



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Ayurveda

SIGNIFICANCE OF PRANAYAMA IN HEALING

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ABSTRACT

Prana means the life force or energy and *aayama* means regulation or control. So, it means pranayama is the regulation of the life force or energy by controlling or manipulating the breath. Mind and prana directly influence each other and the integrity of both is thus the key to vibrant health. It has been proved by the scientists that the disturbances in the mind interferes with the prana and pranic body and the yoga on the other hand says that changes in the pranic body induce the corresponding changes in the mind. As mind is directly related to the breath because our breathing pattern alters with the state of mind, so, by actually controlling or manipulating the breath, we are able to control the mind and regulate the prana. These breathing exercises could prevent and cure conditions which involve disruption of homeostatic state of autonomic nervous systems such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

INTRODUCTION

What is prana

The word prana is merely understood as the air we inhale during breathing or simply as breath but it is not sufficient and it has a broader meaning. It has been known by the yogis throughout the ages and is not a new thing for the present generation or the scientifically inclined persons. After reviewing the details of meaning of prana in the ancient scriptures it is stated that prana is the active energy behind any kind of existence. That's why when somebody is dead it is generally said that prana has gone. Modern science also states that the matter itself actually is nothing but expression of energy [1]. According to religious aspect also, if we see in ancient literature -

Shatpatha Brahmana -- Prana is the body of self (supreme consciousness) "means the prana is the universal energy prevailing all through the cosmos and is actually the medium or vehicle of consciousness.

Chhandogya upanishad says—Prana is the internal matrix and *vayu* is the external matrix of energy. Means prana is the internal energy at more subtle level and the air is the gross energy as seen or depicted superficially.

Thus Prana is *the universal energy or the basic substance of infinite cosmos which forms the basic and active aspect of existence and is the medium or vehicle of consciousness. In short, prana is the life force.*

The concept of pranic body helps to further understand the idea of prana.

The Pranic Body Or Pranamaya Kosha

The ancient sages knew well about the pranic body and it has been stated at various places by them that permeating and surrounding the physical body is an energy body which is known as pranamaya kosha or literally the sheath of prana. Man is linked to the whole universe through this pranic body. [2]

According to physiologists there are several types of energies within the body like nervous energy, heat, biochemical energy which helps in different types of functions in the body. These energy allow all the different organs, nerves and muscles to operate and communicate with the brain. Yoga on the other hand says that the principle energy behind all these energies is actually the prana.

According to yoga behind the gross body is a subtle body consisting of chakras and nadis nourished actually by prana. The fixed pathways called nadis are for the flow of prana energy which

forms the pranamaya kosha. These nadis are different than those explained by physiologists as they carry prana which is a subtle energy. This subtle energy or prana thus by stimulating the chakras nourish the various organs and organ systems of the body.

In Chinese concept of universal energy, Prana is called 'ki'. They considered that whole universe is permeated with this energy or is a powerhouse and each of us is intimately linked to the universe by this energy. The Chinese concept of acupuncture is actually based on this energy which is present at specific points in the body and flow in specific pathways at a subtle level which are activated by this technique to promote healing by facilitating the flow of prana. So, throughout the literature the idea of prana as a universal energy is appreciated.

Scientific evidence in support of pranic body

Existence of pranic body has been revealed by a number of people time to time but no one took much notice of them. However, in 1935 a renowned professor of Neuroanatomy at Yale university in America, called Dr. Harold Burr announced the existence of this energy sheath enveloping all human, animals and even the plants and all the organic matter. He called it as electrodynamic field which regulates the functions of the physical form, controls growth, shape and decay of all cells, tissues and organs. Further studies in the same university showed an intimate link between the mind and this pranic body and it was seen that the disturbances in the mind interfered with the pranic body.

Pranayama and its significance

Prana means the life force or energy and *aayama* means regulation or control. So, it means pranayama is the regulation of the life force or energy by controlling or manipulating the breath. The whole universe is prevailed by prana and so for the body to be in perfect harmony, a continuous flow of prana is required from the surroundings to the body.

It has been proved by the scientists that the disturbances in the mind interferes with the prana and pranic body and the yoga on the other hand says that changes in the pranic body induce the corresponding changes in the mind. It means the mind and prana directly influence each other and the integrity of both is thus the key to vibrant health. In other words, a healthy mind and body allows the free flow of prana in the system like a well tuned radio which carry the required signals from the surroundings or the source.

As mind is directly related to the breath because our breathing pattern alters with the state of mind, so, by actually controlling or manipulating the breath, we are able to control the mind and regulate the prana. Enrichment of breathing techniques leads to

rhythmic respiration and the practitioner attains a calm, yet alert state of mind [3]

So, the ultimate significance of pranayama lies in tuning the body and mind to a higher state of sensitivity so as to enable them to pick up this cosmic subtle energy called prana thereby nourishing the pranic body or pranamaya kosha which is actually responsible for the normal physiological functioning of the body.

Healing through pranayam

Pranayama is an integral component of holistic yoga therapy schedule and involves slowing down of the normal breathing rate along with an awareness based, conscious inner focus on the respiration. There are enough evidences and researches to prove that the practicing of pranayama has beneficial effect on the body at the physiological level.

Pranayama increases life span and maintains health by the practice of prolonging and shortening the breath cycle.[4] This is because respiratory impulses, one of the main channels of the flow of the autonomic nerve currents are controlled by pranayama. These breathing exercises could prevent and cure conditions which involve disruption of homeostatic state of autonomic nervous systems such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Normal rhythmic breathing also tends to reduce the intensity of psychosomatic ailments.

Pranayama improved lung functions in numerous studies. There was found statistically significant increase in pulmonary functions following pranayama thereby proving the efficacy of pranayama in curing the respiratory diseases [5].

Study has also been made on the subject that breathing exclusively through one nostril may alter the autonomic functions [6]. Practicing 'left nostril Pranayama' showed a reduction in sympathetic nervous system activity and was found helpful in inducing overall body relaxation. The 'right nostril pranayama' group showed a significant increase in baseline oxygen consumption and increase in metabolism due to increased sympathetic discharge to the adrenal medulla. These results suggested that breathing selectively through either nostril could have a marked activating effect or a relaxing effect on the sympathetic nervous system and accordingly metabolism can be controlled.

One study on slow pace bhastrika pranayam revealed that both the systolic and diastolic blood pressure decreased significantly with a slight fall in heart rate by practicing it for just 5 minutes. It shows that pranayama has a strong tendency to improve the autonomic nervous system through enhanced activation of the parasympathetic system [7]. One more study on bhrumari pranayama proved that it improves the cardiovascular parameters through parasympathetic dominance in adolescents and it can be practiced routinely for the reduction of stress induced cardiovascular risk in their future [8].

Slow, deep, pranayama-based breathing training has also been shown to be effective in reducing blood pressure and heart rate in hypertensive patients within five minutes of the practice. This may be due to a normalization of autonomic cardiovascular rhythms as a result of decreased sympathetic activity [9].

So, the significance of prana and its regulation by pranayama can be well understood in terms of energy healing to make the body system not only disease free but to lead a healthy and vibrant life. In today's stress prone world rather it has become so important for everybody to understand the concept of prana and to bring it in practical use for not only to keep the physical body fit but also for the mental and social well being.

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