

Quotes on the definition of pranayama from contemporary and classical texts

Seaching for a definition of Pranayama:

It is always helpful for us to find a translation of any Sanskrit word to better understand a concept or practice and as we have already seen a good translation of 'prana' is the 'vital force' or 'life force'. The word 'pranayama' is comprised of 'prana' and 'ayama' where 'ayama' can be translated as as controlling, lengthening or expanding. This means a good translation of pranayama can be **'the expansion or control of the life force'**. Often pranayama is described as "the conscious control of our breathing" although this emphasizes the breath rather than prana so is a somewhat more limited definition.

Quotes on Pranayama from more contemporary sources:

"Pranayama is a conscious prolongation of inhalation, retention and exhalation. Inhalation is the act of receiving primeval energy in the form of breath and retention is when the breath is held in order to savour that energy. In exhalation all thought and emotions are emptied with the breath: then, when the lungs are empty, one surrenders the individual energy, 'I' to the primeval energy, the Atma."

Iyengar, B.K.S., Light on Pranayama, 1981, Unwin Hyam Ltd:London, p114

"To interpret pranayama as breathing exercises would be to sadly limit the scope of the exercises and to misunderstand their true purpose, which is the collection, storing and conscious control of the vital pranic energy in our bodies. In the final analysis, pranayama is also the goal of asana, bandhas and mudras; between the mental level and prana, there is an interaction, which ensures that Hatha Yoga is something more than physical."

Van Lysbeth, A, Pranayama, 1979, Unwin Paperbacks:London, p12

"When the Yogin has become sufficiently aware of his inner environment and is no longer distracted by muscular tensions and external stimuli, he begins to become more and more attuned to the life force as it circulates in the body. The next step consists of energizing the inner continuum – the experienced body-mind - through the practice of pranayama. Prana as has often been pointed out, is not merely the breath. The breath is only an external aspect, or a form of manifestation of prana, which is the life force, which interpenetrates and sustains all life.[.....]As the breath or the life force rises in the body, attention ascends and leads to more and more subtle experiences. In the final stages of this process, the prana is guided into the topmost psychoenergetic center at the crown of the head. When prana and attention come to be fixed in that spot, the quality of consciousness changes radically, yielding the ecstatic state (samadhi).

But this is not the immediate result of pranayama, in the beginning the regulation of the breath and life force simply leads to emotional stability, deeper relaxation, inner clarity and a growing ability to concentrate."

Feurstein. G., The Technology of Ecstasy, 1989, Tarcher p190

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"The mind stands as a wall between the yogi and reality. When the student comes in touch with the finer forces called prana he can learn to control his mind, for it is tightly fastened to the prana like a kite to a string. When the string is held skillfully, the kite which wants to fly here and there, is controlled and flies in the direction desired. All the breathing exercises – advanced or basic – enable the student to control his mind through understanding Prana. Thus the science of breath helps the student to bring Prana under control in order to attain the higher rungs of spirituality. He who has controlled his breath and Prana has also controlled his mind. He who has controlled his mind has also controlled his breath."

Rama Swami et al. Science of Breath, 1979, The Himalayan Institute of Science and Philosophy, Honesdale, Pennsylvania

"There are many fallacious assumptions associated with the theory of pranayama. Pranayama is not the awakening of the coiled serpent. Nor is its purpose to produce levitation, to come out alive after being buried for days, to hold one's breath as long as possible, or to practice difficult and obscure breathing ratios. Rather, pranayama is the conscious regulation of the breath. When you practice it, you deliberately change your normal pattern of breathing, which in turn, changes your state of mind. This reduces mental disturbance, and minimizes the impurities in your system. As a result, you become clearer and your understanding is enhanced. The ultimate aim of pranayama, then, is to focus the mind."

Mohan A.G., Yoga For Body, Breath and Mind, 1993, Rudra Press:Oregon, p160

"The word 'prana' is a combination of two syllables pra and na and denotes constancy, being a force in constant motion. Whereas prana is the vital force, pranayama is the process by which the internal pranic store is increased. Some people split the word 'pranayama' into prana and yama and define it as 'breath control'. However, it is actually comprised of the words prana and ayama which means 'pranic capacity or length'.

