

Pranayama

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Pranayama is commonly rendered as regulation of the breath, but its meaning in Professor Iyer's Theosophical exposition reaches into the relation between life-energy, thought and spiritual awareness. *Prana* names the vital current; breathing is one of its expressions in embodied life. Within Patanjali's eightfold yoga, *pranayama* follows the ethical restraints, observances and preparation of posture, and helps prepare the mind for concentration. Its place in that whole is essential. The aim is a more harmonious instrument of consciousness, capable of serving inward understanding and a life directed beyond personal craving.

Professor Iyer's "Cognition, Breath and Speech" warns against reducing spiritual teaching about breath to physical manipulation. In the metaphysical account, breath has analogues on different planes of being. The visible movement of respiration belongs to a larger field of rhythms through which consciousness and its vehicles are related. This does not make a physical breath identical with cosmic consciousness, nor does it turn ordinary bodily processes into proof of an occult claim. It means that the teaching employs correspondence: a relationship at one level can help thought approach a more inclusive order.

Prana should therefore be distinguished from air or oxygen. Air is involved in physical respiration; *prana* belongs to the tradition's account of vital activity and its subtler relations. Professor Iyer places it within a cosmic field of energy, understood through the interaction of consciousness and substance. The distinction keeps the philosophical idea from being confused with a modern chemical explanation. Different kinds of account answer different questions. The spiritual enquiry concerns how the energies of embodied life can become less scattered and more responsive to an intelligent, benevolent direction.

The ethical preparation supplies that direction. In "*Sadhana Pada*," Professor Iyer presents the limbs of yoga as an integrated discipline. Nonviolence, truthfulness and the other restraints cannot be set aside once attention turns to subtler practices. Without a change of motive, increased sensitivity or concentration could remain in the service of the same possessive demands. The question is consequently not only how much energy can be gathered, but what governs its use. A steadier instrument is spiritually valuable when it becomes more available to truth, self-mastery and the welfare of others.

His discussion of posture likewise emphasizes alertness, steadiness and flexibility. The body is to support contemplation without becoming the object of exhibition. This prepares an understanding of *pranayama* in which ease and proportion matter. The source does describe

advanced relations among breath, subtle centres and meditative states, but it places them within a demanding preparation and warns against misappropriation. Such descriptions are not interchangeable with a general exercise for any reader. Their philosophical meaning is best approached through the larger discipline that gives them context, including restraint, discrimination and the purification of intention.

The relation of breath to speech offers an accessible point of reflection. A hurried conversation can reveal how quickly feeling, thought and utterance become entangled. We begin speaking before we have understood what needs to be said, and the words carry the agitation forward. A quiet interval may allow attention to return to the actual matter. No special breathing technique is required for this ordinary observation. It suggests why Professor Iyer treats speech, breath and mind as intimately related, and why disciplined expression can become part of a more comprehensive inward education.

In “Cognition, Breath and Speech,” sacred recitation is considered as one means of gathering the lower mind around something worthy of attention. Its value depends upon meaning and awareness, not simply upon sound produced. A sentence can be spoken while thought wanders elsewhere, or it can be received and considered with care. Professor Iyer also distinguishes audible utterance from silent speech and deeper thought. These are related movements, but they should not be collapsed into one another. The teaching invites a progressive refinement of attention through which a sacred idea may become inwardly effective.

Human Solidarity provides a measure for that refinement. If inward practice produces only fascination with private sensations, the wider purpose has been obscured. A more gathered consciousness can become useful in a household, a shared task or a difficult conversation. We may listen without continually rehearsing a reply, preserve a calm tone without suppressing necessary truth, or carry a responsibility with less needless agitation. These are modest ethical applications rather than claims to advanced *pranayama*. Their value is that the aspiration towards harmony begins to benefit the field of life immediately around us.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception places our embodied life within relationships we do not create alone. The atmosphere, the rhythms of living systems, the work that sustains a dwelling, and the care through which a person grows all belong to the conditions of an ordinary day. The contemplation of breath can invite gratitude for this dependence without pretending to explain every relation technically. Within the Theosophical vision, the individual participates in a living whole. The practical consequence is a more reverent use of energies and a greater willingness to consider how one’s activity affects others.

