



Prāṇāyāma – Where to Start? Part Four

In the previous three articles in this series we discussed Krishnamacharya's teachings around his understanding of and approach to the viniyoga or application of Prāṇāyāma.

Firstly in terms of Āsana being the starting point for exploring the breath in order to set a starting point and as a guideline for the direction of our Prāṇāyāma.

Secondly the importance of considerations around Prāṇāyāma as a process in terms of being in it for the long haul, rather than only looking at practices which offer immediate fruits after a single practice or class.

The second post also commented on the need to leave more than enough time during our Yoga practice for Prāṇāyāma, rather than it being the token twiddle at the end of the practice.

The third post developed this idea of making time for the practice of Prāṇāyāma by considering the need to add a fixed and consistent time slot within which to build content. We explored this question by looking at the relationship between Āsana and Prāṇāyāma and considered the relationship between the proportions of the time we devote to each.

In this and the next post we will look at some of the techniques that are considered a necessary prerequisite in our journey towards establishing a what would be seen by my teachers as a complete Prāṇāyāma practice.

Firstly we need to have established a seat. The criteria for what would be considered a seat are based around the trunk being erect rather than prioritising what we do with our lower limbs. In other words the main priority is the vertical axis with regard to our spine being upright and without any supports. The secondary priority is the horizontal axis with regard to how we position our legs.

At this juncture one may ask the question around 'can we not practice Prāṇāyāma lying down?'. In response I would offer an anecdote from my first 121 lesson with TKV Desikachar in his home in Madras (as it was called then) in 1979.

He asked me to show him my personal practice and, having come from a generalised group class mentality that pervaded in the UK at that time, I lay down ere to commencing starting with standing Āsana. He asked me a question which has stuck with me ever since, saying "Are you sick?" to which I replied no, so he then said why start lying?

The ensuing discussion then opened my eyes to a number of considerations around what had previously been an automatic choice and expectation as to this being the best way to start an Āsana practice.

So coming back to the question of establishing a seat, there may be specific circumstances whereby we offer a student a practice which includes lying and working just with the breath, but these would be within the context of Yoga Cikitsā or Yoga as a therapy.

Though using such a position because the person's capacity at that time is limited will also mean a compromise of certain techniques, along with limitations in the ability to use the spine and ribs fully. Thus even here the direction is to work towards getting the person off the ground as quickly as is appropriate to their health and potential.

Furthermore when it comes to considering the first priority in that the spine needs to be upright, there are many choices as to what we do with the legs. For example we can sit in a variety of cross legged positions, with or without the support of a block or cushion under the backside.

Or we can sit on the heels or on a stool to keep the weight off the legs, often a valid choice for tight hipped Westerners. Though with this position my teacher discussed certain small compromises around the position of the lower back and its impact on the use of the abdomen. However at the beginning level we are discussing these are not relevant.

Or anyone can usually sit on a stool or chair, though from a more traditional viewpoint the legs would be crossed at the ankles. The reason being is that a common denominator amongst all the choices for seated poses is that the soles of the feet are not in contact with the ground. Here some padding under the ankles may be helpful. This position also creates a Bhāvana or feeling that this is a different position from the more usual chair based activities.

So we have forged a commitment to giving time to exploring this art and to considering a seat appropriate to our starting point. The next post in this series will look at further techniques that need to be in place to guide our focus and skill in remaining present as we practice.

From there we can consider how we can add content to that window in terms what to actually do with the length of the breath and the relationship between the inhale and exhale. In other words a suggestion for a starting point for our first steps with 5' of Prāṇāyāma practice.