
ASANA, NADIS, AND THE MOVEMENT OF PRANA

The third and fourth limbs of the Ashtanga system of Patanjali are asana and pranayama. As we discussed last month, asana is a posture that is held with comfort and stability. Pranayama is the control (yama) of prana. Like yama and niyama, asana and pranayama are paired because they are complementary methods of directing the movement of prana. The effortless neutrality of the spine, which you are developing through your asana practice, is extremely helpful in facilitating this movement.

Prana is Life-Force, the vital energy which permeates creation. It is also sometimes referred to as kriya, laya, tantra, kee or chi. It is drawn in when we breathe and is absorbed through the lining of the mucous membranes, in much the same manner that oxygen is absorbed within the lungs. Prana is also absorbed from the foods we eat, the water we drink, and the thoughts we think.

Our physical body has life because of the prana that flows through it, not just because of the breath. This is clearly demonstrated by observing that doctors cannot keep a body alive by simply supplying pure oxygen, adrenalin, or intravenous sugar. Our life is sustained by both the influx of prana and oxygen.

Prana moves within what we have referred to as the pranic body. In yoga this pranic body or sheath is called the *prana maya kosha* and is understood to be an interface between the physical body and subtler bodies. The prana travels within the pranic body over a network of pathways called *nadis*. These nadis form a system much like the network of nerves that branch through the physical body. In the same way that impulses travel through our physical body over nerves, prana flows via the nadis through our pranic body animating its physical counterpart.

There are said to be some 72,000 nadis through which prana flows. When we explore the articulation and alignment of an asana, what we are really exploring is how the prana is moving through these nadis. We look to see if the prana is moving in a balanced way or whether there is excess or restriction in some area. The well-being of our body is determined by the degree of balance with which the prana flows, and this movement of prana is reflected in the muscles, joints, skin and viscera.

Of the 72,000 nadis thirteen are considered important, but three are primary. These three are called *Ida*, *Pingala* and *Sushumna*. Consciousness is affected and modified by the flow of prana when it becomes predominant in one of these three nadis. For instance,



the flow of prana is more active in the Pingala nadi when we are awake, but is more active in the Ida nadi when we are sleeping. Some of the key qualities of the Ida nadi are introverted, cool, lunar, analog, emotional, passive, yin and feminine. Some of the key qualities of the Pingala nadi are extroverted, warm, solar, digital, logical, active, yang and masculine.

The Sushumna nadi is associated with a balanced state of awareness. This balanced state is not a mixture of Ida and Pingala but a balance—neither emotional nor logical. We really do not have a good translation in English for this concept. It is a state of true intuition, a place of direct and clear awareness. In the yogic model of consciousness, feeling or intuition is differentiated from emotion. An emotion motivates some sort of reaction, whereas feeling or intuition is a direct insight or perception that does not motivate a reaction.

Though Ida, Pingala and Sushumna are not in the physical body, they are experienced along the torso traversing the length of the spine: Ida to the left, Pingala to the right, and Sushumna in the center. The Ida nadi runs from the base of the spine up to the left nostril. The Pingala nadi runs from the base of the spine up to the right nostril. The Sushumna nadi is said to run from the center of the perineum to the top of the head at the fontanel.

The Chakras

The Ida and Pingala nadis are said to overlap Sushumna at several points (see page 63 in *The Spiritual Science of Kriya Yoga*). As prana moves through these three overlapping nadis, a vortex of prana is formed. These points are called chakras. The word chakra literally translated means wheel. The word chakra is used to describe these vortices because their basic appearance is circular. Some sources describe them as having a symmetrical flower-like appearance with petals, like a lotus. Each petal is associated with a particular Sanskrit sound. Ancient diagrams show the chakras containing a combined total of fifty petals, one for each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet. These petals are also said to contain the seeds of our samskaras: our attitudinal, behavioral and physiological predispositions. Each chakra also contains a *bija* or seed sound. This sound vibration is not associated with just one of the petals but with a total, balanced experience of the chakra. It is from this understanding of chakras and phonetics that the science of mantra was developed.