Pranayama also needs to be distinguished from *dharana* and *dhyana*. *Dharana* is the concentration of attention upon a chosen focus; *dhyana* is the sustained flow of that attention. In Professor Iyer’s

account, the harmonizing discipline associated with *pranayama* helps prepare for these inward stages. A calm bodily condition is not by itself a realization of spiritual truth. The mind must still learn discrimination, continuity and freedom from compulsive identification. Keeping the stages distinct protects the depth of the teaching and allows an ordinary beginning to be valued without being mistaken for its highest fulfilment.

The governing image is one of rhythm becoming serviceable to meaning. A phrase spoken with understanding has a different quality from words driven by impatience. Similarly, a day ordered around a worthy purpose can gradually acquire more coherence than a succession of competing impulses. This analogy does not define the technical achievement of *pranayama*. It helps illuminate the direction of the discipline: the energies of life cease to be merely reactions and become increasingly responsive to conscious purpose. The spiritual significance depends upon the quality of that purpose and the clarity with which it is held.

HPB's *The Voice of the Silence* joins inward tranquillity with the obligation to serve. The image of an active body and a soul clear as a mountain lake makes room for both movement and stillness. Her insistence upon loving deeds also prevents contemplation from becoming an excuse for withdrawal from every human claim. Professor Iyer's treatment carries a similar integration. The refinement of consciousness belongs within a lifetime of responsibility. Any account of breath that loses this ethical setting leaves out the very orientation that makes the discipline part of the path of wisdom.

Pranayama, approached in this spirit, invites reverence for the living instrument through which thought and action become possible. The instrument is cared for, its energies are gathered, and its use is gradually made more conscious. The final concern is not the display of control. It is the availability of a quieter, more responsive nature to the work of understanding and service. Breath, speech and thought can then be contemplated as related expressions of a shared life, whose deeper harmony asks to be honoured in the way we listen, act and offer our strength.

Glossary

Abhyasa — Persistent practice; the sustained effort to abide in a steady state of awareness.

Akasha — The subtle spiritual substance of space in Theosophical teaching; also written *Akasa*.

Akashic — Pertaining to *Akasha*, the subtle spiritual substance of space in the Theosophical account.

Anga — A limb or aspect; the eight *angas* are the interrelated disciplines of Patanjali's yoga.

Anugita — A philosophical teaching within the *Mahabharata*, discussed by Professor Iyer in relation to mind, speech and the senses.

Asana — A steady posture supporting the alertness and ease required for meditation.

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle formative or psychic dimension described in Theosophical teaching.

Bhagavad Gita — The dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna within the *Mahabharata*, teaching disciplined action, knowledge and devotion.

Bhakti — Devotion; the inward dedication of feeling, thought and will to a spiritual ideal or the divine.

Contemplative — Pertaining to sustained, reflective or meditative attention directed towards meaning and spiritual understanding.

Dharana — Deliberate concentration upon a chosen focus; the sixth limb of Patanjali's yoga.

Dhyana — The sustained flow of concentrated attention; the meditative phase distinguished from *dharana* and *samadhi* in the cited exposition.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relevant relationships, causes and responsibilities outside an immediate personal view.

Empyrean — A highest or celestial region; the akashic empyrean is Professor Iyer's image for boundless spiritual space.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or deeper teaching whose understanding requires preparation and enquiry.

Gupta Vidya — Secret or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected essays.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity and interdependence, made active through thoughtful responsibility and care.

Karma — The law of action and consequence; the relationships through which causes and their effects operate.

Kleshas — The afflictions of Yoga psychology: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and clinging to phenomenal existence.

Meditative absorption — The deepening of concentration in which consciousness becomes profoundly engaged with its object or spiritual focus.

Metaphysical — Pertaining to the fundamental nature of reality and its underlying principles.

Misappropriation — Taking or using something entrusted or belonging to another in a way that violates its proper purpose or rightful claim.

Mulaprakriti — Root-nature or primordial substance in Theosophical philosophy; the underlying basis of manifested forms.

Neophyte — A beginner or aspirant entering a discipline of spiritual training.

Nirvana — Spiritual emancipation or liberation; its precise philosophical meaning depends upon the tradition and context.

Niyamas — The five binding observances of yoga: purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study and surrender to the divine.

Prakriti — Nature or primordial substance and its manifestations; in *Sankhya* and Yoga, distinguished from *purusha*, the spiritual seer.

Prana — The vital current or life-energy in the traditional account; it is not simply a name for physical air or oxygen.

