

## Pranayama in the Function of Life Transformation

Pratibha Rita Gramann\*  
CA Takshila University, Santa Clara, CA, USA

**Abstract:** *This research project examines the perceptions of long-time practitioners of the yoga pranayama technique regarding the effects for their life. The focus is their professional, personal, health and spiritual life. This exploratory, phenomenological study utilizes the qualitative instrument of semi-structured questions. Participants are interviewed individually. The material is transcribed, analyzed, and thematically organized to create a meaningful report of the results of the collected data. Yoga techniques of pranayama are important tools for achieving the higher levels of consciousness that results in creating the new life philosophies and acceptance of the new lifestyle.*

**Key Words:** *yoga, pranayama, everyday life, experience, awareness*

### Introduction

This study is an exploration of the phenomenological usefulness of the yoga technique *pranayama* practiced as a component of lifestyle among long-time practitioners. The hypothesis is that pranayama practice significantly alters the experiences of daily life. This study explores an approach to the usefulness of pranayama practice, which is separated, from other techniques that make the method of the yoga improvement (*asana, banda mudra, kriya, djana, dharana, pratyahara* practice) in this research.

Participants are healthy persons who are three years or longer practitioners of a technique of *pranayama* methods. Interview sessions reveal participants' general routine of *pranayama* practice and their favorite regulated breath (*prana*) methods. Observations of the effects of *pranayama* practice include personal and professional life, interpersonal relationships in professional and personal life, general sense of self, diet and sleep patterns, and spiritual experiences and life views. The study includes reflection by subjects on *pranayama* as a form of meditation as well as preparation for deeper levels of meditation.

The *pranayamas* practiced by the participants are integral to the ancient yogic traditions. In part two of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, *pranayamas* are stated to be key methods for reducing mental pain and anxieties while creating focus and concentration. In Aranya's commentary on Sutra (49. p.230), the definition is stated as: "...regulation of the flow of inhalation and exhalation is *pranayama*".

Everyday life is a term that brings one into the practical and ordinary realms of work and personal life where feelings about oneself play a significant role. Many people do not make a connection between breath and emotional state, mood, feelings of happiness, unhappiness, satisfaction, non-satisfaction or anxiety, although it is obvious. Williams et al in *Mindful Way Through Depression* (2007, стр. 179) point to the importance of the daily conscious 3-minute breathing in overcoming unpleasant emotional states. During a crisis situation or shortly thereafter, he recommends three steps of *pranayama* practice. The first step is to become aware of the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations present at that moment. The second step is gather attention on the breath and accompanying bodily sensations. The third step is to expand the awareness from the breath to the body as a whole and prepare to face the coming challenges.

Carlson's (Carlson, 2008), comments (p. 264), in a review of William's book (Williams, 2007), deserve special attention. Mental scheme consists of thoughts and feelings that occur routinely, according to some regularity.

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\* Corresponding author: rmg.pratibha@att.net

The moment an individual becomes aware of established and involuntary mental patterns (schemes), he/she acquires the ability to overcome them. Then the mind functions freely, willingly and non-judgmental, because it is not a subject to the interpretations arising from mental schemes, but from the authentic experiences.

The effects of practicing yoga breathing (*pranayama*) on mental disorders increasingly attract the attention of researchers. It is particularly expressed interest in the effects of practicing yoga on PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Yoga breathing reduces the pressure of images from the past and enhances sleep while *asanas* reduce stress symptoms and do not induce sleep among patients with PTSD (Sharma, 2008).

Brown and Gerbard (2005) refer to yogic breathing (pranayama), as a mind-body intervention that is beneficial in overcoming both mental and physical disorders. They indicate a beneficial effect in overcoming emotional disorders that are associated with vagal tone of heart rate variability and describe the breathing methods of *ujjaya*, *bhastrika* and *sudarshan kriya*. *Ujjaya* is also called 'victorious breath' and it is performed by slowly taking in air through the nose using a slight contraction of the laryngeal muscles. *Bhastrika* is also called the 'blacksmith's bellows' because this practice expands the abdomen in the way that bellows expands. *Sudarshan Kriya* is considered to be good for the nervous system. Practicing yoga breathing is helpful in preventing daily stress, overcome mental tension, mild forms of anxiety, posttraumatic stress and stress-related illness.

Attention in this study is described much in the same way as Kornfield (2007), describes attention as part of the process of self-regulation or self-development. Kornfield refers to attention as a factor that connects the stability of functioning and the ability to adapt to change.

### **Methodological framework**

The main question of this exploratory study is: Does the practice of pranayama influence, affect, or change one's mode of experiencing daily life, and if so, in what ways are the influences experienced?

Participants of the study are residents of Santa Cruz County in California, USA. Interview of each subject consisted of a 45 minute to one hour. Each session has been audio-recorded. The significance of the study is to explore the usefulness of pranayama for a world that seeks methods to reduce stress and increase awareness about oneself and the spheres of life in which one operates. The data analyzed in this paper are relying on a methodological framework of Steiner Quay (Kvale, 1996), suggested in his book "Inner Views"

Analysis of the data brought about the following organization of material. It includes participants' routine of practice and the influence that the practice has on their daily life.

Participants practice regular 45 minutes to two hours of yoga exercises several days a week or daily. Participants had the same Master of yoga and the same basic routine that began with four Pranayama called 'four purifications'. These are known as *nadishodan* (alternately breathing through one nostril then the other), *dripping Bhat* (skull shining), *agnishara dauti* (clean digestive fire) and *ashvini wise* (Dass, 1981).