The bias of our consciousness is largely influenced by how prana is flowing through the three primary nadis and the chakras to which they are linked. The prana is given specific qualities by each chakra, which affects the characteristics of how life is experienced.

There are many chakras within our being, but six or seven are considered primary. They are associated with the vertical axis of the torso. Although the chakras are not physical in nature, they can be associated with various aspects of our physiology and psychology. Historically they have been related to the grouping of vertebrae, the cranial nerves, and the ganglions or plexuses formed along the spine. There are six major chakric levels; they are associated with the six major divisions of the spinal column (considering the head as a part of the spine).

The chakra associated with the coccyx at the base of the spine is called Muladhara chakra. Muladhara means *root support*. It is said to have four petals, and in its center is the seat of the Sushumna nadi. It is associated with the earth element, the sense of smell, and the planet Saturn. Physiologically this chakra relates to the skin, bones, knees, and teeth. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as practical, patient, responsible, and self-disciplined. Out of balance, they become pessimistic, rigid, depressed, and selfish. Muladhara relates to the structures in our life, our fears, and our basic survival needs. Its bija sound is *lam*.

The chakra associated with the sacrum is Svadhishthana chakra. Svadhishthana means *its own base*. This is interesting because even though the coccyx is the lowest section of the spine, the sacrum is its functional foundation. It has six petals and is associated with the element of water, the sense of taste, and the planet Jupiter. Physiologically this chakra relates to the thighs, hips, liver and gall bladder. It also rules the blood, specifically the veins and arteries. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as optimistic, generous, and compassionate. Out of balance, they become extravagant, excessive, and over confident. The Svadhishthana chakra is expansive in nature. It relates to our sensory experiences. Its bija sound is *vam*.

The chakra associated with the lumbar spine is called Manipura, meaning *jewel city*. It has ten petals and is associated with the fire element and the planet Mars. Physiologically this chakra relates to the muscles, sexual functions, and the excretory organs. It also rules the red blood cells, bile, and the bladder. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as strong, bold, and courageous. Out of balance they become harsh, angry, and combative. Manipura is the seat of passion, power, and desire. It is associated with the sense of sight. Its bija sound is *ram*.



The chakra related to the thoracic spine is called Anahata. Anahata means *the unstruck sound*. It has twelve petals and is associated with the air element and the planet Venus. Physiologically this chakra relates to the kidneys, renals, intestines, ovaries, and throat. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as affectionate, gentle, and artistic. Out of balance they become self-indulgent, vain, and extravagant. This chakra inspires feelings of beauty and sensuality. Anahata is associated with the sense of touch. Its bija sound is *yam*.

The chakra associated with the cervical spine is Vishuddha. Vishuddha means *pure*. It has sixteen petals and is related to the ether element and the planet Mercury. Physiologically this chakra relates to the nerves, most specifically, the motor nerves. It also rules the ears, mouth, tongue, and the organs of speech. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as articulate, perceptive, and diplomatic. Out of balance they become nervous, restless, and indecisive. This chakra level processes data and information. Vishuddha relates to the sense of hearing. Its bija sound is *ham*.

The chakra related to the head is called Ajna and corresponds to the Sun. Ajna means *command*. It is located between the eyebrows and contains two petals. Physiologically Ajna relates to the heart, upper back, and spleen. It also rules the circulation of blood and the general vitality of the body. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as creative, dignified and honorable. Out of balance they become proud, arrogant, and egotistical.

The five lower chakras contain right and left hemispheres, which relate directly to the Ida and Pingala nadis. The Ajna chakra also has two sides but they are situated front and back rather than left and right. The back petal of this chakra is at the base of the skull and is often associated with the medulla oblongata. It is called Chandra chakra.

Chandra means *moon*. Physiologically the Moon relates to hereditary traits, the stomach, the breast, and body fluids. When positive, the symbolic psychological states associated with this chakra express themselves as receptive, adaptable, and nurturing. Out of balance they become moody, manipulative, and overly-impressionable.

