



PRANA

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF PRANA AND ITS SUBTLE QUALITIES IN YOGA PRACTICE

YTTC Yoga Project by OXANA WEBER, JULY 2017

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If you type the question 'what is prana?' into the google search, it will offer the following definition:

prana
'/pra:nə/

Noun **HINDUISM**
noun: **prana**

breath, considered as a life-giving force.

"prana is seen as a universal energy which flows in currents in and around the body"

Wikipedia offers us the following explanation of prana:

*"In Hindu philosophy including yoga, Indian medicine, and martial arts, **prana** (प्राण, prāṇa; the Sanskrit word for "life force" or "vital principle")^[1] is all cosmic energy, permeating the Universe on all levels. Prana is often referred to as the "life force" or "life energy". It also includes energies present in inanimate objects. In the literature, prana is sometimes described as originating from the Sun and connecting the elements of the Universe.^[2] This life energy has been vividly invoked and described in the ancient Vedas and Upanishads.*

In living beings, this universal energy is considered responsible for all bodily functions through five types of prana, collectively known as the five vāyus. Ayurveda, tantra and Tibetan medicine all describe praṇā vāyu as the basic vāyu from which all the other vāyus arise. Indologist Georg Feuerstein explains "The Chinese call it chi, the Polynesians mana, the Amerindians orenda, and the ancient Germans od. It is an all-pervasive 'organic' energy." (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopaedia, 2017).

In this project I will explore the concept of Prana through examination of some important ancient Hindu & yogic texts as well as the texts from other cultures. I will explore the five movements of prana (the five vayus) and look at the practical application of these pranic concepts in a standard yoga class. We will also explore practices and yogic concepts which aim to increase and/or manipulate the flow of prana in our body, looking at the potential benefits that this may bring to our human development and spiritual evolution.

Prana - the Ancient Hindu Perspective & the Vedas

The ancient concept of prana is described in many early Hindu texts, such as the Upanishads and Vedas. One of the earliest references to prana is from the 3,000-year-old *Chandogya Upanishad*, but many other Upanishads also make use of the concept, including the Katha, Mundaka and Prashna Upanishads. The Prashna Upanishad in particular elaborates extensively on the pranic concept.

The structure of Prashna Upanishad is based on six seekers approaching the sage Pippalada one by one to ask him a basic question in relation to Reality. This allows the sage to immerse his listeners in a process of creation, or "the emanation of the world's innumerable forms from the divine" (Eknath Easwaran, 1987). The first answer Pippalada gives explains the principle of consciousness and matter (prana and rayi) and the dual nature of reality based on these two principles. Pippalada describes prana as the sun and rayi as the moon. He further elaborates in his answer to the first question that those who follow the path of the moon (rayi/matter) are destined to be reborn but those who follow the path of the sun (prana/consciousness) and immerse themselves in self-discipline, wisdom and faith become "free from the cycle of birth and death" (Prashna Upanishad, v10). As Pippalada continues we learn that the sun, within this concept, is considered to be the "prana of the universe" (Prashna Upanishad, v7), the life giver to all creation.

The importance of prana is described in more detail in Pippalada's answer to the second question – *what powers support this body?* Pippalada tells the story of all the collective powers of space, air, fire, water, speech, mind, vision and hearing, the components of the physical body, boasting about their importance in supporting the body. They did not believe in prana's importance so, prana, described as the 'vital energy supreme over them all', conducted a test in which she left the body. As soon as this happened, all other powers knew that they had to leave too. Thus, prana, according to Upanishands, is the most important aspect without which life cannot exist within the body.

Over and over, throughout the Upanishads, prana is described as the vital force behind all existence, as immortality itself.

Pranic concept in other cultures

China

The Chinese principle of QI, is strikingly similar to the Vedic principle. In Chinese culture Qi is described as vital energy which governs all life and likened to the flow of energy around and through the body, forming a cohesive and functioning unit. Ancient Chinese believed that by understanding the rhythm and flow of qi they could guide exercises and treatments to provide stability and longevity. Early Chinese philosophy refers to qi as necessary to activity, stating that it could be controlled by a well-integrated willpower. When properly nurtured, this qi was said to be "capable of extending beyond the human body to reach throughout the universe" (Lau, D. C. (2003). *Mencius* (Revised ed.). Hong Kong: Chinese University Press). However, not only human beings and animals were believed to have qi. One of the ancient Chinese texts, Zhuangzi, indicates that wind is the qi of the Earth (Watson, Burton (2013). *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press). Moreover, the cosmic yin and yang (the duality principles) were described as "the greatest of qi". The text further states that "human beings are born [because of] the accumulation of qi. When it accumulates there is life. When it dissipates there is death... There is one qi that connects and pervades everything in the world." (Watson, Burton (2013). *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press).

Polynesia, Hawaii & Tahiti

Likewise, in Polynesian culture MANA was considered a sacred impersonal force existing in the universe. It is considered that to have mana is to have influence and authority, and efficacy—the power to perform in a given situation. This essential quality of mana is not limited to persons – people, governments, places and inanimate objects can possess mana. Polynesians believe that there are two ways to obtain mana: through birth and through warfare.

In Hawaiian and Tahitian culture, Mana is a form of a spiritual energy and also healing power which can exist in places, objects and persons. It is the Hawaiian belief that there is a chance to gain mana and lose mana in everything that a person does. It is also the Hawaiian/Tahitian belief that mana is an external as well as an internal thing. Certain sites in the Hawaiian Islands and the archipelagos of French Polynesia (Tahiti) are believed to possess strong mana. The Hawaiian way of thinking is that nature has a dualistic relationship and that everything in the world has a counterpart.

Europe

In the West, a 16 century scientist, Dr. Carl (Karl) Ludwig von Reichenbach, a notable chemist and philosopher, had dedicated his last years to a research into a field of energy combining electricity, magnetism and heat, emanating from all living things, which he called the Odic Force (Od Force). This research initially stemmed out of his interest in pathology of the human nervous system leading to the discovery of the Od force. The Od force was named after the Old Norse god Odin, the "all transcending one," and the old Norse word "voda" which means "*I go quickly...! I stream forth*". Od was seen to dance and glide in spectacular beauty when it flowed along magnets and crystals. Dr Von Reichenbach declared that this force permeates all things and that the Odic streams "flowed on eternally" through the Earth and along the light that streams from the Sun, Moon, and stars. The scientific experiments used to discover this force involved the use of special darkrooms that were connected to wires that would conduct Od from plates that collected the force from the Sun or Moon. Minerals, magnets and crystals were brought into the darkroom via special rotating tables that permitted no light to enter. Various displays of Odic force manifested themselves during these sessions, elaborate descriptions of which are to be found in his writings. In his further studies Dr Von Reichenbach had also utilised 'sensitives' for his research. During his early work with Somnambulism he was introduced to the idea of 'sensitives'; his idea was that sleepwalkers are sensitive or allergic to something being carried in on the moonlight, an Odic agitation. This experience opened his mind to the possibility of humans sensing the Odic force. It was also later discovered that it may be possible for everyone to participate in this knowledge and indeed Dr Von Reichenbach himself had developed sensitivity to the Od force as he progressed with his experiments.

