

Prāṇa - Its origin, function and malfunction



The phenomena of body energies and their emanating energy field are found recorded within most Asiatic traditions. Both Chinese and Indian thought have a rich textual history of bio-energy, its function and effects of its malfunction.

In each of these traditions a system of medicine evolved aimed at enhancing and sustaining the flow of Ch'i or Prāṇa within the individual and much interest is now being shown in the West in Traditional Chinese and Indian medicine.

The previous article established links between the mind, breath, and Prāṇa but posed the problem of both Yoga and Āyurveda texts presuming knowledge of what Prāṇa is, how it functions within the individual, and what is the role of Yoga and Āyurveda in relation to sustaining the intensity of Prāṇa within the individual health, harmony and, mental stability.

1. So What is Prāṇa?

The word Prāṇa is a Samskrta word meaning "that which is present everywhere". Basically Prāṇa is the sustainer of the macrocosm and the microcosm. Without Prāṇa the universe ceases to have vitality for existence and we cease to be alive as individuals.

It is more commonly translated as the breath of life or life force. Prāṇa is that energy which sustains life within the universe. Within the individual Prāṇa can be seen as the force for life or vitality.

In Yoga and Āyurveda Prāṇa is seen as that energy which gives life. Thus Prāṇa is bio-energy (from the Greek bios-life and energeia-activity).

This is why, within the practice of Yoga, Prāṇāyāma (Prāṇa – life activity plus Āyāma – to extend or to restrain according to the context of extending the flow or restraining the field) is seen as one of the main techniques. Without this means for influencing and sustaining our vitality our efforts at psychological or physiological change could be limited.

2. What is the Origin of Prāṇa?

There are different schools of thought on the origin and nature of Prāṇa. It is seen by some as a product of the material world, by others as a product of the spiritual world. Some say it permeates through all things, whilst some say it is something other than this.

The Vedānta and Hindu view is that God created Puruṣa and Prakṛti.

From this association comes Prāṇa. In the Upaniṣat, which form part of the Hindu canon, there is the idea of God and Prāṇa being everywhere.

We have according to Yoga and Sāṃkhya the idea of Prakṛti as the field and Puruṣa as the seed. When there is a movement that brings the two together or when there is an association between the two, then from this comes Prāṇa. It is like a spark that comes from the contact of Spirit and Matter. Without the two in association Prāṇa does not exist.

Another way that this relationship is expressed is through seeing Puruṣa as the male aspect of creation (the seed) and Prakṛti as the female aspect (the field). There is a coming together of the two, a sort of cosmic big bang you might say, and the child of that union is Prāṇa.

Thus Prāṇa is some sort of force resulting from the conjunction or union of Puruṣa and Prakṛti.

So it is very difficult to ascertain whether it is a product of the Seer or the Seen, or spirit or matter. Consequently it is seen as being more subtle than Prakṛti or its manifestation as the five elements but less subtle than Puruṣa or spirit manifesting as awareness.

From this one can surmise that the source of Prāṇa is from Puruṣa and its expression from Prakṛti. Prāṇa does not come from Prakṛti, it is the association of Puruṣa and Prakṛti that allows Prāṇa to manifest. It's the expression of Puruṣa as a subtle form because of its contact with Prakṛti.

The way Prāṇa is expressed is due to Prakṛti but it does not come from Prakṛti. It is what happens in the realms of Prakṛti that influences this expression of Puruṣa through Prāṇa.

Put simply Prāṇa is the friend of Puruṣa.

3. How Prāṇa functions in the Individual

The presence of Prāṇa is identical in all people.

To quote TKV Desikachar from Religiousness in Yoga Chapter 10:

*"Prāṇa is simply the expression of Purusa
in all parts of the body and beyond.*

*This Prāṇa has an intimate relationship to the mind
because the Purusa sees only through the mind.*

Thus Prāṇa, breath and mind are interrelated."

The viewpoint of Yoga and Āyurveda is very much that of looking at the idea of Prāṇa in relation to the individual. Having said that Prāṇa is present in all people, it does have different characteristics or attributes which influence our feelings, thoughts and modes of action.

