

CHAPTER 7

PRATYĀHĀRA THROUGH PRĀṆIC ACTIVITY

1. The Relationship between the Mind and *Prāṇa*

The existence of *citta* (mind stuff) depends on the existence of *kriyā* (activity) and *vāsanā* (desires). If either one of the latter two disappears, the other also disappears. They are like two ends of a line. If the line is erased, the two ends also disappear automatically. In *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, Sage *Vaṣiṣṭha* says to Lord *Rama*, “There are two causes of *citta*: *prāṇa* vibrations and *vāsanā* (desire). When one is destroyed, so is the other.”

The mind is always full of thoughts and desires. Therefore, in order to render it desireless, one has to take recourse to *viveka* (discrimination) and *vairāgya* (nonattachment). In *Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā* it is said: “When the vital air becomes active the mind also becomes active, and when the former becomes steady the latter also is stabilized. When the *yogī* attains steadfastness of mind, the activity of the vital air also ceases.”¹

A *yogī* enters the state of *samādhi* when both *prāṇa* and the mind attain steadiness. In that state the body also becomes motionless and stable. Therefore, it is essential for the seeker to practice the control of *prāṇa* or the vital air. Elsewhere it is said: “When the mind becomes steady, the vital air also becomes steady. This leads to the steadiness of the sexual fluid, which in turn generates *sattva* (purity) establishing the steadiness of the body.”² The stability or immobility of the seminal fluid is essential in providing strength and stability to the body. It is when the sexual fluid is solidified or becomes immobile that the seeker gains the strength to keep the spine, neck and head straight and steady without effort. It is also said: “The mind is the master of the senses and the vital air is the master of the mind. The vital air in turn is controlled by *laya* (absorption), which is dependent on *nāda* (subtle spontaneous sound).”³

It is the curtain or the wall of the mind which separates the being from the Almighty. A seeker has to remove this wall using *prāṇa* as a tool. With the eradication of this wall, the duality existing between the individual self and the universal self disappears.

2. The Relationship between *Prāṇa* and the Soul (*Ātman*)

¹ *Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā*, Chapter II, 2.

² *Op. cit.*, Chapter IV, 28.

³ *Ibid*, 29.

A body possessing *prāṇa* energy or the vital force is alive, and one devoid of it is dead. This fact establishes the close relationship between the *ātman* (soul) and *prāṇa*. Sometimes the air is known as *prāṇa* and sometimes even *ātman* is called *prāṇa*. This identification between the two establishes their close relationship. It can be said that the existence of an individual being is the existence of *prāṇa*. In fact, in an individual being, there is the co-existence of five elements: the body, the senses, *prāṇa*, the mind, and the soul. Out of these five, the body, the senses, and the mind are on one side, while *prāṇa* and the *ātman* (soul) are on the other side. Thus *prāṇa* is nearer to or has a closer link with *ātman*. In *Śiva-Svarodaya*, Lord Śiva tells Mother *Pārvatī*: “*Prāṇa* is the best friend, the best associate and the best kinsman of all living beings.”⁴

3. The Importance of *Prāṇa* in the Process of Meditation

In self-realization or God-realization, therefore, *prāṇa* plays a very important role. This indicates that *prāṇa* is important in the process of meditation, too. During meditation, its major function is to bring the senses and the mind under control. The senses are of two types: gross and subtle. All organs of action constitute the group of gross or physical senses. All perceptive senses constitute the group of subtle senses. During meditation, *prāṇa* first tries to establish its control over the gross senses and then it controls the subtle senses. Therefore, the process of meditation begins on the gross level and subsequently starts functioning on the subtle level. In the beginning, its main area of operation is the body, while later on it operates upon the mind. When its field of operation is mainly the body, the process of meditation generates activity or movements in the body, resulting in *cala* (active or dynamic) meditation. This stage of active meditation is known as the restraint of the physical senses. It is integral to the practice of *haṭha yoga*, *sabīja*, *saṃprajñāta*, *savikalpa* or *cetana* (dynamic) *samādhi*. The subsequent stage of *acala* (inactive or steady) meditation is called the restraint of perceptive senses or mind. That is integral to the practice of *rāja yoga*, *nirbīja*, *nirvikalpa*, *asaṃprajñāta* or *acetana* (immobile or inanimate) *samādhi*.