The Chandra chakra is the primary opening that receives prana. (see page 63 in *The Spiritual Science of Kriya Yoga*) The prana is said to enter Chandra chakra and flow down to Muladhara and then up again to Ajna where it is cognized and given expression. During this movement, the prana is modified or colored by the samskaras or predispositions and impressions of our past experiences which reside in the five lower chakras.



In this way the samskaras stored within the chakras are activated and affect the way we create our experience of the world.

The seventh chakra is related to the fontanel at the top of the head. It is called Sahasrara. Sahasrara means *thousand-petaled*. This center is at one end of the Sushumna nadi, the opposite end being in the Muladhara chakra. Technically speaking, Sahasrara is not really in the chakric system. It is a doorway out of the experiential realm created by the chakras. It is an opening into subtler realms.

Asana as a Method for Pranic Balance

The way we breathe, the way we use our body, even the thoughts we think affect the movement of prana. Hatha Yoga is a series of techniques which employs the body and breath as vehicles to absorb, direct, and balance prana. Asana practice reveals the character and pattern of pranic movement and where restriction and excess need to be addressed. The muscles, joints, skin and viscera become mirrors which reflect how the prana is moving through the nadis and chakras. This affects not only our physical well-being and energy level but our perception and experience of our world as well.

According to yoga, any imbalance or limitation in the body or consciousness is caused by a lack or excess of prana in some part of the nadi/chakra system. The purpose of the first four limbs of the Ashtanga is to purify and prepare our body and mind to attract, absorb, and direct the prana.

Asana and pranayama are techniques primarily for creating a balanced pranic flow through the nadis and chakras. This balance assists in providing us with the most unbiased experience of life we can have. Balance is a dynamic state which should require a minimum of effort and energy to sustain. Hence asana and all yoga practice should be an effortless and enjoyable practice. The further out of balance we become, the more energy and effort we will need to expend.

Controlling the Flow of Prana

The normal flow of the prana is through the Ida and Pingala nadis. This flow produces the familiar patterns of waking and sleeping, logic and emotion, thought and action. Through discipline and practice, the yogi is trying to bring the prana into the balanced channel of Sushumna so that it will flow upward from Muladhara to Sahasrara unimpeded.



When this happens centers of consciousness (chakras), which are normally dormant due to a lack of prana, awaken. This results in enlightenment, an illuminating expansion of consciousness which broadens the horizon of awareness, and produces greater joy and wisdom. But this can only be achieved if the chakras and nadis are first balanced. If there is an imbalance in a given chakra, physiologically or psychologically, the pranic current will tend to veer left or right into Ida or Pingala, producing a bias in our body or mind.

At the base of the spine in the Muladhara chakra is a pranic force which is called *kundalini*. Kundalini is referred to as an evolutionary energy which is tremendously powerful. Rather than being drawn in from the outside, this energy is already within us, though dormant or sleeping. One of the goals of yoga is to awaken this latent pranic force and consciously lift it up the central Sushumna nadi to Sahasrara, the thousand-petaled lotus.

Though kundalini is present in all of us, it is usually not an active force because of what are called *granthis*. Granthis are referred to as knots that restrict the ascent of the kundalini. The first granthi is called Brahma-granthi, and it is said to be located just below the navel. The second granthi is called Vishnu-granthi, situated at the throat. The third granthi is called Rudra-granthi, situated between the eyebrows. These three granthis must be “pierced” in order for the kundalini to ascend to the Sahasrara chakra. One goal of asana is to balance the movement of prana so that as the kundalini rises, it will lift unimpeded. The effortless neutrality of the spine, which we develop in asana practice, facilitates this movement.

Throughout our yoga practice, we are working to bring all of the areas of our life into balance. In this way the momentum of the samskaras—the physical, emotional, and behavioral predispositions—can be minimized and even removed. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali states that once a samskara becomes latent, it can be completely dissolved so that no further effect is experienced. In this way, we reach the goal of our practice and become free from the confining biases of our body and mind.