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy and a pioneer in spiritual science, advanced the idea even further with his theory of the ether or four etheric forces linked with the four elements of fire, air, water and earth. Steiner believed that all human beings had senses that could perceive the ethers, and that especially through initiation and mental discipline these senses could be awakened. This important idea is paralleled to yogic science in my opinion: that the mind may also be trained to see the Odic force/prana through a gradual awakening of the senses. (https://borderlandsciences.org/journal/vol/56-8/v56-1/Borges_Odic_Observations.html)

What is Prana?

In his book '*Prana and Pranayama*' Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati explains that thousands of years ago, the yogis living in the shadow of the Himalayas realised the inherent quality of motion and creation, which they called prana. The word 'prana' is often translated as 'energy' or 'vital force', however Swami Niranjanananda states that neither definition offer a precise equivalent of the Sanskrit term that emerged from the highest states of contemplation. The word prana assumes the quality of 'livingness' and from the yogic point of view, the entire cosmos is alive, throbbing with prana.

Prana is described as the sum total of all energy that is manifest in the universe, all the forces in nature and powers which are hidden in men and which lie everywhere around us. If there is no prana, there would be no existence. Therefore, all beings, whether living or non-living, exist only due to prana. Further, every manifestation in creation forms part of a never-ending matrix of energy particles, arranged in different densities, combinations and variations. Prana may be in a static or a dynamic state and is found in all forms, from the highest to the lowest.

Prana is the simplest and the most profound concept realised by the seers. Whatever moves or has life is but an expression or manifestation of prana. It is prana that pumps the blood from the heart into the arteries or blood vessels. Through prana digestion, excretion and secretion take place. It is because of prana that the wind blows and the rivers flow. It is because of prana that the airplanes, cars and trains move. Heat, light, electricity, magnetism are all manifestations of prana. Prana is behind both static and dynamic states of matter. In fact, within the yogic concept, every object in creation is floating in the vast, all-encompassing flow of prana and receiving everything they need from it. As it is stated in the Katha Upanishad: "*This whole world – whatever there is – vibrates having originated from prana*" (*Katha Upanishad, 2:3:2*). This cosmic prana is called *mahaprana* and it came into being at the time of creation.

Pranic Manifestation – The Universal Prana – Macrocosm

Mahashakti, mahaprana, cosmic creatix, Cosmic Mother.

To explain how prana manifested it is necessary to examine the yogic perspective on the process of creation. The realisation of cosmic creation was perceived by the seers in the deepest states of meditation. It is described in detail in the ancient Hindu and tantric texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads.

At the very beginning, there was nothing, not even creation. The only thing that existed was an all-pervasive, unmanifest consciousness, known in the scriptures as *Para Brahman*. It contained within it all the qualities

and components necessary for creation. The whole universe lay infinitely contracted within it as a mere potency, with prana completely absorbed within it. Out of this stillness manifested a movement. Tantric and Vedic literature indicate that this movement manifested out of desire: *Ekoham bahusyam* – “I am one, let me become many”. The desire was the first creative impulse resulting in ‘willing’. The willing of the unmanifest consciousness causes a vibration (*spandan*) causing the energy to awaken and emerge. It is this movement that is considered to be the first movement of becoming from being, the first manifestation of prana. Prior to this, prana was never separate from consciousness - it existed eternally as a potential within consciousness. But now it has become separate and thus the interaction between the energy and consciousness began. It is this interaction, or the cosmic play, *lila*, which caused creation. The awakening of mahaprana was like a self-projection of the ‘I-ness’ of the infinite consciousness which allowed the unchanging consciousness to experience itself through the movement of prana.

As the interaction between prana and consciousness, *chitta*, continued, different levels of existence began to manifest: being and matter, elements and energies, light and dark, positive and negative, animate and inanimate, male and female. The many subtleties of prana and *chitta* (consciousness) are the ladders of all spiritual practices with the ultimate goal being the attainment of the state of realisation that all that exists **is** pure consciousness, a process of going back to the ‘source’.

"When prana moves, chitta (consciousness) moves. When prana is without movement, chitta is without movement." Hatha Yoga Pradipika (2:2)

Both prana and consciousness must be present for life to exist. Two are interconnected: consciousness is being, awareness, knowledge; prana is becoming, manifestation through motion. Consciousness is a dormant experience whereas prana is the active principle of the manifest energy. Together, they are the two eternal principles which form basis of the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Individual Prana – Obtaining prana

"Prana is the greatest friend, prana is the greatest companion. ... there is no closer friend in this universe than prana." Shiva Swarodaya (v. 219)

The amount of prana in each individual is indicated by the power of the personality, which reflects one’s natural capacity to use prana. It is a well-known fact that some individuals appear to be more alluring than others and this is due to the level of their prana. The Prashna Upanishad explains that prana springs from the atman (soul) and is inseparable from the self as the shadow from one who casts it (*Prashna Upanishad, 3:3*). Everyone is born with a certain amount of prana. However, the quantity

and quality of it change continuously. It is said that positive thoughts, higher feelings and yogic practices generate higher levels of prana. In fact, a yogi stores an abundance of prana within him, in the same way as a battery stores electricity (Prana and Pranayama, Bihar School, 2013). The megawatts of his prana radiate strength, energy, providing prana to everyone who comes into contact with him. Swami Sivananda had said that *"Just as water flows from one vessel to another, prana flows like a steady current from a developed yogi towards weak person."*

Prana is also obtained from the external environment, from food, water, sun and air. Further, as all the elements around us are comprised of prana, the amount of prana within each individual is influenced by the quantity and quality of prana to which that individual is exposed and which he ingests in the course of everyday life.

Pranic value of food: The Bhagavad Gita refers to the quality of prana in different foods as *sattwic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic* (17:8-10).

In recent times, between 1930 and 1940, the Frenchman and expert on electromagnetism André Simoneton (gravely ill and without hope of recovery who regained his health with vegetarianism) conducted a research into the vibrational qualities of food. By using scientific equipment he was able to measure the amount of electromagnetic waves in food and then categorise them according to these waves.