4. The Function of *Prāṇa*

Prāṇa is the protecting and the driving force in living beings. Whenever an action is performed by a person, first the mind directs *prāṇa* to carry out the action and subsequently *prāṇa* drives the bodily organs to act. Thus *prāṇa* is the major driving force in the body and all actions are performed with its help.

Since *prāṇa* is the master of the senses but, at same time, is subservient to the mind, it has to carry out two types of activities independent or voluntary and controlled or involuntary. When it functions involuntarily or under the control of the mind, it directs the bodily organs to perform activities like eating, drinking, walking, talking, standing up, sitting down, etc. During this time, the body also remains subservient to the mind. Therefore, the state of the mind has a direct effect on the

⁴ *Śiva-Svarodaya*, 27.

state of the body. If the mind is drawn towards activity, the body has to follow suit. Similarly, if the mind becomes inactive or lethargic, the body also experiences dullness. Thus mental composure results in physical comfort and mental disturbance brings physical indisposition.

When one is not meditating, *prāṇa* has to function under the control of the mind. Hence, it is not able to work efficiently. As a result, it cannot render the best service to the body. Under the state of subservience, it is not able to do as much in as many days it may do in only one day while acting with freedom. This very situation proves to be the cause of disease and decay in all living beings.

For example, a person is feeling sleepy at night and is preparing to go to bed, but at that very moment someone approaches him with an urgent task demanding him to work until late at night. While he works, *prāṇa* often reminds him to go to bed by making him yawn and nod, but his mind does not give heed to it. In such a situation, how can *prāṇa* carry out its function of protecting the body most efficiently! Not eating when one is hungry, not attending to the call of nature immediately, exerting oneself even when one is physically tired, etc., are the situations which deny the opportunity or the freedom to *prāṇa* to serve and protect the body. Such is the case, usually, of all people who lead a worldly life.

On the other hand, a spiritual seeker allows adequate opportunity and freedom to *prāṇa*, during meditation, to act independently and without the check of the mind. So *prāṇa* acts voluntarily and efficiently to carry out the necessary functions for keeping the body comfortable, healthy and pure. The seeker who has learned the right technique of meditation under the guidance of an experienced *guru*, knows the art of releasing *prāṇa* from the control of the mind so that it can perform its functions more efficiently and in the required manner.

5. Witnessing the Activities of *Prāṇa* in Meditation

A seeker whose *prāṇa* energy is released allows free scope for *prāṇa* to carry out its voluntary activities without willfully applying the control of the mind. Instead of putting a check on the spontaneous and voluntary activities of *prāṇa*, he watches them as a mere witness. He does not make *prāṇa* the captive of the mind through coercion, but gives it full freedom to function voluntarily. *Prāṇa* is a wise and protecting energy and it knows full well how to best carry out its voluntary functions so as to bring comfort and purification to the seeker.

During meditation, no sooner is the *prāṇa* released than the seeker's body begins to undergo a variety of experiences such as movements of the hands, legs, waist, chest, shoulders, neck, etc.; the automatic performance of *asanas*, *mudras*, *prāṇāyāmas* etc.; and the manifestation of crying, laughing, singing; etc. When *prāṇa* begins such spontaneous activities in the body, the seeker should permit them to occur without obstruction and witness them with neutrality. He should not allow his mind to willfully interfere with the voluntary functioning of *prāṇa*.

When the above-mentioned spontaneous activities manifest in the body of the seeker during meditation, they do not have any direct connection with the mind, because through the release of *prāṇa* he has already separated the mind from the body. So bodily activities have no effect on the mind. This means that even the most difficult manipulations of physical organs or joints do not put any strain on the seeker. Similarly he does not have a feeling of sorrow when he cries or a feeling of happiness when he laughs spontaneously. In short, his mind does not react to all these emotions, but remains an unaffected witness.

6. Witnessing Generates Introversion

In the normal wakeful state, a person is stimulated by external surroundings through his sense organs. He does everything in accordance with such stimulation and is always mentally involved. This makes his mind extroverted, and it continues to be attracted by sense objects. The mind's indulgence in sense objects makes it the slave of the senses. As a result, it suffers dualities like pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, heat and cold, etc.

