



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

April 2017 Contemplation:
Exploring Yoga's Multidimensionality #4

All You Need is...

By Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

"All you need is love" the Beatles tell us. But yoga says you don't need love. Instead, you need to know your own Self. Your own Self, is Consciousness-Itself, which is the Source of Love-Itself. Your Divine Essence is the One who is being every scintillating form in this world. Instead of needing love, what you need is Ujjayi Pranayama — to enliven you, to center and ground you, and to empower your inward journey to your own Self.

We teach the breathing practice, Ujjayi Pranayama, at the beginning of every Svaroopa® yoga class. For those five minutes, you focus on your breath, especially the sound of your breath. You're actually using sound, breath and awareness to work on your prana, your own aliveness. Prana is more subtle than your breath. It is the cosmic energy of aliveness that underlies everything that exists, including you.

The four-fold model of Consciousness we wrote about last month explains that Shiva takes on the seeming emptiness of the void, and Shiva pulsates within the void. That pulsation of Shiva within Shiva is named prana. Other ancient cultures have named prana: in Chinese, it's chi; in Japanese, it's ki. In the Star Wars universe, it's called the Force. Your own prana is the energy that coalesces as your mind, subtle body and physical body. When your prana is low, you don't have the clarity of mind or physical capacities you want.

You are used to looking outside for a way to fill up on prana. One of the reasons people love nature is because it's abounding with prana. Sitting by the ocean, taking a walk through the woods, going outside in the spring amidst blooming daffodils and budding trees, fills you up. But it's only a temporary fix. Some healing modalities specialize on giving you prana. It helps you feel better for a while, until you once again deplete your prana and need to be filled up by someone else — again.

Yoga offers many different ways of working with prana, especially through pranayama (breathing practices). The benefits are so immediate and tangible! Of all the many types of pranayama, Ujjayi Pranayama is the most important because it is safe and effective, as well as accessible to anyone. Swami Nirmalananda remembers teaching Dr. Benjamin Spock, the baby doctor, how to do Ujjayi Pranayama when he began yoga at the age of 94. He was surprised at how his own breath worked.

Your prana and breath are intimately intertwined though they are not the same. It's like the difference between electricity and a light bulb. Electricity is energy, not a physical reality; you cannot pour a cup of electricity. A light bulb is physical. It needs the energy of electricity in order to function. Your breath is physical, but it needs the energy of your prana in order to function. Prana makes your breath function. Yet breathing is the only involuntary body system you can voluntarily control, thus yoga uses your breath to move your prana.

You not only "prime the pump" when you do Ujjayi, even more valuable, you expand your pranic capacity. You *can* be full to the brim, vibrant, happy and healthy all the time. To have a lot of prana is to be enlivened, full of life! Your skin shines, your eyes glow, you have vitality and enthusiasm, even a delight in everything that happens.

Your prana is comprised of five primary flows. Performing different functions, they usually need to be balanced. Ujjayi Pranayama balances all your pranic flows simultaneously. Prana is the name of the general category of enlivening energy, technically spelled "praana." Looking more closely at the five types, you'll see that the first one is also named "praana," which can be confusing. Prana is both a general and specific term, which this list clarifies:

Praana praana — the energy of intake, filling up, ingestion. It gives you the ability to take in oxygen as well as the ability to take in yoga's teachings. Ayurveda sometimes prescribes medicated oils to rub on the affected part of your body, which soak through your skin, as this is one of the quickest ways to ingest medication. Praana brings the oil into your skin.

Apaana praana — the energy of emptying out: elimination and excretion. This is an emptying, downward flowing energy, which manifests as urination, defecation, menstruation, sweating and exhalation. If you use praana to take in teachings, what will excrete? Apaana excretes all the old stuff

you used to think and the ways you beat yourself up. With Ujjayi Pranayama, you're cultivating the capacity to take in as well as to empty away what you don't need to hang on to anymore.

Samaana praana — the energy of digestion. Samaana prana fuels the processing of the food you've eaten, extracting the nutrients and making them available to your cells. It's related to digesting your life experiences as well as digesting the teachings. Swamiji can explain a teaching and it can go in one ear and out the other. You didn't digest it. Her Guru often said you must imbibe the teachings fully. Let the nutrients of the teachings feed you.

Vyaana praana — the energy of assimilation. Samaana prana makes the nutrients available but vyaana prana gets the nutrients into all the cells of your body. Vyaana prana keeps you alive even when you miss a meal. It gives you endurance, vitality and stamina. In meditation, you may notice that sometimes you're not breathing, although once you notice, your breath usually starts up again. Vyaana prana keeps you alive even when prana and apaana are suspended, which happens in the deepest states of blissful meditative absorption.

Udaana praana — the upward moving energy. Udaana is the energy of laughter, talking, hiccups, crying, burping and coughing. It makes you bubbly and talkative. It's also the energy of upliftment, of happiness and joy. It's a blissful energy. Everybody loves udaana praana.

All this means that if you don't have enough breath, you're also not going to have good digestion, elimination, assimilation, stamina or even much joy. When you do Ujjayi Pranayama, you are nourishing and balancing all your pranas.

How much Ujjayi Pranayama must you do for the benefits it promises? Only 20 minutes a day! If you are experiencing any health problems, double it — do 20 minutes twice daily. If you're having a hard time, you need *more* Ujjayi, not less. Rukmini shares,

When I first tried Ujjayi Pranayama for 20 minutes at home, I had a hard time keeping it going that long. After 10 minutes, I'd drift off. Worse, I wasn't noticing much benefit from my attempts. So, I set a timer to go off every 5 minutes. And I focused on making the sound of my breath easy. I found that, for me, it's the last few minutes of the practice that are the most powerful. My breath opens up, and there's a spreading bliss and inner spaciousness. Wellbeing is the least of what I get!

Aerobic exercise gets you breathing faster by having you jump, run or dance. They test your aerobic condition by measuring how slow your resting breath is (better aerobic condition = fewer breaths per minute). It's counter-intuitive. With Ujjayi Pranayama, you slow your breath down to slow down your breath.

Preliminary studies have shown that people doing pranayama have better heart-lung efficiency than aerobic exercisers. Yogis are not surprised by this. It's because, while you're exercising, you're spending the prana that you're building. But when you're doing Ujjayi Pranayama in Shavasana, you're collecting the prana without spending it. So, you're increasing your reservoir of prana.

More importantly, from yoga's perspective, if you do 20 minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama, and then sit up to meditate, your entry into meditation is easy, deep and profound. Pranayama's true purpose is to fill your pranic reservoir and quiet your mind, so you can be immersed in the timelessness and breathlessness of your own Self. As important as your own aliveness is, yoga's goal is for you experience the One that you really are.

Nirmalananda describes it:

You have a body, but you are not your body. You have a mind, but you are not your mind. You are more than your body, more than your mind, and more than your body and mind put together.

You existed before this body existed, you will exist beyond the end of this body. Pranayama helps you to access the deeper dimension of your being, deeper than prana, beyond the void. Wonderfully, this experience also increases your body's health, strength and vitality. Do more yoga. Specifically, do more Ujjayi Pranayama.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "EXPLORING YOGA'S MULTIDIMENSIONALITY," OUR THEME FOR 2017, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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