On the basis of his findings, Simoneton divided food into four general categories. On a scale of zero to 10,000 angstroms, Simoneton found that to remain in perfect health the human vibration must be around 6,500 angstrom. He regarded the foods that had wavelengths between this and 10,000 angstroms, to be of the highest quality and value.

In this first category are fruits and fruit juices obtained from squeezing; fresh vegetables and fruit - raw or cooked at the temperature below 70 degrees; flour and whole grain bread; olive oil, almonds, sunflower seeds, coconuts, soy, peanuts and hazelnuts; ocean fish and shellfish. He also discovered that some food are superior only when consumed at the time of production, like milk, butter and eggs.

In the second category, with radiations 6.500 thousand to 3,000 angstroms, are the vegetables cooked in boiling water, milk, butter, eggs (not freshly laid), honey, cooked fish, peanut oil, sugar cane and wine.

The third category, with very weak radiations below 3,000 angstroms, is comprised of cooked meats, sausages, coffee, tea, chocolate, jams, processed cheeses and white bread.

The fourth category exhibits practically no energy and includes margarine, conserves, alcoholic spirits, refined white sugar and bleached flour.

Simoneton's research provides strong support for those who advocate a vegetarian diet based on whole grains and fresh vegetables, because these foods are the most abundant of life force.

Wheat, for example, has a value of 8.5 thousand angstroms which rises to 9,000 when it's cooked. Vegetables are most radiant when fresh from the garden, losing about one third of their potency by the time they reach the shops, and another third when cooked. The potato, for instance, is measured at only 2,000 when raw, but when boiled this shoots to 7,000 and to 9,000 when baked. The emanations of legumes (dhal) - peas, beans, lentils, etc. - are lessened by drying but register a hearty 7,000 to 8,000 when fresh.

Meat has only second class vibrations at best, and this sinks to low in the third category by the time it is cooked. The exception is freshly cured ham which is enhanced by the process of salting and smoking. Sea foods must be eaten raw to gain their full value, otherwise they drop into the second category. Furthermore, according to Simoneton's research, the effects of food processing are disastrous. For example milk has a value of 6.5000 *angstroms* when fresh, but loses ninety percent within twenty-four hours. After pasteurisation there are no bioenergy radiations at all. Likewise for over cooked vegetables. This research substantiates the recurrent yogic advice to maintain purity of diet, especially when practicing pranayama.

Pranic value of air: The quality of air one breathes affects one's energy level directly. The exhilaration and vitality experienced near a waterfall or high in the mountains is because the quantum of prana in the air is significantly higher in these places. On the other hand, when one is exposed to air pollution, the energy level quickly begins to decline. Modern science has explained this phenomenon in terms of ions, charged particles in the air that are formed when enough energy acts on a gaseous molecule to eject an electron. The ions may be negative or positive and are the component of the air one breathes. When one inhales negative ions, they increase the level of prana in the body and the opposite is experienced on the inhalation of positive ions. For example, in the closed room inside the city there may be less than 50 negative ions per square foot in comparison with 5,000 found in the mountains. It is now an established scientific fact (Prana and Pranayama, Bihar School, 2013) that depletion of negative ions leads to discomfort, enervation, lassitude and some degree of mental and physical inefficiency. Negative ions are considered therapeutic because they kill germs and accelerate the blood's delivery of oxygen to cells and tissues. It has also been observed that the ability to assimilate negative ions goes up during yogic practiced such as pranayama. However, prana is not received solely from

external sources; it is also self-generated and its quality can be refined and directed.

Working with prana: In human body, the breath is considered to be the external manifestation of prana. The yogis state that prana is sustained and the duration of life is prolonged by deliberately decreasing the distance of the exhaled air. The yogis also state that the brain utilises the maximum amount of prana. In fact, if the brain is not supplied with sufficient prana, the mind becomes restless and disturbed and constantly dives into negative thoughts. The example of this can be irritability caused by one being ill or hungry, when the quantum of prana in the body has decreased and the brain circuits protesting the lack.

Yogis believe that one must work with *prana shakti*, force of prana, in order to perfect life experience. The yogic practices of pranayama and prana vidya aim to both enhance and direct prana by using breath. Although the breath is gross and prana is subtle, the two are intrinsically connected and one can influence the level of prana Shakti in the body with the help of the breath. Moreover, when prana is influenced through modification of the breath, all the functions of the body, brain, mind and consciousness are affected. The practices of pranayama raise the levels of prana by working with the breath and lead to *prana vidya*, inner knowledge of experience of prana. A significant outcome of pranic awareness is that one is able to gain control over the mind (Prana and Pranayama, Bihar School, 2913, p. 17). When prana moves, the mind thinks and the senses perceive their respective objects. Hence by developing sensitivity to prana, one becomes more aware of the subtle forces in the mind, which arise in the form of thoughts, feelings, emotions, responses, impressions, symbols and knowledge.

As one works with prana on improving its quantum and quality, the dormant areas of the brain awaken. However, just a few rounds of pranayama performed in a hurry will not achieve this. Sustained practice with deep concentration, acute awareness and unshakeable faith are required in order to achieve this.

Cosmic prana: The individual prana within each being is a part of the cosmic sea of mahaprana, but until this truth is realised experientially, one sees oneself separate from the rest of the universe. Hence pranayama practices activate the individual prana and raise it to a higher frequency. The pranayama practice generate a certain amount of heat, or creative force, in the body and this in turn influences the existing quantum of prana, which makes its way up to ajna chakra, the psychic centre in the midbrain. By using the practice of prana vidya one can then direct prana to the different parts of the body.

As one continues their prana sadhana with dedication and awareness, it reaches a higher level and the amount of heat generated within the

system becomes more intense. This leads ajna chakra to transmit a message back to mooladhara chakra, the psychic centre located at the perineum. *Kundalini* energy, the abode of the cosmic prana in the human body, is located in that area where it lies dormant until this process of awakening takes place. When the full potential of this energy is released, it travels up through the sushumna nadi, bringing about a complete transformation in the individual. Cosmic prana and kundalinity are synonymous terms. In awakening the kundalini, one unites with the cosmic prana. This experience of awakening leads to an explosion of *satya*, a moment of Truth, when one sees everything as luminous and experiences oneself in every object of the universe, every person, leaf and rock. The experience of separation dissolves. The ultimate yoga is experienced at this level, where one discovers the abiding consciousness, *sat-chit-ananda*, truth, expansiveness and beatitude (Prana and Pranayama, Bihar School, 2013, p.19).