On the other hand, a seeker who just remains a witness to all the spontaneous activities which occur during meditation does not give heed to external stimulation. He receives all his stimulation from the *ātman* within, through the aid of *prāṇa* energy. He remains mentally detached from the physical manifestations undergone during meditation and observes them as a witness. This state of witnessing with neutrality lends introversion to the mind. The state of introversion in turn helps the seeker to withdraw his mind from sense objects. This process is called *pratyāhāra*, the fifth embodiment of the eight-fold path of *yoga*.

7. Introversion Is the Entry to *Pratyāhāra*

The sense organs remain extroverted because of an extroverted state of mind and they remain introverted due to the introversion of the mind. A seeker begins his spiritual journey by making the sense organs introvert. In order to do so, he lifts the control of *prāṇa*, which usually acts as a middle link between the mind and the sense organs. This, in fact, is the release of *prāṇa* energy from the control of the mind (*prānotthāna*). Once *prāṇa* is given this freedom to control the sense organs, it gradually makes them introvert. Thus there is no other way to seek entry in the stage of *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of the mind from the senses) except through *prānotthāna* or the release of *prāṇa*.

8. There is no Entry into Meditation without *Pratyāhāra*

The release of *prāṇa* leads the seeker to *pratyāhāra*, the gateway to meditation or *yoga*. Once the seeker enters into the stage of *pratyāhāra*, the rest of the components of *yoga*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*, are unfolded automatically in due course. That is why *pratyāhāra* is considered to be the point of entry into meditation or *yoga*. Of course, the practice of *pratyāhāra* or of *indriya nigrāha* (control of the sense organs) is not easy and does not come

quickly. One has to strive hard for many years to master that stage and attain complete control over the senses. It is only after achieving mastery over the sense organs that one can hope to practice *manonigraha* (control of the mind), which is achieved through *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*. These latter three are also known as *saṁyama* (restraint).

Ordinarily, people think meditation means only *manonigraha* (control of the mind). They are not wrong in such an understanding. But if they think that *indriya nigraha* (control of the sense organs) is not necessary for attaining the stage of *manonigraha*, they are certainly making a mistake. The mind is not so simple and sane as to be easily absorbed into any single object or thought that is desired by the seeker. It remains involved in sense objects through the sense organs. So until it is weaned away from these, it can never be brought under control and made steady. Therefore, experienced *yogīs* found out that first of all a seeker must practice *indriya nigraha* leaving aside *manonigraha*. Only through the practice of *indriya nigraha* can the mind be weaned away from the senses and only after this can one be fit to practice *manonigraha*.

Thus *indriya nigraha* is the basis of all *yogic* practice, also known as *haṭha yoga*. *Manonigraha* is the latter phase of *yogic* practice and is also known as *rāja yoga*. These are, therefore, the two natural divisions of *yogic* practice.

9. Karma (Action) Is the Basis of Spiritual Practice

Since *haṭha yoga* concerns the organs of action, it corresponds to *karma yoga* (the *yoga* of action). Similarly, *rāja yoga* concerns the mind and hence corresponds to *jñāna yoga* (the *yoga* of knowledge).

In order to master any branch of *yoga*, therefore, a seeker has to begin with *karma yoga*, which is the basis for all the branches of *yoga*. *Karma* (action) is the first step and *jñāna* is the next step to spiritual upliftment. It is possible that some seekers may try to understand the principles of knowledge first, but their real *yogic* practice must begin with *karma* (action). A reason-oriented seeker accepts the principles of knowledge by way of studying the scriptures. But mere acceptance of the principles of knowledge is not enough; these principles have to be put into practice. Before realizing them, one has to remove the obstructions coming in the way of knowledge, viz., *mala* (impurities), *vikṣepa* (distractions) and *āvaraṇa* (the veil of illusion).

In the same way, an action-oriented seeker accepts certain types of action. But real knowledge does not come by mere acceptance of action. For that, one has to actually practice such action.