Pranayama is a technique through which the quantity of prana in the body is activated to a higher frequency. By practicing pranayama a certain amount of heat or creative force is generated throughout the entire body, influencing the existing quantum of prana. This prana then makes its way up through the pinagla nadi into ajna chakra. When sufficient heat is generated within the system, ajna chakra monitors the message back to the base of kundalini and the actual awakening of the great prana takes place. The science of pranayama is based on the retention of prana or kumbhaka towards this end."

Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, Prana Pranayama Prana Vidya, 1994, Bihar School: Munger p9

"Classical pranayama, is primarily a technique for purifying consciousness and harnessing the citta-vrittis as a prelude to meditation."

Rosen, R., The Yoga of Breath, 2002, Shambala:Boston, p30

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Some useful quotes from the traditional classical texts telling us more about the practice of pranayama:

1) *"....some offer the forces of vitality. Regulating their inhalation & exhalation, and thus gain control over these forces."*

Easwaran, Eknath, Bhagavad Gita, 1985, Penguin Arkana: London, Chapter 4 v28 to v30

Here the practice of pranayama is set alongside other ways in which we may journey towards Self-Realization.

2) *"pranayama is said to be of three types; exhalation (rechaka), inhalation (puraka) and retention (Kumbhaka); Kumbhaka is again of two types: connected (sahita) and unconnected (kevala)"*

Sw. Muktibodhananda Sarawati, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 2nd Edition 1993, Bihar School : Munger, Chapter 2 v71

Here we are given the different parts of the breath and it highlights sahita kumbhaka where we are consciously practicing breath retention and kevala kumbhaka where breath retention occurs spontaneously without effort.

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3) *"That (firm posture) being acquired, the movements of inhalation and exhalation should be controlled. This is pranayama."*

*The modifications of the life breath are either external, internal or stationary. They are said to be regulated by space, time and number and are either long or short.*

*There is a fourth kind of pranayama that occurs during concentration on an internal or external object.*

*As a result, the veil over the inner light is destroyed.*

*And the mind becomes fit for concentration"*

Sw. Satchidananda, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 1990, Integral Yoga Publications: Buckingham VA, Book Two v49 to v52

Here we are given some extra information regarding pranayama. It says that after we have found our seat (asana) we move to the practice of pranayama. There are three possible aspects of the breath i.e. the inhalation, exhalation and retention. It goes on to talk about the attributes of pranayama in more detail mentioning place or space, time and number:

**Desa = place or space** This is usually thought to refer to the placement of the mind during pranayama and in the PYS, being the first listed it is the most important factor. This can be an internal or external focus such as the throat sound, a chakra or mantra but the mind & breath must be harmonious.

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**Kala = Time & Ratio** This refers to the time spent in each part of the breath i.e. the ratio

e.g. samavritti = equal ratio and vishamavritti = unequal ratio with different ratios giving different effects.

**Samkhya = Number of Breaths** This refers to the total time doing pranayama. It must be comfortable & not too long for the mind to lose focus, but long enough for an effect to occur. Ultimately the practice must have the qualities of being Dirga i.e. long & steady and Sukshma i.e. smooth & subtle.

Finally we are told the veil over the inner light is destroyed meaning the mind becomes capable of being focused inwardly, becoming ready for concentration and meditation.

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The Gheranda Samhita and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika both expound how we must prepare ourselves by taking the right diet and find the right environment. We are also told we must have performed cleansing kriyas if necessary before we proceed.

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In the **Siva Samhita** it says:

*4) "When the yogi can, of his will, regulate the air and stop the breath (whenever and how long) he likes, then certainly he gets success in kumbhaka, and from the success in kumbhaka only, what things cannot the Yogi command here?"*

Vasu, Srisa Chandra, Siva Samhita Chapter, 2004, Munshiram Publishers:New Dehli, III v39

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And finally, for many traditions of yoga pranayama is accompanied by particular intention, giving a flavour or bhavana which is often of a devotional nature:

"On the inhalation, we invite God inside; as we retain the breath we pray to God, invoking God to remain within us; on the exhale we pray that God remove our impurities; and during suspension, we surrender ourselves to the feet of God"

Mohan, A.G. *Yoga for the Body, Breath & Mind*, 1993, Rudra Press:Oregon, p173