Pancha Kosha: Vital Sheaths

According to yoga, a human being is capable of experiencing five dimensions of existence, which are called *pancha kosha* or five sheaths. These are the five spheres in which the human being lives at any given moment and they range from gross to subtle. The pancha kosha are: i). Annamaya kosha – the physical body, ii). Pranamaya kosha – the energetic body, iii). Manomaya kosha – mental dimension, iv). Vinjanamaya kosha – psychic experience and v). anandamaya kosha – bliss/ transcendental body. These five progressively subtle bodies are described in the Taittiriya Upanishad:

"Human beings consist of a material body built from the food they eat. Those who care for this body are nourished by the universe itself.

"Inside this is another body made of life energy. It fills the physical body and takes its shape. Those who treat this vital force as divine experience excellent health and longevity because this energy is the source of physical life.

"Within the vital force is yet another body, this one made of thought energy. It fills the two denser bodies and has the same shape. Those who understand and control the mental body are no longer afflicted by fear.

"Deeper still lies another body comprised of intellect. It permeates the three denser bodies and assumes the same form. Those who establish their awareness here free themselves from unhealthy thoughts and actions, and develop the self-control necessary to achieve their goals.

"Hidden inside it is yet a subtler body, composed of pure joy. It pervades the other bodies and shares the same shape. It is experienced as happiness, delight, and bliss."

(Taittiriya Upanishad, The Upanishads, Eknath Easwaran, 1987, p.143)

The five sheaths are interlinked and pervaded by prana, which nourishes and sustains them. The movement from one kosha to another is also achieved with the help of prana. The aim of a yoga aspirant is to attain higher levels of consciousness by piercing through the levels of kosha and all yogic practices facilitate that. The shatkarmas, for example, directly influence annamaya kosha and allow the consciousness to penetrate to the next level, pranamaya kosha, by freeing the flow of prana. The asanas have a similar influence, clearing the blockages in the annamaya kosha hence influencing the pranamaya kosha. Pranayama practices have a direct influence on the pranamaya kosha and indirect influence on the manomaya kosha. In the West we associate our routine mental state with the brain, but according to yoga the entire nervous system (including the

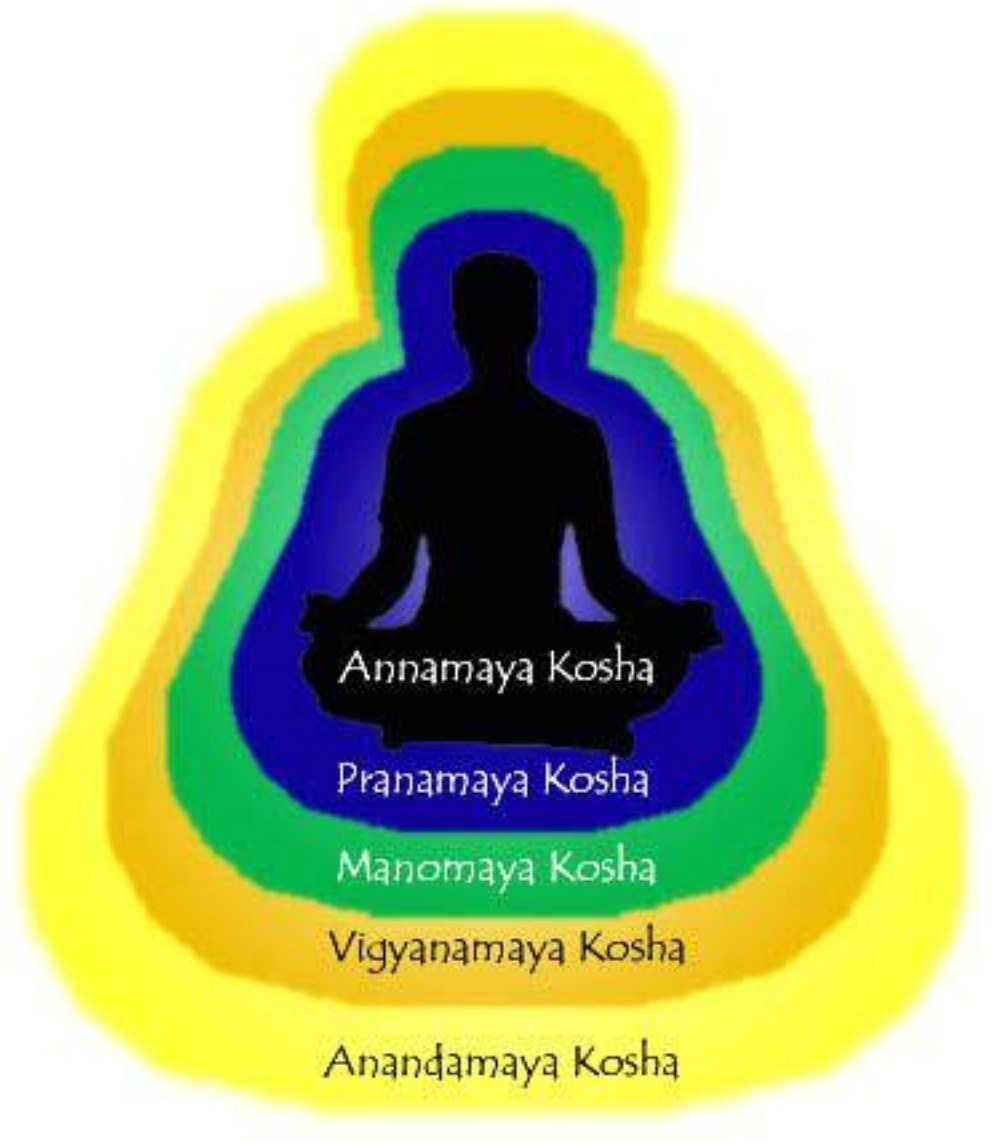
brain) merely mediates the activity of the manomaya kosha, expressing the commands of this higher energy state through the physical body. The health of the manomaya kosha is enhanced through the practice of mantra meditation. This soothes and balances this inner body, and helps release “knots” of energy tied up in mental complexes and obsessive thoughts. Yogis who spend a great deal of time in meditation often have very little need for sleep, in part because their mental vehicles are functioning optimally, like a car that’s just had a tune-up.