### **Practice of the yoga pranayama and its influence on everyday life**

The experiences of the respondents were classified into groups. The first consists of the subjective experiences of the respondents (practitioners of pranayama techniques), that are related to effects in everyday life, including:

"...Practicing *nadishodan* takes me deep and I explore what is going on in my mind. My thoughts become more conscious as I focus on the ajna center. Disturbing thoughts move into a placid pool..."

"...*Nadishodan* enables focus focused on the ajna center, slows down and reduces the number of thoughts. I feel light, my energy feels elevated, freer, and good..."

"... *Nadishodan* is an experience that strengthens concentration, ie. composure and calms the mind..."

"... *Kapala bhati* ... awakens in me a sense of vitality. I feel the movement of energy along the spine..."

"... Practicing *sahit kumbhaka* or pranayama of breath holding, there is a pervading sense of pleasant light..."  
"... Composure and slowing the flow of thought, that's what I feel. During the day I feel calm mind ... "

All respondents indicated the depth, clarity, poise, comfort, ease and vitality that emerged after practicing pranayama techniques.

The second group consists of the subjective experiences of the respondents (practitioners pranayama techniques), which are related to the effects in the business sphere, including:

"...Ten years ago I wanted to introduce my son into my business. His pattern of behavior was annoying me... I was impatient. Practicing pranayama puts me into the space between the agitation and non-agitation. My anger went way down. Now I am much more patient and self-accepting ... "

"...I'm more able to do the work without recognition being necessary. My awareness is stronger, and I can go longer. If asked to do something extra, I willingly and generously do it. It has to do with recognizing that the Essence is in everything and being in the flow of God, there is no reason to have no energy."

"... The practice of *pranayama* provides me with concentration and reduces job related stress... "

A number of respondents indicate effects in managing their own emotions in the work environment. Patience, greater focus and greater willingness to work under the stress, are only some of the effects that respondents distinguish after practicing pranayama techniques. Since the work environment is not just a place to perform tasks, but also a place where people work and bring in their needs, wishes, beliefs and desires, these changes are of a great importance.

The third group consists of the subjective experiences of the respondents (practitioners of *pranayama* techniques), which are related to the effects on personal life, including:

"... Business and personal relationships with other people are calmer and more harmonious. Since the son who works with me saw the effect of *Pranayama* on my example, and he started to practice it ... "

"... In dealing with other people we serve and help each other, so we use the all-pervading essence and higher consciousness.... *Pranayama* slows down the flow of thoughts. It helps me not to react impulsively. Now I am thoughtful ... "

"... I am in this moment when I do pranayama and I feel good ... It seems that all aspects of my life merge. Awareness that makes stronger makes me capable of separating my private life from other circumstances ... "

Respondents point to the importance of acquired patience and a higher level of consciousness, which allows them to establish harmonious relationships with friends, relatives and family.

The fourth group consists of the subjective experiences of the respondents (practitioners of pranayama techniques), which relate to health effects, including:

"... Since I practice *pranayama*, it's been long since I was cold... "

"... I eat less food, which is good for my health. Doing this as a conscious practice, it is easier for me to pay attention to my eating habits... "

"... I notice the impact on the entire digestive and immune system. I wake up easily in the morning without an alarm clock ... "

"... *Pranayama* dispelled the sense of insecurity..."

After practicing techniques, respondents notice less cravings and balance of physiological processes, as well as improvements in general health status.

The fifth group consists of the subjective experiences of the respondents (practitioners of pranayama techniques), and relates to the integration of spiritual experiences and attitudes, including:

"... *Pranayama* makes me focus inside me, on what's going on in my mind - the distance to them ... which brings me to a deep inner clarity..."

"... The practice of techniques has strengthened my inspiration. I realized that the Christian practice and yoga practice are doing the same thing. There is no conflict ... "

"... Appears to me a sense of connection with everything ... We are separate beings, and at the same time we are connected ... because we are a part of the same view and the purpose in life ... "

An increased mental clarity is noticed among respondents, which leads to deeper insight in unity and an increased inspiration.

## Conclusion

The results of the research indicate the depth, clarity, poise, comfort, ease and vitality of *yoga pranayama* practitioners. The notable are results in managing their own emotions in the work collective. Patience, greater focus and greater ability to function under the stress, are only some of the effects noted after practicing *pranayama* techniques. Increasing levels of awareness enables establishing harmonious relationships with friends, relatives and family. An increased mental clarity is noticed among respondents, which leads to a deeper insight into the unity, increased inspiration, as well as increased general health status.

We can conclude that *pranayama*, as regular yoga practice, is a dynamic tool in life for personal transformation. It requires leadership of a certified Teacher who will make the path safe, peaceful and inspiring, and allow performing the techniques properly. There are a number of philosophical and psychological paths related to the purpose and significance of life. The studies of philosophy and psychology are useful tools for understanding the development and purpose of life. Equal importance is the personal commitment and human values - work and share. Along with these factors, the practice of yoga pranayama techniques forms the foundation for personal transformation. There are numerous paths of philosophy and psychology about purpose and significance of life. Study of philosophy and psychology are helpful tools for developing understanding and aim in life. Equally significant is personal commitment to humanistic values, to work, and to sharing. Pranayama together with these factors form the groundwork for transformation.

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Received: July 1, 2011  
Accepted: August 3, 2011