mind.”

We have seen from this article that the common bond for the mind and body is Prāṇa and the quality of the Prāṇa Śakti or intensity of the bio–energy field is expressed through the breath.

The next article will continue to develop and explore ideas on how Yoga views the nature and purpose of Prāṇa.

The work on Āyurveda will continue in the article after that with the concepts of Dhātu, which assist in the formation of the body structure, and Mala, those waste products produced by the body.

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