Purification of the first three sheaths leads to the penetration of the fourth sheath, vijnanamaya kosha, the sheath of intuition. The practices that help develop the vijnanamaya kosha are the yamas and niyamas, commitments every yoga student is asked to make: not to harm, lie, steal, overindulge, or desire more than you actually need. Instead the qualities of contentment, purity, self-discipline and devotion are to be developed. Jnana yoga also works with this kosha. This is the path of the intellect in which you are advised to study spiritual truths, contemplate them deeply, and finally incorporate them into the very core of your personality. On this path, your spiritual understanding becomes the “food” with which you nourish your intellect. The practice of meditation performed consistently also enhances the ability to connect with the inner guidance, leads to greater intuitive insight and greater willpower.

In the vast majority of humans, the fifth sheath – anandamaya kosha, is totally underdeveloped. The anandamaya kosha is extremely important in yoga because it is the final and thinnest veil standing between our ordinary awareness and our higher Self. We can awaken our bliss sheath through three practices. The first is seva, selfless service. This opens our heart to our innate unity with other beings. The second is bhakti yoga, devotion to God. This opens our heart to our unity with the all-pervading Divine Being. The third is samadhi, intensely focused meditation, which opens our heart to our own divine being.

Kosha consciousness: It is advised that the yogic practices that one selects are based on the major kosha in which the consciousness rests. The different levels of consciousness represented by the koshas relate to i). body, ii). life, iii). mind, iv). psyche and v). self, and each practitioner belongs to one category predominantly depending on his or her evolution. Therefore, if the consciousness is mainly in annamaya kosha then one will identify strongly with the body, if the consciousness is in the pranamaya kosha then one will identify with power and vitality and if the consciousness is in manomaya kosha then one will identify with the analytical mind. When the consciousness evolves further, to the level of vijnamaya kosha, then one acquires clarity of cognition based on intuitive intelligence. He begins to see all experiences in the light of the psyche assuming a deeper significance to that which is apparent. It is in this dimension one begins to experience the subtle, expressive nature of the

higher consciousness. The one who identifies with the anandamaya kosha is a yogi, the one who has evolved to the spiritual realm, where all experiences are spiritual experiences.



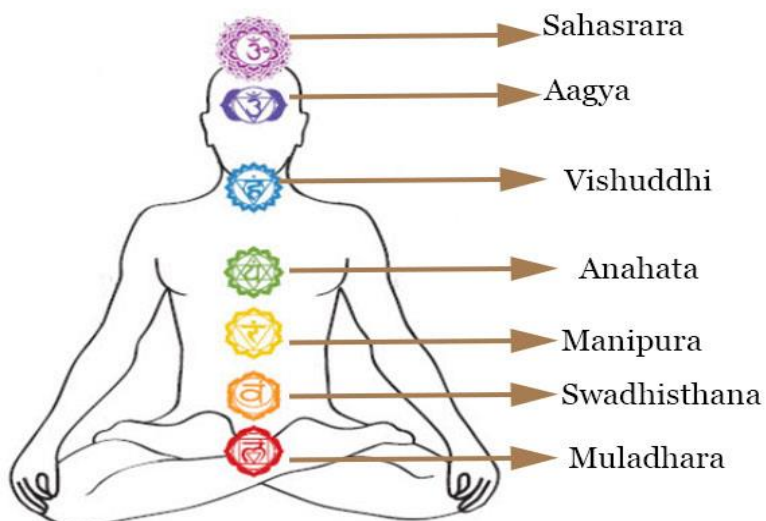
Chakras: Energy Vortices

The pranic body is fuelled by the *chakras*, or psychic centres, which are subtle, high-powered vortices of energy in the energy body. They receive and store the cosmic prana, and act as transformers to step down the level of energy, so that it can be used by the different organs and parts of the body. They also act as 'switches' for illuminating the higher faculties and dimensions of consciousness. The chakras have been discovered by yogis, rishis and sages of various traditions in India and throughout the world. To this end, the kundalini yoga is concerned with the awakening of the chakras.

The main six chakras are located along the spinal column and they are: mooladhara, swadhisthana, manipura, anahata, vishuddhi and ajna. Although these centres are situated in the subtle body, they correspond to the nerve plexuses in the gross body. Beyond the six are two other centres of awakening: bindu and sahasrara, whose perception is acquired only at significantly evolved states of consciousness.

Each chakra vibrates at a particular rate and velocity. The chakras at the lowest point of the energy circuit operate at a lower frequency. They are grosser and create grosser states of awareness. Chakras at the top of the circuit operate at a higher frequency and are responsible for higher intelligence and subtler states of awareness. The different systems of yoga, especially hatha and kriya yoga, systematically purify, rebalance and awaken the chakras individually and also as a whole. When the chakras are properly prepared by such practices, the prana level is higher and more stable, and there is little difficulty in awakening and experiencing the transmission of prana.

7 Chakras in Human Body

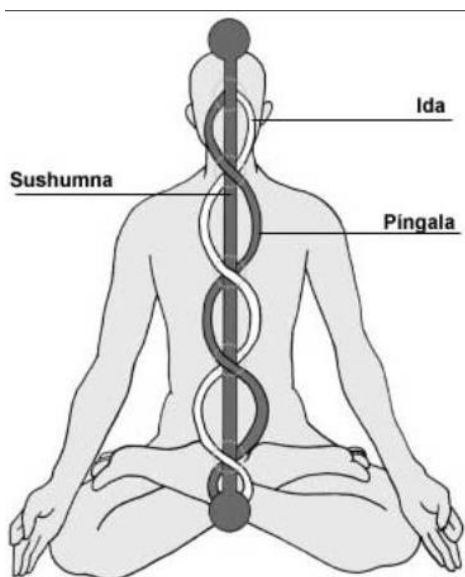


Nadis: Channels of Prana

The word *nadi* means 'flow'. Nadis are energy channels through which prana streams. It is generally considered that within the human body there is a subtle and perfect network of thousands of nadis, which include all the major and minor flows of energy in the body, and out of these, 72,000 nadis are considered to be major. On the physical level the nadis correspond to the nervous system, but their influence extends beyond this to the astral and spiritual planes of our existence. If all the nadis are functioning correctly then we are healthy and generally feel happy.

Among the nadis, three nadis are of special importance - IDĀ, PINGALĀ and SUSHUMNĀ.

- IDĀ arises in the left side of the body and represents the moon principle
- PINGALĀ begins on the right side of the body and symbolises the sun principle.
- SUSHUMNĀ runs through the central channel of the spinal cord and represents the consciousness.



On the physical level PINGALĀ has its counterpart in the Parasympathetic Nervous System, IDĀ in the Sympathetic Nervous System, and SUSHUMNĀ in the Central Nervous System.