In short, it can be said that the reason-oriented seeker seeks knowledge first and then tries to realize it through action. On the other hand, an action-oriented seeker resorts to action first and subsequently gains knowledge through experience. In

either case, actual spiritual practice begins with *indriya nigraha* (controlling the physical sense organs) or *haṭha yoga* or *karma yoga*.

While establishing control over the senses, one must also attain introversion. The senses remain linked with the external sense objects. In such a state the mind remains constantly distracted. New distractions keep flowing from the outside to the mind, which already possesses many old distractions. Thus one has to struggle against both the inner and the outer distractions simultaneously. This entails a tremendous waste of energy and leaves very little scope for victory. Hence, for keeping new distractions from entering the mind, one has to begin with the practice of establishing control over the senses, thereby obtaining introversion.

The senses constitute the impenetrable fort of the mind. So one can try to conquer the mind only after conquering the senses. That is why Lord *Kṛṣṇa* commanded *Arjuna*, first of all, to establish control over the senses. He says, “Therefore, best of *Bharatas*, control thy senses first and then slay this sinful thing (passion), the destroyer of knowledge and wisdom.” Passions and desires are the impurities of the body and the mind. One is not fit for achieving *samādhi*, while such impurities exist. The body is purified through *karma yoga* (the *yoga* of action) and the purification of the mind is achieved through *jñāna yoga* (the *yoga* of knowledge). But one has to purify the body first; therefore one must start with *karma yoga*.

10. The Five Types of *Pratyāhāra*

The organs of action are five: tongue, hands, feet, genitals and anus. First of all, one has to attain control over them by causing them to be withdrawn from all activity. In order to withdraw them from activity, one has to put them under the direct control of *prāṇa*, instead of keeping them under the mind’s control. As the organs of action are withdrawn from activities, the mind also is withdrawn from the senses. This process of withdrawal of the mind from the senses is called tube stage of *pratyāhāra* in *yoga*. Without mastering this stage of *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of the mind), even the stages of *dhāraṇā* (focusing of the mind) and *dhyāna* (concentration of the mind) are also impossible to attain, let alone the state of *samādhi*.

When *prāṇa*, having become powerful, tries to establish its control over the organs of action and the sense organs, the process of *pratyāhāra* sets in automatically and the mind, having become introvert, begins to withdraw from the senses. Since there are five senses of perception, there can be five types of *pratyāhāra*: *pratyāhāra* of the ears or of the sense of hearing, *pratyāhāra* of the skin or of the sense of touch, *pratyāhāra* of the eyes or of the sense of sight, *pratyāhāra* of the tongue or of the sense of taste, and *pratyāhāra* of the nose or of the sense of smell. It is not necessary that these different *pratyāhāra* occur in a specific order during meditation. In spontaneous meditation, the released *prāṇa* first brings about any one of the abovementioned *pratyāhāra* and the remainder follow automatically.

During the process of *pratyāhāra*, the introversion of the mind is generated because the perceptive senses have become introvert. When a particular perceptive sense becomes introvert, the opening of the sense organ corresponding to it closes automatically. During the *pratyāhāra* of *śabda* (hearing), the openings of the ears are closed automatically. Similarly, during the *pratyāhāra* of *sparsā* (touch or feeling), *rūpa* (sight), *rasa* (taste), and *gandha* (smell), the openings of the skin, eyes, tongue and nose, respectively, are closed. During spontaneous meditation, *pratyāhāra* of the different senses may occur separately or in combination.

In the initial stages of *pratyāhāra*, a seeker may not be able to remain steady in any one posture for a long time. So he goes on changing postures frequently in order to keep the body comfortable. The released *prāṇa* energy takes care of these changes in position. Moreover, any single type of *pratyāhāra* may not last long in the initial stages. Hence there will be frequent and automatic changes in the types of *pratyāhāra* experienced during the initial stages of spontaneous meditation. But as the seeker progresses and gets well established in the state of *pratyāhāra* he is able to remain steady for a long time in any single type of *pratyāhāra* as described below:

(a) *Pratyāhāra* of the ears or *śabda* (hearing)

A seeker usually finds it more difficult to avoid the disturbance of sounds than that of any other sense. But when they get firmly established in the *pratyāhāra* of hearing, they become steady in any comfortable *āsana* (posture). At that time, the ears are closed with the thumbs and the eyes are closed with the index and middle fingers. The remaining two fingers are placed on the upper and the lower lips. During this *pratyāhāra*, one hears the *anāhata nāda* (subtle sound) from within and their gaze remains fixed in *bhrūmadhya* (the region between the eyebrows). This state is also called *nādānusandhāna* (tuning the mind with subtle inner sound) or *nāda samādhi*.

