

When exploring the meaning of a yogic concept it is always beneficial to start by looking at the translation of the Sanskrit word, i.e. it's etymological root, and we must remember that in Sanskrit there are often different roots that can apply to the same word – leading to a variety of meanings that can tell us something of the character of the concept.

For Prana there are two translations we can immediately explore:

1. Prana can be translated as **'constant motion'** where 'pra' means 'constant' and 'na' means 'movement' denoting its main quality of constant movement or vibration.

Here we can think in terms of prana as being Spanda Shakti, the Divine Pulsation, which is the creative power of the universe, the power of Consciousness itself, where vibration underpins all which is manifest or unmanifest; this is something that has certainly been more recently borne out in quantum theory where everything, including seemingly solid objects, has been shown to be waves of vibratory energy excited to different frequencies. Indeed, you could say we exist in a sea of prana and each and everything exists as a whirlpool within that sea!

"All that vibrates in the universe is Prana; heat, light, gravity, magnetism, vigour, power, vitality, electricity, life and spirit are all forms of Prana. It is potent in all beings and non- beings and a prime mover of all activity. This self-energizing force is the principle of life and consciousness. It is the creation of all beings in the Universe. All beings are born through it and live by it, and when they die their individual breath dissolves into the cosmic breath. Prana is the hub of the wheel of life. Everything is established in it. It permeates life, creating the sun, the moon, the clouds, the wind, the rain, the earth; all forms of matter are permeated by it. It is both being (sat) and non-being (asat). Therefore, each and every thing including man takes shelter under it. Prana is the source of all knowledge and a unique energy."

Sri Swami Satchidananda Yoga Today Magazine July 2001

2. Prana can also be translated as **'before the breath'** where 'pra' means 'before' and 'ana' means 'breath' highlighting how prana is the life force or vital force bringing life to each of us, sitting behind the formation & animation of the body/mind/senses and all of our activities.

"The name prana is Sanskrit; it means before (pra) breath (ana). Prana is neutral; it is pure energy without any qualities. This pure energy can take on any quality without losing its purity; just as by putting on clothes, we associate with a style of dress, still we remain the same person."

Atreya Smith, Prana: the Secret of Yogic Healing page 3

This can remind us that prana is considered to be both prior to and to have given rise to all name and form, i.e. to all of manifest creation, including ourselves. Interestingly in yoga in this same vein, name & form (nama & rupa) also refer to the limiting factors of Time & Space within which we function through our body, mind & senses.

And to take this a little further... in yogic philosophy it is sound which is considered to be the primary creative factor, with the word OM at the very centre of yoga philosophy & practice as the primordial sound emanating as the seed of creation and pervading all of existence, and here we should remember that sound is essentially vibration within akasha or space. This can remind us that in most religious traditions we can find a reference to Sound as being the primary causative factor of creation such as we find in the famous verse from John 1.1 in the Bible where it states "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Prana & prana

A good way to conceptualize Prana is to think of Prana with a capital 'P' as being the undifferentiated power and energy of the universe, with prana with a small 'p' as being all the manifested differentiated forces of prana.

"Prana is undifferentiated universal energy, while prana is the differentiated energy revealed in every possible form. Magnetism is a manifestation of Prana, so are electricity and gravitation. Everything in the universe that moves is a manifestation of Prana; thanks to Prana the wind blows, the earth trembles, an axe falls, an aeroplane takes off, a star explodes, a philosopher thinks. We exist in an ocean of Prana where every living thing is a vortex. Yoga affirms that what characterizes life is its ability to attract Prana to itself, to store it up and transform it for influence upon both the inner and outer world [...] According to the yogis, it is present in the air, yet it is neither oxygen, nor nitrogen, nor any other chemical constituent of the atmosphere. Prana exists in our food, water, sunlight, but it is neither vitamin nor warmth nor ultraviolet rays. Air, water, food, sunlight: all convey the prana on which all animal and vegetable life depends. Prana penetrates the whole body, even where the air cannot reach. Prana is our true nourishment, for without prana there can be no life. Vitality itself is no more than a special and subtle form of prana, which fills the whole universe. To make itself manifest on the material plane the spirit uses prana to animate the body and its organs.....[The Rishis] proclaim – and this forms the very basis of yoga – that prana can be stored in the nervous system, more particularly at the solar plexus. Furthermore, they emphasize this cardinal and essential idea that yoga gives us the power, through thought, of directing the current of prana at will. Yoga thus gives us conscious and voluntary access to the very source of life."

Andre Van Lysbeth, Pranayama: The Yoga of Breathing p10

In all of the recent great civilizations this all pervasive force has been recognised, for instance in Ancient Egypt 'Prana' was known as 'Ka', in Japan as 'Ki', and in China as 'Chi'. Indeed we can see that in all indigenous societies there has always traditionally been an animistic view of the world, with a special word always given to denote the 'Life Force', as the same spiritual force pervading and ensouling all of reality. In this way although the word used varies from tribe to tribe they universally shared a deep respect for Nature and a sense of being directly connected to Life and all of it's multitude of manifestations, from rocks, to rivers to plants and animals.