The moon symbolises the mind with its changeable feelings, whereas the sun represents the intellect. Just as our emotions and thoughts change constantly, the moon is also constantly changing its form. The intellect,

however, is a stable and constant principle like the sun. Only when harmony and balance prevail between the moon system and sun system are we healthy and capable of developing further mentally and spiritually.

The nadis are activated and harmonised through breath. In pranayama and prana vidya the practitioner works mainly with Ida, Pingala and Sushumna as these three channels govern the whole system of the nadis and all the body processes. For example, when we breathe through the left nostril in Prānāyāma we activate the Idā Nādī. The Idā Nādī cools, quietens and refreshes body and mind like the silvery light of the moon. Pingalā Nādī, however, which is influenced by breathing through the right nostril has a warming and activating influence, in the same way as sunshine warms the earth and stimulates the growth of vegetation. The Nadi Shodhana is an example of this type of practice. (Appendix 2).

Idā and Pingalā begin in the brain at approximately the level of the Pituitary Gland. Idā has an effect on the right side of the brain whilst Pingalā influences the left hemisphere. To maintain balance both Nādīs run in a snake-like course from one side of the body to the other. At the points where they cross they also meet with the central Nādī, Sushumnā. At those places where the power and radiance of the sun and moon meet, together with the strengthening effect of the Sushumnā, the CHAKRAS form.

Other terms for Idā, Pingalā and Sushumnā are GANGĀ, YAMUNĀ and SARASVATĪ. These are the names of the three holiest rivers in India. Gangā and Yamunā flow on the surface but Sarasvatī flows underground. It rises to the surface only once every twelve years. This event happens in conjunction with a particular planetary constellation and is known as the KUMBHA MELĀ. This great spiritual festival of India held at the confluence of these three rivers (Sangam) is attended by millions of people who come to attain liberation from their Karmas and the cycle of rebirth by bathing in the sacred waters. But for the Yogi the three main Nādīs are the "divine rivers" and the Āgyā Chakra (the eyebrow centre) where these Nādīs meet is the holy place of pilgrimage where the Yogi attains liberation.

Just as the mysterious river, Sarasvatī, only rarely appears, the Sushumnā Nādī is only active for certain short periods of time (for example, at dawn and dusk). When the three main Nādīs unite only one stream of consciousness flows – the spiritual energy of the Sushumnā Nādī. The energy also flows through this Nādī in deep meditation and in Samādhī. For as long as the Sushumnā is inactive we are plagued by constantly changing CHITTA VRITTIS – thoughts, emotions, worries, etc. But once the Sushumnā begins to flow the waves of the mind come to rest and we "bathe" in the bliss of divine consciousness.

Purification of the pranic body: All yogic practices purify the prana, but pranayama is considered the principal among these. In the *Yoga Sutrās* (2.52) sage Patanjali states, "Thence the covering of the light is destroyed", with reference to the effects of pranayama. This covering is the residue of *tamas* and *rajas*, and through pranayama the *sattvic* nature of the *chitta* becomes apparent. *Tamas* and *Rajas* exist in the form of blockages in the *nadis*. These blockages may be caused by disease, tension, accumulation of impurities, negative thoughts or *samskaras*, mental subconscious and unconscious patterns. Just as the *nadis* are not physical but pranic entities, the blockages too are pranic and may be experienced, but not quantified.

The thoughts and *vrittis*, mental formations and modifications, exist in the mind and consciousness as energy waves. Therefore, they influence the energy patterns in the *nadis* directly and inherently. If the thoughts are left unchecked, the energy system will be depleted over time. In this way, the negative thought patterns and *vrittis* are reinforced and the mind is weakened. For this reason, it is difficult to free oneself of obsessions and *samskaras*. For example, indulging in an experience of arrogance will create a block in the *manipura/anahata* region and the network of *nadis* there. A tendency to hold back will create a block in the *anahata/vishuddhi* region. These blockages in the *nadis* often manifest as disease in the *annamaya kosha*. On the other hand, even if the disease has been caused by purely physical circumstances, it will be transmitted to the pranic and physical realms as well. The *nadis* in that region will become weak and the network of flows will begin to bypass that region. Hence that region will be depleted of energy and will become weaker and weaker.

During the practice of pranayama, especially *nadi shodhana*, as one takes slow breaths, the prana is forced to flow through the blocked areas and through the entire system of *nadis*. Therefore, the process of pranayama restores the energy circuits and strengthens the weak areas, clearing the energetic blockages.

Awakening of prana: The evolution of a human being depends on the awakening of the prana shakti, as much as it depends on optimum health of the body. The awakening of prana takes place when the *nadis* flow regularly, rhythmically and continuously, and no blockages or physiological discomfort is encountered in the breathing process. This stage is known as *pranottahana*, awakening of the *pranas*, more specifically of *ida* and *pingala*. This process subsequently facilitates the awakening of the *sushumna nadi*. The awakening of the *sushumna nadi* is considered to be the most important event in pranayama, *kriya* and *kundalini yoga*. In fact, the practice of pranayama begins with the awakening of this *sushumna nadi* due to the expansion of the pranic field that takes place.

Only after the pranas have awakened, the practitioner is ready to undertake the practice of prana vidya. The adept yogi can withdraw prana from any area of the body, so that it becomes unaffected by heat, cold or any other sensations. Furthermore, one can learn to use the cosmic energy, which is freely available to all, to create further changes in the patterns of the body, mind and consciousness.