Prāṇa is considered very subtle and something other than air. For example, in the Yoga Yājñavalkya we are told that Prāṇa is that which helps us to breathe.

In the individual Prāṇa is said to appear at the moment of conception when the male seed and the female field unite. This force called Prāṇa manifests in the individual as a bio-energy field. The Yoga Yājñavalkya tells us that Prāṇa extends beyond the body. It even gives measurements for this relative to a person's height.

Here the definition of the perfection of Prāṇāyāma is when Prāṇa is concentrated from the beyond of the body to within the body. Prāṇa can be said to be an ideal state when it is equal to or less than the size of the physical body.

The concept of Prāṇa and the individual can be illustrated simply by conceptualising three images:

Firstly that of a bicycle wheel and its surrounding tyre.

This illustrates the extension of Prāṇa beyond the human body by about 10cm all around it. It is said to be the state of Prāṇa in an individual with the usual energetic processes and health.

Secondly by conceptualising a fried egg.

Here we have the notion of the Prāṇa being dispersed and is associated with ill health or mental fatigue or energetic fragility.

It is a state we can recognise when recovering say from the flu and all our facilities and processes are weakened because Prāṇa is in a dispersed state. As our health recovers so the dispersal of Prāṇa reduces from its state of being well beyond the body back to its more usual state of being some 10cm from the body.

The fried egg image may also be applied to situations of being over stressed or in fact more likely over stretched and our field of Prāṇa is dispersed so we are moving around like an energetic version of 'Michelin Man' feeling a lack of space as our field is distended and thus our usual ability to handle stress weakened.

Imagine a couple with both parties in the same state of being. Suddenly the room is unable to handle this distended energetic state and quite literally we are bumping into each other energetically speaking. The resulting complaint is often one of needing space from the other. In this space we take time and the fried egg becomes the bicycle wheel and we are hopefully more able to be around the other more comfortably again.

This example illustrates that this dispersal or distension can be a short term re-action to something or a long term build up that can manifest through or result in mental or physical illness.

We might also speculate around what appear to be recent manifestations of the disease process within auto-immune problems such as chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia as extremes of the fried egg model.

Or even speculate on the notion that the bicycle tyre has been so distended that it blows out and we have a puncture in our Prāṇa.

Finally if we can imagine a cartwheel with its steel rim.

Here we have a situation where the Prāṇa is within the rim of the wheel. Or in Yoga terms the Prāṇa is contained or concentrated within the body.

The primary tool to facilitate this process of moving from bicycle wheel to cartwheel is working with the breath in Prāṇāyāma.

The primary tool to facilitate the process of moving from fried egg to bicycle wheel is working with the breath in Āsana

In Prāṇāyāma we use the breath to influence the mind to influence the intensity of the bio-energy. The previous article gave examples from the texts of the link. To influence the breath influences the mind. Any process that influences the mind influences the flow of Prāṇa.

4. How Prāṇa flows within the body through the Nāḍī

The breath along with Prāṇa appears to radiate out from the centre of our body and beyond.

How Prāṇa moves in the body is said to be through Nāḍī or channels. The Nāḍī can be compared to the meridians in Chinese Acupuncture. It is by these Nāḍī that the field of Prāṇa is dispersed or distended from within to beyond the body. It is through the Nāḍī that one is able to bring about a change in the intensity of the Prāṇa.

Further understanding of the role and function of the Nāḍī comes from the study of the theory of Hatha Yoga and as such is not within the focus of these particular articles.

In Āyurveda the art of reading a person's health through the pulse is called Nāḍī Parikṣa and the word is synonymous with pulse. The intensity and pattern of movement of Prāṇa, and through it the reading of the Tri Doṣa or Three Principles, can be felt from the pulse.

5. The root of the Nāḍī and the place of Kuṇḍalinī

The Nāḍī appear to emanate fibre-like from the centre of our body; this centre is called the Kanda which means trunk. Various Hatha texts give descriptions of its position and shape. There is a posture, very difficult for Western bodies, called Kaṇḍāsana, where the soles of the feet are placed against the abdomen or place of Kanda.