(b) *Pratyāhāra* of the skin or *sparsā* (touch or feeling)

In other types of *pratyāhāra*, the seeker closes the openings of the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, etc., but in this *pratyāhāra* the opening of the skin is closed. One may wonder how that can be done since there are innumerable openings or pores all over the body. But one does not have to close them. Instead, during this *pratyāhāra* the opening of the anus is closed. When this type of *pratyāhāra* occurs automatically in a higher stage of meditation, the seeker is seated in *siddhāsana* (adept pose), closing the opening of the anus with the left heel. The right heel is placed on the abdominal region over the genital organ. The thumbs close the ears and the index and middle fingers close the eyes. The annular or ring fingers keep both the nostrils closed while the small fingers are placed on the closed lips. This is known as *yonī mudrā*. During this *pratyāhāra* *khecari mudrā* (locking of the tongue

in the cavity of the skull) is also performed automatically and the seeker experiences *divya sparśa* (divine touch). This state is called *laya samādhi* (the state of dissolution or sublimation).

During this kind of *pratyāhāra*, the seeker's sexual fluid becomes sublimated. Until this process of sublimation is mastered, one is neither able to attain *samādhi* nor can he become an *ūrdhvaretā yogī* (one whose sexual fluid is sublimated). Only an *ūrdhvaretā yogī* can attain *divya śarīra* (divine body), which is the outward sign of mastering *nirbīja samādhi*. This is the complete path of *yoga*, which is fully attained by hardly one *yogī* in a thousand years, since it is full of countless difficulties and dangers.

(c) Pratyāhāra of the eyes or rūpa (seeking)

Like the ears, the eyes also make one's mind easily extroverted. That is why in all types of *pratyāhāra*, the eyes are generally kept closed for avoiding external distractions. During the spontaneous occurrence of this type of *pratyāhāra* the seeker, seated in any comfortable *āsana*, closes his eyes with the index and the middle fingers, keeping the remaining two fingers on the upper and lower lips. The thumbs may or may not be closing the ears. The head is slightly raised as if looking to the sky. However, the gaze is fixed inward on the vision of *ātma jyoti* (flame-like light of the soul) between the eyebrows. This state is also called *jyotirdhyāna* (meditation on the divine light). In the initial stages the seeker may visualize different colors such as yellow, red, white, brown, smoky, etc.

(d) Pratyāhāra of the tongue or rasa (taste)

One who has conquered the tongue can conquer the whole universe. Such a victory has to be not only in terms of the sense of taste but also in respect to speech and *khecarī mudrā*, in which the tongue is to be locked in the cavity of the skull. When this kind of *pratyāhāra* occurs spontaneously in the higher state of meditation, the position of the seeker remains similar to that of *pratyāhāra* of the skin. However, instead of experiencing the divine touch, he undergoes the experience of *amṛta-pāna* (sipping the nectar) in this *pratyāhāra*. This state is also called *rasānand samādhi*.

(e) Pratyāhāra of the nose or gandha (smell)

In this *pratyāhāra*, the process of breath-control or *prāṇāyāma* is involved. In fact, *prāṇāyāma* is the key to *yoga*, through which one progresses faster than any other technique. When the seeker is firmly established in this type of *pratyāhāra*, he is found to be doing *anuloma-viloma prāṇāyāma* (breathing through alternate nostrils) spontaneously. Along with such controlled breathing, he mentally chants *mantra* and also experiences the smell of divine odors of various types. This state is also called *ajapājapa*

(spontaneous mental chanting), *haṁsayoga*, *haṭhayoga* or *prāṇopāsanā* (spiritual practice involving *prāṇa*).

An ordinary seeker should not practice these types of *pratyāhāra* willfully. They should occur spontaneously after progressing well in meditation.