प्राणायाम

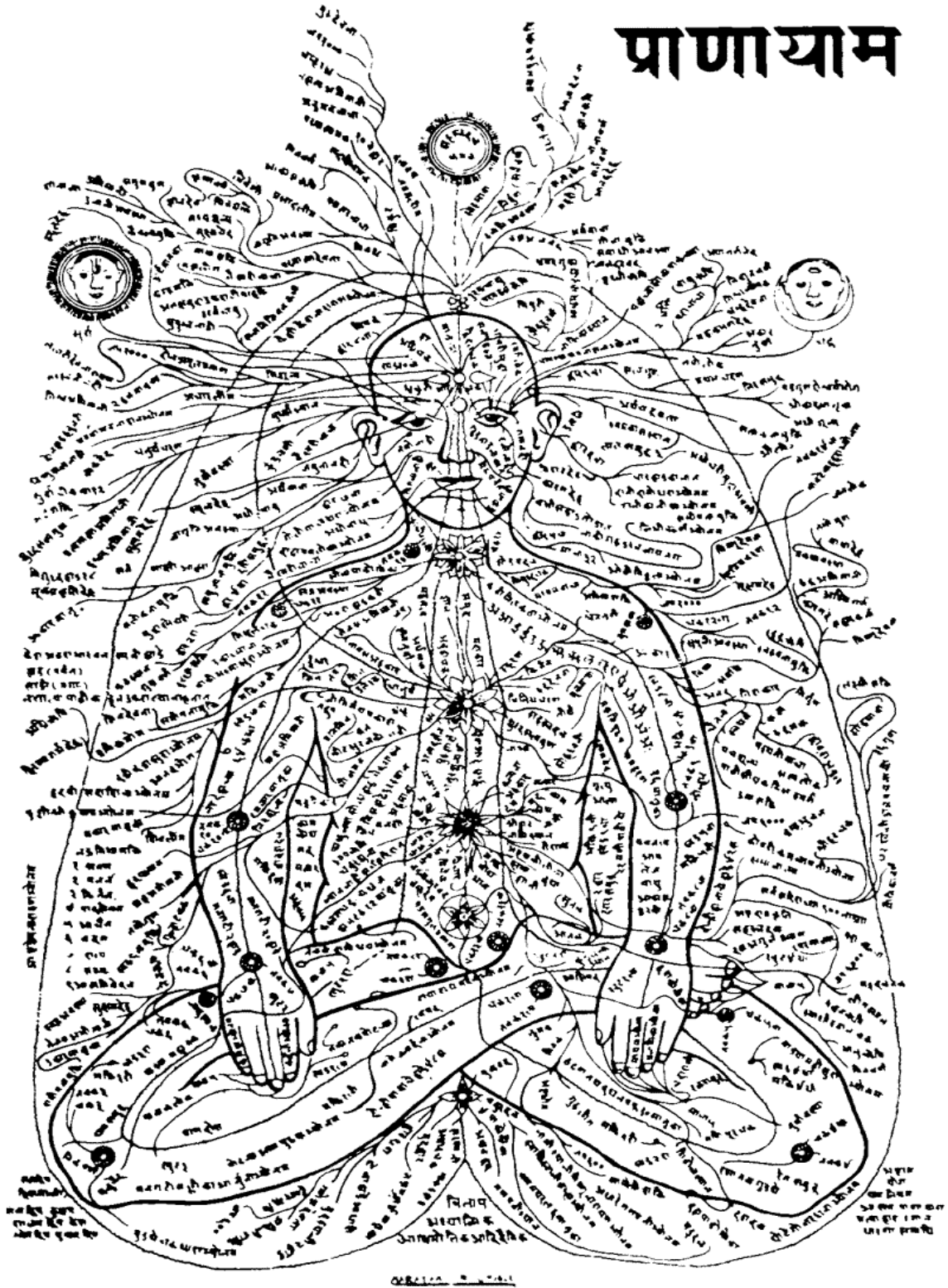


Illustration showing the nadis and the major and minor chakras

(from David V. Tansley, *Subtle Body - Essence and Shadow*, (1977, Art and Imagination Series, Thames and Hudson, London) In that book this illustration is labelled "The nadis, diagram, Tibet", but the writing is sanskrit not Tibetan, and both the artistic style and also the arrangement of the chakras is Indian).

Pancha Prana: Pranic Force Fields

According to yogic science, there are five primary forces, known as *pancha prana*, which operate in the physical body at all times. Prana Shakti, the one sustaining force, assumes these five fields to enable the body to accomplish its various actions. The prana is therefore experienced differently in different parts of the body simultaneously. These five forces also act on subtle levels, influencing and in turn being influenced by the mind and consciousness. The seers identified these five pranas as prana, apana, samana, udana and vyana. These pranas are also known as *prana vayus* (winds). The five Vayus of prana all have very subtle yet distinct energetic qualities, including specific functions and directions of flow. The yogis were able to control and cultivate these Vayus by simply bringing their focus and awareness to them. Through this conscious control and cultivation, they were not only able to create optimal health and well-being, but were able to activate the primordial Kundalini energy to obtain states of enlightened Samadhi. The five pranas maintain the balance between the physical and mental levels.

PRANA vayu is responsible for the INTAKE. It moves downward and inward, providing the basic energy that drives us in life. It is primarily located in the head, lungs and heart. Imbalances in Prana flow can show up as anxiety, fear, anger (head); breathlessness, asthma, sleep apnea (lungs); heart palpitations or stroke (heart).

Some of the ways to keep your Prana vayu in balance include:

- Emphasis on Inhalation (to encourage taking things in)
- Prana Breath (IN: Pull the energy in through the sensory openings in the head (nose, eyes, ears, third eye); hold a moment; EX: Release the energy through the third eye)
- "Positive impressions": contact with nature, visualizations, rituals
- Sensory therapies: colors, sounds, aromas
- Meditation generates prana in the mind
- Wherever space and stillness is created, prana flows.

APANA vayu is responsible for elimination. It moves down and out and also helps retain things in. It is primarily located in the lower abdomen and is associated with functions of elimination, reproduction and bone health (regulating the absorption and retaining of minerals). Imbalances in Apana flow can show up as constipation/diarrhea, IBS; menstrual problems, sexual issues; bone density issues.

Some of the ways to keep your Apana vayu in balance include:

- Focus on Exhalation and Suspension of breath (holding after exhale)

- Apana Breath (IN: Pull the energy into the belly EX: Direct the energy from the belly into the feet/ground; hold the air out for a moment. Attention at the root chakra)
- Mula Bandha – like contraction of pelvic floor muscles
- Nourishing foods, less junk

Vedas say: “Mortals eat food with Apana, while the gods eat food with Prana” (mortals are the physical tissues; the immortals are the senses that receive nourishment directly through the sense openings in the head). While the right food sustains Apana, right impressions are required to feed Prana. As we grow spiritually we must learn to take in more prana to feed the spiritual powers within us. We need to control Apana, particularly the sexual function, not to drain vital energy downward.

Apana, which is aligned with the force of gravity, moves downward resulting in disease, aging, death and the diminution of consciousness. Prana, which is aligned with the air and space elements, disperses upward through the mind and senses. This leads to loss of mind-body coordination and devitalization. Uniting these two primary vayus results in strengthening our energy along with awakening our higher faculties. Yogic practices work to raise Apana up to unite with Prana and draw Prana down to unite with Apana, which occurs in the region of the navel – the pranic center of the body.

SAMANA vayu is responsible for processing things and moves toward the center in a churning motion. It is concentrated around the navel. It is responsible for digestion on all levels, including the mind. It is associated with processes of digestion, absorption and assimilation. Imbalances in Samana vayu function include metabolism issues, poor digestion, bloating, loss of appetite.