Pranayama — Regulation of breath and vital energy within the yogic discipline; Professor Iyer also discusses its subtler relation to thought.

Pratyahara — Withdrawal or abstraction of the senses from their objects, preparing consciousness for inward concentration.

Purusha — The spiritual seer or Self in *Sankhya* and Yoga; Professor Iyer interprets its highest realization through a universal spiritual synthesis.

Raja Yoga — The royal discipline of inward self-mastery, meditation and spiritual realization.

Sadhana — A sustained discipline or practice directed towards spiritual realization.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; in the cited account, a deepening in which the object stands alone and the sense of separateness recedes.

Sankhya — An Indian philosophical system distinguishing *purusha*, consciousness, from *prakriti*, nature; an important background to Patanjali's yoga.

Taraka — Transcendent; used in the cited exposition of spiritual knowledge and the yogic path that reaches beyond ordinary limitations.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The transcendent royal discipline of yoga as expounded by Professor Iyer in his studies of Patanjali.

Vesture — A body or instrument through which consciousness is expressed; vestures is the plural.

Yamas — The five restraints of yoga: nonviolence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-possession.

Yoga — An integrated discipline of ethical preparation, concentration and spiritual realization.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "Cognition, Breath and Speech," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 77.

"All of this amounts to a re-ascent in consciousness through the vestures of the mind towards their ultimate ground in that which is beyond manifestation. The same process may be understood in relation to the complex teaching of *Gupta Vidya* concerning the different aspects of breath and their relationship through speech to mind. Like everything else in arcane metaphysics, the concept of breath does not refer merely to something physical. It refers, even at the lowest level, to that which is astral, but which has its analogues all the way up to and including the highest vestures and beyond."

Meditation thought: Breath is discussed through correspondences among levels of being. The metaphysical meaning extends beyond physical respiration while preserving the distinction between those levels.

2. R.N. Iyer, "Sadhana Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

"Patanjali enumerated the eight (ashta) limbs (*anga*) of this *Taraka Raja Yoga* as five which concern karma and lay the foundation for meditation, and three which constitute meditation itself: restraint (*yama*), binding observance (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), regulation of breath (*pranayama*), abstraction and withdrawal from the senses (*pratyahara*); concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and complete meditative absorption (*samadhi*)."

Meditation thought: *Pranayama* belongs within the eightfold discipline. Its purpose becomes clearer when ethical preparation and the later stages of concentration are kept in view.

3. R.N. Iyer, "Patanjali's *Taraka Raja Yoga*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 264.

"The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali is universal in the manner of the *Bhagavad Gita*, including a diversity of standpoints whilst fusing *Sankhya* metaphysics with *bhakti* or self-surrender. There is room for differences of emphasis, but every diligent user of Patanjali's aphorisms is enabled to refine aspirations, clarify thoughts, strengthen efforts, and sharpen focus on essentials in spiritual self-discipline. Accommodating a variety of exercises – mind control, visualization, breath, posture, moral training – Patanjali brings together the best in differing approaches, providing an integrated discipline marked by moderation, flexibility and balance, as well as degrees of depth in meditative absorption."

Meditation thought: The integrated method is marked by moderation and balance. No isolated technique can replace the relation among moral training, self-study and inward attention.

4. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

"The correct posture will be firm and flexible without violating the mind's vigorous concentration and precise focus. Once the appropriate *asana* is assumed by each neophyte, the mind is becalmed and turned towards the Infinite, becoming wholly impervious to bodily movement and change, immersed in the boundless space of the akashic empyrean. Thus the impact of the oscillating pairs of opposites upon the volatile brain mind, captivated by sharp contrasts and idle speculations, and the agitation of the body through recurring sensations are at least temporarily muted. In this state of serene peace, the effortless regulation of rhythmic breath (*pranayama*) becomes as natural as floating on the waters of space. Just as the mind and body are intimately interlinked at every point, such that even holding a firm physical posture aids the calming of the mind, so too *pranayama* points to silent mental breathing as well as smooth respiration."

Meditation thought: The source joins steadiness with flexibility and alertness. Its account of breath points towards a harmonized instrument of consciousness, rather than a display of bodily control.

5. R.N. Iyer, "*Sadhana Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 283.

"The process of purification is not an end in itself, but the necessary condition to prepare the mind for *dharana*, complete concentration. *Pranayama*, delusive and dangerous when misappropriated for selfish purposes pursued through subtle enslavement by the *kleshas*, is hereby integrated into Patanjali's eightfold yoga as a preliminary step towards subduing the restless mind, freeing it to become the servant of the immortal soul, seeking greater wisdom, self-mastery and universal self-consciousness."