A brief definition of Prana:

If we are looking for a brief definition of 'Prana' then according to the glossary of the Upanishads, as translated by Eknath Easwaran, some simple definitions of prana might be:

"Vital energy, the power of life, the essential substrate of all forms of energy; also one of the five kinds of vital energy in living creatures: the five pranas are prana, apana, samana, vyana and udana" (p342)

Although we should be careful to avoid thinking in terms of simply 'energy' because this can easily become too reductionist or materialistic especially in our western society, always remembering that prana is the very vibration of Life, underpinning all of life, even including our capacity to think – thoughts being subtle movement!

With reference to this in one of his lectures on Raja Yoga Swami Vivekananda stated:

"There is no such thing as my body, or your body, except in words. It is one huge mass of matter. One point is called moon, another sun, another a man, another the earth, another a plant, another a mineral. Not one is constant, but everything is changing, matter eternally concreting and disintegrating. So it is with the mind. Matter is represented by the ether (akasha); when the action of Prana is most subtle, this very ether, in the finer states of vibration, will represent the mind, and

there it will be still one unbroken mass. If you can get to simply that subtle vibration you will see and feel that the whole universe is composed of these subtle vibrations. Sometimes certain drugs have the power to take us, as it were, through our senses, and bring us to that condition. Many of you may remember the celebrated experiment of Sir Humphrey Davy, when the laughing gas overpowered him, and during the lecture, he remained motionless, stupefied, and, after that, he said that the whole universe was made up of ideas; for the time being, as it were, the gross vibrations had ceased, and only the subtle vibrations, which he called the mind, were present to him. He could only see the subtle vibrations around him; everything had become thought; the whole universe was an ocean of thought, he and everyone else had become little thought whirlpools."

Prana & Hatha Yoga

Prana is central to yogic practice, and especially for Hatha Yoga where we are seeking to directly work with prana, through the practices of kriya, asana, pranayama, mudra & bandha in order to bring forth an awakening to our full consciousness. The following three quotes provide some pointers towards this journey:

"The practice of yoga is so logical! While the asanas loosen all the joints of the body, stretch the muscles and free all the roots of the nerves, they prepare the organism to receive a supplement of prana without the risk of a 'prana short-circuit.' Accompanied by adequate respiration, the asanas increase the amount of prana in the human body and permit its harmonious distribution throughout the system. Pranayama adds its own effects and further increases the fixing and storage of prana in the appropriate accumulators (the chakras), when it is distributed to all of the organs that need it"

Andre Van Lysbeth, Pranayama: The Yoga of Breathing p158

"According to Swatmarama's Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 'Only when all the nadis and chakras, which are full of impurities, are purified, is the yogi able to retain prana.' (v.5, Ch.2). In the process of awakening the great kundalini shakti, the practitioner has not only to clear the energy channels (nadis) but also to increase the quantity and quality of prana and store it."

Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, Prana Pranayama Prana Vidya pg 7

"Everything in this universe is the manifestation of prana. In yogic terminology it is said that whatever is manifest is the sthula rupa or 'gross form' of the subtle cosmic energy, is prana. In yoga and tantra there is an eternal truth; the basis of existence depends on two forces Shiva and Shakti, or consciousness and energy. Ultimately, they are not two forces but one; Shakti or prana, is the creative force of consciousness or Shiva. The purpose of hatha yoga is to realize Shiva or consciousness, by means of Shakti or prana."

Swami Muktibodhananda, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Ch 2, v1 (commentary)

Prana & the Mind

Finally, we also need to note the important link between prana and the mind as Sri Swami Satchidananda stated:

"Prana (energy) and Chitta (mind) are in constant contact with each other. They are like twin brothers – the Prana gets focused where the mind gets focused; and where Prana is, the

mind gets focused" Yoga Today Magazine July 2001

Yoga makes much of this connection as we shall see, indeed remember how Hatha Yoga does not seek to work directly with the mercurial mind but rather by working with prana the mind is gradually refined and stilled.

How can we experience prana?

By its very nature prana is in perpetual motion, never resting. We can directly experience it in many ways for instance:

- During asana practice when there is a flurry of energy, rather like the feeling of electricity, moving through the body as the pathways of energy are altered to become more freely flowing. (Indeed according to Ayurveda pain is what is experienced when energy cannot move through a blockage of some kind)
- When we are feeling our energy levels lifting prana is increasing.
- Perhaps you may have experienced being drained by the company of another person where that person literally drains you of energy. Remember we do not exist as an isolated island, being more like the whirlpool of energy in a sea of energy, and like the weather system energy will flow from high to low pressure!
- You may have experienced distinct movements of energy or prana when receiving healing such as acupuncture, massage or the placing of hands.
- When you place your mind within a certain area of the body you may have felt the enlivening of that area, perhaps a feeling of heat, tingling etc. as prana follows the mind (energy follows thought).

Also see: Upanishads

Bibliography:

"If you want to find the secrets of the universe think in terms of energy, frequency and vibration"
Nikola Tesla

Kaushitaki Upanishad 3.2-3 p106

Prasna Second Question p68

Prasna Third Question p70 (all of this Upanishad is relevant)

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