To get Samana vayu back on track you might try:

- Focus on Exhalation with abdominal contraction
- Suspension of breath (hold after Exhale)
- Progressive abdominal contraction (Zip-up)
- Uddiyana Bandha-like practices
- Samana breath (IN: Imagine pulling the energy in toward your belly EX: Contract the abdomen, imagine the energy becoming more concentrated; hold contraction for a moment.)
- Kapalhati (to stimulate agni)
- Quality food, fasting

VYANA vayu is responsible for distribution. It moves outward in a circular, pulsating motion. It is located in the heart and lungs and is involved in cardiac activity, circulation and voluntary nervous system. Imbalances may show up as poor circulation, blocked arteries, heart attack, edema; peripheral neuropathy, symptoms of MS.

Practices that benefit Vyana vayu include:

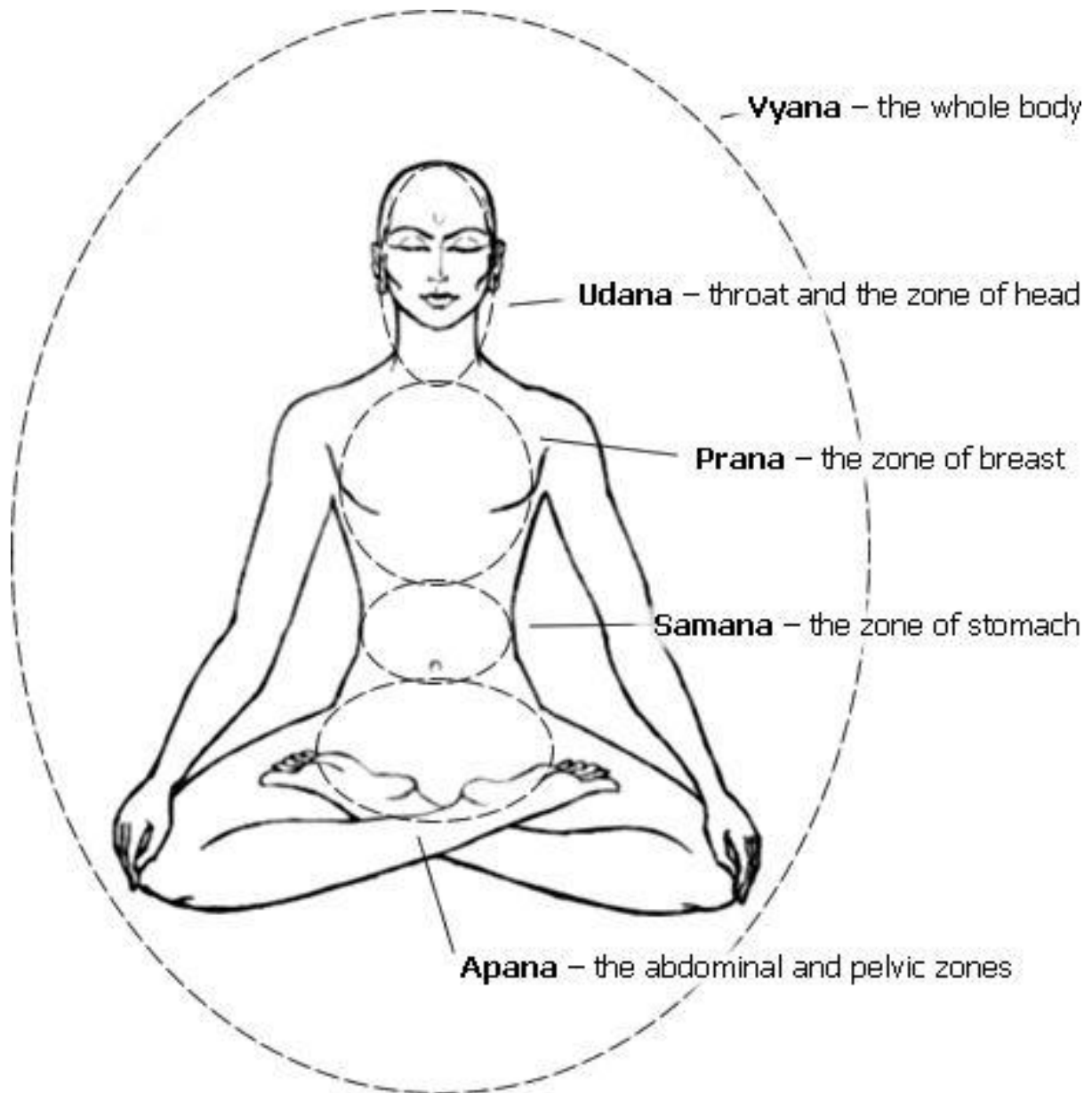
- Focus on Inhalation and expansion
- Retention of breath (hold after Inhale)
- Vyana Breath (Place the hands on your chest.
IN: Bring the arms out, expanding from the center out into the periphery, filling up the lungs; hold 2 seconds; EX: Place the hands back on your chest. Keep your focus at the heart center)
- Using asanas as prana pumps
- Heart opening routines
- Prayer, ritual
- Any activities that give you joy, touch your heart

Vyana and Samana vayus are opposite as forces of expansion and contraction. Vyana allows for differentiation of elements and grants each their separate sphere of activity. Samana brings about the integration of the elements and keeps them connected. Samana regulates agni (digestive fire) with fuel, which must burn evenly. Vyana governs the movement of prana through the nadis, keeping them open, clear, clean and even in their functioning.

UDANA vayu is responsible for growth. It moves upward and is a result of other vayus working properly. It governs our ability to stand, our speech, effort, enthusiasm and will. It is concentrated near the diaphragm and throat and is responsible for certain respiratory functions, speech and mental functioning (by supporting the blood movement to the brain). Imbalances in Udana vayu functioning include asthma, emphysema; stuttering, voice hoarseness; depression, poor memory, lack of creativity, direction or goals.

To help with Udana vayu functioning you can try:

- Focus on Exhalation, particularly diaphragmatic breathing
- Udana Breath (IN: Breathe in through the mouth, attention at the throat chakra EX: Chant OM)
- Chanting
- Jalandhara Bandha-like movements
- Working with all other Vayus



Conclusion

Yoga is a system focussed primarily on awakening and ascending the prana up so that pure yoga (unity) with the Higher Self can be achieved by the practitioner. By studying and working with prana, one can learn to increase the amount of prana in their body and direct it for spiritual purposes and improvement of mental and physical health and general well-being.

Oxana Weber, July 2017

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