Meditation thought: Purification prepares the mind for concentration and service to spiritual understanding. The passage explicitly places the use of subtler energies under the discipline of motive.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Cognition, Breath and Speech," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 78.

"Inspirational breathing is important in relation to being able to aspirate properly, to speak clearly, and so to control the power of sound. To control a restless mind, for example, one could try reading aloud some passage from a sacred text. The principal thing is to forget oneself, in the lower sense. Yet this is no easy task, if only because one has spent too much time, too much energy and too much wasted breath over so many lives in lower self-meditation. Even if this is so, one can use the vestures of the lower self on behalf of a higher egoism. Through intoning sacred words, paying attention to the sound of one's own voice and the words being formulated, one may employ the power of speech to govern the restless lower mind."

Meditation thought: Recitation is presented as an attentive engagement with meaningful language. Its value depends upon the orientation of consciousness, rather than upon sound produced mechanically.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Cognition, Breath and Speech," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 79.

"According to the *Anugita*, it is possible through the power of silent or inaudible speech to approach the realm of the immovable mind, enabling one to draw upon its powers of inspiration. Ordinarily, people find it difficult to distinguish between what they call thought and silent speech. This is because ordinary views of the power of thought are extremely vague. Hence the crucial importance of regular efforts to engage in meditation, attempting to hold ideas in the mind, if only by trying to hold sentences or stanzas from sacred texts before the mind. As one does this, one can intone the sentence in the mind, and as one intones it, one can dwell upon it. Gradually becoming one with the Teaching in the mind, one may increasingly learn to think upon it in the true sense of the word 'thought'. In this way, one can begin to apprehend both noiseless speech and the mystical process whereby it nourishes the life of the soul."

Meditation thought: Silent speech and thought require patient discrimination. Dwelling upon a teaching can help a sentence become an inwardly active meaning instead of remaining a remembered formula.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Cognition, Breath and Speech," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 79.

"Each sense is seen as a differentiation both of the abstract power of thought and the abstract principle of substance on a particular plane. There is no mind-body problem in the philosophy of *Gupta Vidya*. There are, instead, corresponding to different planes of Universal Cognition and *Mulaprakriti* in manifestation, different sets of senses and organs of action. By recognizing the predominance of the mind in relation to the lower astral and physical senses, it is possible through deliberation and thoughtfulness to rise above the compulsive and involuntary processes that operate through the sense-organs of the gross body."

Meditation thought: Professor Iyer relates the senses to thought and substance on differing planes. Deliberation becomes a means of freedom from automatic reaction within embodied life.

9. R.N. Iyer, “*Samadhi Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 275.

“Overcoming mental obstructions through *abhyasa* in respect to one principle requires the progressive purification of the mind, freeing it from the froth and dross of old patterns fostered by feeble and fickle attention. Most seekers typically find easiest and most effective a concerted effort to expand the feeling of friendliness towards all beings, compassion for every creature, inward gladness and a cool detachment in regard to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice.”

Meditation thought: Friendliness and compassion belong to the purification of mind. The search for inward harmony retains its spiritual direction when it enlarges benevolence towards other beings.

10. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment II, p. 23.

“Both action and inaction may find room in thee; thy body agitated, thy mind tranquil, thy Soul as limpid as a mountain lake.”

Meditation thought: The image permits outward activity and inward clarity to coexist. Calm becomes useful when it supports responsibility rather than requiring withdrawal from every demand.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment II, p. 24.

“Shalt thou abstain from action? Not so shall gain thy soul her freedom. To reach Nirvana one must reach Self-Knowledge, and Self-Knowledge is of loving deeds the child. Have patience, Candidate, as one who fears no failure, courts no success. Fix thy Soul's gaze upon the star whose ray thou art, the flaming star that shines within the lightless depths of ever-being, the boundless fields of the Unknown.”

Meditation thought: Loving action gives spiritual discipline an ethical ground. Patience and freedom from the hunger for success preserve the possibility of a wholehearted, unadvertised offering.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 10.

“Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce Sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye.”

Meditation thought: The welfare of another being provides a direct test of inward refinement. Greater composure is most valuable when it helps the heart respond with timely care.