It is at the root Kanda that the symbolic Kuṇḍalinī resides blocking the entrance to the main Nāḍī in the body, the Kuṇḍalinī envelops the Kanda living off our actions, particularly those arising from misunderstanding or Avidyā.

Through Yoga it is possible to do something to the Kuṇḍalinī so it no longer blocks the flow of Prāṇa into the main Nāḍī called Suṣumnā.

The third chapter of the Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā goes into the detail of Kuṇḍalinī and how it blocks the Suṣumnā.

Prāṇāyāma helps to reduce the obstacles that block the flow of Prāṇa to all parts of the body, hence the use of breathing techniques such as Nāḍī Śodhana or channel clearing.

Kuṇḍalinī blocks Prāṇa from entering the Suṣumṇā. When the Kuṇḍalinī is moved Prāṇa naturally enters Suṣumṇā.

Tena Kuṇḍalinī Tasyāḥ Suṣumṇāyā Mukhaṃ Dhruvam |
Jahāti Tasmāt Prāṇo'Yaṃ Suṣumṇāṃ Vrajati Svataḥ ||

*"By this (previous practices) the Kuṇḍalinī
leaves the entrance of the Suṣumṇā at once,
and consequently Prāṇa enters the Suṣumṇā of itself."*

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā – Chapter III Verse 111

Suṣumṇā is like a conductor through which energy flows. This energy is the same energy that is always present, namely Prāṇa.

Further understanding of the role and function of the Suṣumṇā and Kuṇḍalinī comes from the study of the theory of Haṭha Yoga and as such is not within the focus of these particular articles.

To summarise both the Yoga Yājñavalkya and the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā define the word Yogi as "one whose Prāṇa is within the body". If Prāṇa is not within the body and able to flow freely everywhere, then one is not a Yogi.

It is interesting to note here that according to this definition a Yogi will have no visible energy field but will possibly exhibit an intensity from the concentration of the field of Prāṇa.

6. Prāṇa and the Disease Process

It is this free flow of Prāṇa that is integral to the health or well being of the individual. Tradition tells us that an unsteady person or one who is confused has more Prāṇa beyond the body than within it.

The measure of Prāṇa beyond the body is more when we are not at ease or at dis-ease, and therefore the concentration of Prāṇa within the body decreases in quality.

The measure or extent of Prāṇa beyond the body when we are quiet is less. When Prāṇa has difficulty in entering our body it is because something is there that shouldn't be. The Yoga Sūtra calls that which blocks our well-being Kleśa or that which afflicts us. Its origins arise from a subtle state of illusion know as Avidyā. It is also known in Haṭha Yoga as Mala or dust or dirt (physical and mental).

So the more a person is in a state of ease the more the Prāṇa is within the body, the more a person is in a state of dis-ease or disturbed the

more the Prāṇa is scattered. There are times for all of us when our energy feels scattered due to internal or external situations.

This is why T Krishnamacharya in his Yoga Rahasya tells us:

"Where there are problems in the body use Āsana,

where there are problems in the mind use Prāṇāyāma."

This is why Yoga looks at Prāṇa at the level of Āsana and Prāṇāyāma in order to influence the flow of Prāṇa in the body. We can use Āsana to explore the breath and use Prāṇāyāma to experience the breath.

So what are the factors that disturb or scatter the intensity of flow of Prāṇa in the individual? In life our actions often disturb the mind and increase the measure of Prāṇa outside the body. In a child the Prāṇa tends to be as concentrated in its energy field as for the Yogi.

In a person with disease or illness the energy field is weakened or scattered. This has been already described with the bicycle tyre and fried egg examples or 'Michelin Man' examples.

The way the Prāṇa is diffused or interrupted in its flow is due to changes in the flow of Prakṛti. It is what happens in the realm of Prakṛti that influences Prāṇa. The child has a good bio-energy field; however, as they grow up so the Prāṇa diffuses and becomes less concentrated. This is because of the formation of unhelpful Samskāra or tendencies. The Samskāra condition us to certain modes of being and can cause blockages or holding patterns on a mental, emotional, or physical level and thus interfere with a balanced flow of bio-energy.

