

Yoga Philosophy Simplified – 6

Patanjali has five sutras on pranayama – two more than the sutras on asana, which says something about the relative importance of these two limbs of yoga. One of these sutras is *YS* 1.34, in the section where he lists, in reducing order of importance, seven methods of eliminating the antaraya (mental obstacles) and achieving mental serenity:

1.34 pracchardana vidhāranābhyāṃ vā prāṇasya – “[the mind is calmed] also by the expulsion and retention of breath”

No special technique is prescribed here. Simply by sitting or lying down, and giving attention to lengthening the out-breath, with awareness of some breath retention, it is possible to settle the mind. Since this chapter is intended for the student who has made some progress in yoga (and who presumably has a teacher), no more details are necessary.

The other four sutras about pranayama, in chapter 2, are more detailed, because chapter 2 is intended for the beginner in yoga. They come immediately after the three sutras about asana, for the yogi who is proficient in asana is ready to tackle breath control. Patanjali begins with a simple definition of pranayama:

2.49 tasminsatiśvāsaprasāvāsayorgativicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmaḥ -- “Once firm posture has been acquired, pranayama is the regulation of inhalation and exhalation.”

He follows this with some more precise information about regulation of the breath:

2.50 bāhyābhyantarastambhavṛttirdeśakālasaṃkhyābhiḥ paridr̥ṣṭo dīrghasūkṣmaḥ -- “This regulation may be of inhalation, exhalation or suspension of the breath. It may be regulated in space, time or number, and it is either long or short.”

By regulation in “space” he means choosing to focus on the awareness of the breath in areas of the body where the breath can be observed (this includes the mind). Regulation of “time” is the length of time given to inhalation, exhalation or suspension and refers also to the ratio between these parts of the breath. The choice of ratio depends on the effect required (for example to calm the mind, or to create energy). Suspension (*stambha*) could be either pausing after an inhalation (*antar kumbhaka*), or pausing after an exhalation (*bahya kumbhaka*). In his edition of the *Sutras*, Hariharananda says that suspension is a state “in which there is no attempt at exhalation or inhalation. It involves total stoppage of breathing in one single effort, either in the process of inhalation or exhalation, with some air left in the lungs. The air thus remaining in the lungs is gradually exhausted. This operation gives rise to a feeling as though the whole body were being evacuated of air.” Regulation of “number” refers to the number of breaths or rounds in any given session. According to Krishnamacharya, fewer than 12 breaths is a waste of time, but up to 80 breaths allows the practice to develop effectively.

It's worth noting here that Patanjali does not go into details of different pranayama techniques. This is for the teacher to explain, and the interested student can also turn to Chapter 2 of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. What does interest Patanjali, however, is something much more subtle, which he describes next:

YS 2.51 bāhyābhyantaraviṣayākṣepī caturthaḥ -- “the fourth type of breath control goes beyond external or internal domains.”

There is a lot of discussion about what precisely Patanjali means in this sutra by “the fourth type of breath control.” Some people think he is referring to *bahya kumbhaka*, but this seems unlikely since he quite clearly says that the fourth type “goes beyond external or internal domains”. He is possibly describing a complete cessation of the breathing mechanism when the lungs are deflated, and which may be involuntary. This cessation will develop only after the practitioner has attained some proficiency in pranayama. Bouanchaud suggests that it is a state which can follow from daily practice of pranayama, after which one sits quietly for some time, "meditating on the breath at its source, which is the heart.... It is a state of accomplishment in breath control, of peace, and of deep calm not issuing from the will."

Finally, Patanjali explains the benefit of proficiency in pranayama:

2.52 tataḥ kṣīyate prakāśāvaraṇam – “Then that which covers the light is destroyed.”

The “light” referred to is the light of mental clarity, or *buddhi*. With this improvement in mental clarity, the practitioner is in the best possible state to engage in meditation. But that's another story.

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