

BKS Iyengar on Pranayama

(transcribed from an informal 12 min talk by Guruji.

As with asana, Mr Iyengar's approach to pranayama was revolutionary - removing the veils of mystery and misinformation and making this subject available to the average practitioner.

Following the clear direction give by Patanjali in the yoga sutras, Pranayama is introduced only once a level of proficiency is reached in the practice of asana. Pranayama is introduced, gradually and safely, to be incorporated in the personal practice of the student in an intelligent manner.

Mr. Iyengar has left behind a wealth of information on pranayama, including the seminal book 'Light on Pranayama' - a must-have resource for anyone interested in unraveling the deeper and subtler workings of the breath.

This transcript of an informal talk is very brief - but explains the profound subject simply and elegantly. We have lost track of the video from where this talk was transcribed – lucky we transcribed it when we did! If you find this video, we will be grateful for the citation)

the root for good pranayama is the spinal column. if the spinal column is not alert, pranayama will not come at all.

The anterior spine

Have you see the earthworm? they contract, and then they move forward. there is a rhythm in their movement. have you seen it? as the earthworm stretches forward, the anterior spine should stretch like that without aggression.

(Mr. Iyengar is seated on a chair. he demonstrates on himself the activation of the anterior spine without jerking the body.

The storehouse of energy

(Points to the armpit-chest area as the storehouse of energy)

on a gross level, we do *pranayama* to store energy. when a man is depressed (*shows the closing of the armpit-chest area*) when you want to stay alert (*demonstrates the rolling back of the shoulders and opening of the chest and the armpit-chest area*)

you sprout the energy from the side-chest. the storehouse of energy is the extremities of the side chest. when we do *pranayama*, we make the energy to store there. that is on the gross level.

The temples

the temple is like the gate of the church. if the main gate of the church is closed, can you go inside? similarly, the temple is the door, for the mind to go inside. in meditation, when they say 'let go', it is not letting go, it is releasing the temples. if the temples go close to the cells of the brain, there is no action, there is only passive reflection; passive reflection is meditation. *pranayama* is not meditation. it is the gate for the mind to go close to the Self.

G-O-D

you know the *sloka*:

Gurur Brahma Gurur Vishnuhu

Guru Devo Maheswaraha

Guru Saakshaat Parabrahma

Tasmai Sri Gurave Namaha

according to our mythology, God has three forms.

in breathing, these *tri-murti*'s (the three forms) are:

puraka - is brahma, if you cannot inhale, you are half dead. inhalation is the generator for analysis or synthesis.

kumbhaka is to organise. to make the energy to reach the nerve cells so you are rejuvenated. after inhalation *kumbhaka* is to organise the drawn-in energy to distribute in the body, for it to develop the tolerance, perseverance and persistence. THAT is *kumbhaka*; not just holding your breath and then showing how long you can hold. did the energy reach the tip of the nerves?

In *rechaka* (exhalation), air which has been used, is released

puraka is Brahma

kumbhaka is Vishnu

rechaka is Shiva.

so without His name, to whatever country we may belong to, we follow G-O-D.

Generative Force

Organising Force

Destructive Force

The spiritual aspect of *pranayama* - the empty cup and the full cup

The spiritual aspect of *pranayama* is not the length of the inhalation, length of retention, length of retention; that is only one part.

body is the vessel. the breath is the content - though i can also say the *atma* (soul) is the content. in the context of *pranayama*, the trunk is the container/ vessel. the container takes the content (breath) in such a way that it finds its level in the container. that is *puraka*. if the container is a little shaky. or if the water pot has no base, can the water be in level? similarly *kumbhaka* is meant for us to keep the energy level even on the right and left side. exhalation is letting go of the used air - emptying the cup.

But when you are emptying the cup, does it become empty or does it get filled with something else?

if you have an empty vessel and you press it down into water, the water comes in to the vessel, but air has to come out to let the water in (air bubbles rise up to the surface of the water). so nothing is empty.

in *pranayama*, the vessel is the chest. when you are inhaling, you think you are inhaling the breath. but do you know what gives room for the breath to go in? something has to come out.

the infinite space in the body is filled by the Self. in inhaling, as the breath goes in, the Self makes room for the breath to go in. the Self comes out from its source. during inhalation, the breath touches the bottom first, then it spreads. as the breath touches the bottom, the Self says "i am giving room. please come in." the Self creates room and moves to the surface of the inner chest - inner layer of the skin. When the breath touches, the Self is compressed to the extremities of the body. That means the *puraka* - inhalation - has ended. when you hold the breath (*kumbhaka*) the Self and the breath, which are in contact with the inner frame of the container (the trunk), are wedded together. that means the breath, the energy, and the Soul are united together at the time of *kumbhaka*. THAT is *kumbhaka*. but if you say, i want to increase the duration of retention, that means your Self is forgotten. When the contact between the energy of the physical body releases away from the container, the time of *kumbhaka* is over. what you do after that is the egoistic *kumbhaka* - not the real *kumbhaka*. you have to distinguish between the real *kumbhaka* and the egoistic *kumbhaka*. as long as the content and the container are in touch, that is wholistic *kumbhaka*. if space is created between the container and the content, that is egoist, arrogant *kumbhaka*. somebody says, hold for 5 mins, or count to 20 - you are not doing *pranayama*, your mind is on the count. When the natural contact becomes loose, it means the time has come for you to exhale.

hrdaye citta samvit

in exhalation, without disturbing the frame, the content releases from the frontier of the inner body and comes close to the infinite - it comes to the exact centre.

hrdaye citta samvit (YS III.35)

in exhalation *chitta* should touch the *hrdaya*. this means the exhalation is completed.

when you are emptying the cup in exhalation. the natural tendency of the mind to go outside is withdrawn towards the Self in exhalation. the mind reaches the Self in exhalation. when you are inhaling, the Self reaches the body. inhalation starts at the centre - touches the *chitta* and expands; then it comes in contact with the physical body. when the inhalation is complete, that means the *atma* has touched the inner surface of the container (the body). dont say "can i take 10 sec more? can i take 1 sec more?" No. this you have to learn. in your *pranayama*, the *puraka* starts from an empty space and the Self makes room for the breath to go in. the breath and the Self get united in *kumbhaka*. in *rechaka*, the body releases the Self so it can go to its abode. at that time, the Nature also says "i will also come with you to your abode" that is the secret of *pranayama*.

That is why *pranayama* is part of *bhakti marga*. in inhalation you are thinking of expansion of the Soul; in retention you are attending to the contact of the soul with the energy; and in exhalation, you make the body to follow the Self. where the Self reaches - the body does not reach - but your consciousness, your intelligence, your mind come closer and closer to the centre of the body in exhalation.

when you are learning, keep this as the gate to enter the sanctum sanctorum in your heart. integration of the *chitta* with the *atma* is *hrdaye citta samvit*.

in *rechaka* (exhalation) the body integrates with the Self. In *puraka* (inhalation), the Self

integrates with the body. in *kumbhaka* (retention), they are wedded together.

That is what they called as Kundalini yoga. I dont want to use mysterious words. I just give what a person with natural, average intelligence can understand as the spiritual steps in pranayama.