Samskāra may be present at birth from genetic history known as Vāsaṇa, or formed from family, social and environmental life patterns. There are always positive and negative influences and these bring about certain patterns that will affect us in later life. These patterns are then compounded by our own actions with regard to food, social relationships, sexual activity, work, family relationships, social activities, etc.

If there are problems in these areas then this will reflect in our bio-energy perhaps causing blockages, holding patterns, excess flow in one or more areas or a deficit in one or more areas. It is these disturbances in the Prāṇa that lay the foundation for disease or disturbance later in life.

This is why both Āyurveda and Yoga maintain that disease, when present at the level of the body, is also present at the level of mind. This means that body is only part of the problem, we have to do something at a deeper level. We might remove a problem physically but the dis-ease is still present at the level of the mind.

According to Patañjali in his Yoga Sūtra dis-ease that is not potentially active in the mind is not in the body. So the purpose of Yoga is to reduce the potential for disease at the level of the mind as well as the level of the body. Furthermore Patañjali tells us that not only is the disease in the mind but also the power to work with our relationship with how it manifests is in the mind.

The mind can convert the impact of disease. So the idea is not to kill the diseased mind but to change it.

This is why the Yoga Sūtra is a study of the faculties of the mind and its potential or power for influencing the outcome and effects of our actions. So Āsana, Prānāyāma, Mudrā, Dhyānam and other tools are the means by which the mind becomes a powerful ally. Power is when the mind is free of the effects, though not necessarily the presence of disease.

As we mature we encounter other difficulties that affect our bio-energy. For instance we become involved in worldly distraction, with the mind tending to be drawn out. We adopt unhealthy living patterns with regard to food and sleep. We use social and medical drugs. We accumulate tensions through excess pressure with work or family commitments.

The body isn't as efficient in sustaining or self-repair as it was when it was younger. Through these Prāṇa is diffused and becomes less concentrated. This is why during the middle years particular emphasis should be placed on maintaining and refining our Prānāyāma practice to help balance the effects of the life patterns we are involved in. We can minimise the effects of this diffusion by the daily practice of Prānāyāma.

The Yoga Sūtra tells us in Chapter II Sūtra 52 that as we practise Prānāyāma more and more of the covering within the mind around awareness is reduced and there is clarity or a state of awareness naturally arises. It is like comparing the reduction of cloud covering the sun. Reduce the cloud and the sun emerges.

With this awareness comes an understanding of these factors that exacerbate negative effects, and from this point a sense of anticipation can develop to work with those problems which effect our vitality adversely.

This is the premise of Patañjali in Chapter Two verse 16:

Heyam Duhkham Anāgatam ||

"Experiences that constrict the heart are likely to occur

and should be anticipated wherever possible."

7. Summary

This article intended to introduce Prāṇa, its origin, function and malfunction. However, Prāṇa is such an important part of Yoga and Āyurveda that this issue concentrated on presenting some basic ideas on its relationship to the individual, to the practice of Yoga and to the understanding of life known as Āyurveda.

Furthermore Prāṇāyāma is seen as the highest means for reducing blockages in the physical and mental processes This means Prāṇāyāma works at the both the mental level of the three Guna and the physio/energetic level of the three Doṣa. The three principles of Air, Fire and Water take their direction from Prāṇa.

This is why Yoga is the extension of Āyurveda beyond the body. But the work with Prāṇāyāma must be accompanied by an inquiry into food and other influences. Its effects can be seen from reading the pulse or Nāḍī and the pulse is an important tool for diagnosis for the Āyurveda practitioner.

The quality of Prāṇa affects our well being. The factors that affect Prāṇa include food, attitude, and environment. These are areas of enquiry for both Yoga and Āyurveda in the quest for a more harmonious life.

Prāṇa is the source of vitality and action. A change in the quality of action through food, exercise, attitude, environment, etc. means a change in the quality of mind. For instance foodwise it might be helpful to reflect on such as the potential of junk food in diffusing Prāṇa, whereas simpler natural food can support a natural intensification of Prāṇa.

Thus the quality of food also helps to determine the quality of Prāṇa and thus impacts on the relative harmony or chaos of the energetic and mental processes of body and mind.