

# Aspects of the breath in a flowing asana practice

## Introduction

*“I pay homage to you, O Breath, for the whole universe pays homage to you.”*

*Atharva Veda<sup>1</sup>*

When I started meditating I was intrigued to notice the role the breath played in attaining concentration, awareness and peace of mind. A few years later, when I took up yoga, this was a familiar element to me and focus on the breath became one of the essential and important aspects in my practice. Coming back to the breath helps me to keep the development of my personal practice in perspective and cultivate greater concentration and relaxation.

As the breath is a vast topic in the context of yoga, I decided to pick out a few areas that I find particularly relevant personally – some physical, some more subtle – and which I would like to share with students when teaching.

## Breath in yoga

In simple words the goal of yoga can be understood as the union of body, mind and spirit. The breath plays an intrinsic part on the journey towards this union and can be used as a guide through the different steps. Patanjali describes eight of these steps or limbs<sup>2</sup>, as he calls them. The first one where a focus on the breath is promoted is asana. From there working with the breath leads on to deeper levels of awareness in pranayama

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<sup>1</sup> Atharva Veda in Rolf Sovik, *Moving Inward*, p55

<sup>2</sup> The eight limbs are Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, verse 229

and meditation. Below I will examine the relevance of breath in the context of asana practice where we first develop an awareness of it.

## **Becoming aware of the breath**

As one of the automatic processes in the body we aren't usually aware of our breathing, yet our breath is an indicator of our state of health and is affected by any imbalance in our bodies or minds.<sup>1</sup> When we are excited, sad, agitated or in pain the breath can become short, irregular and laboured. Poor breathing can become habitual and affect the autonomic nervous system producing feelings of stress, anxiety and even panic attacks. By contrast when we are relaxed our breathing becomes deep and even. Quiet breathing can slow the heartbeat, reduce blood pressure and produce calm and a sense of stability<sup>2</sup>. Only relatively recently has an emphasis on the right breathing technique become important in sports, public speaking, stress therapy and many other areas of public life, whereas in eastern philosophic systems an awareness of the breath has been highlighted as a way to achieve focus and concentration for centuries. Our respiration is one of only two internal functions that operates autonomously yet permits conscious control<sup>3</sup> and I find it beautiful to become aware that I can use the breath as a tool that roots me in the present moment and can help me to calm down when I'm agitated or to relax when I feel tense.

Many teachers draw the students' attention to the breath in the beginning of a class. As students sit or lie on their back the teacher might make them aware of the grounding qualities of the exhalation connecting them to the earth and the gently lifting action through the spine and up through the crown of the head on the inhalation. This

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<sup>1</sup> This essay doesn't provide the scope to describe the details of the physiology of breathing. I recommend Donna Farhi's *The Breathing Book* and Doug Keller's *Refining the Breath* for further reading and detailed descriptions.

<sup>2</sup> David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga*, p90

<sup>3</sup> The other one is eye blinking.

awareness promotes a sense of calmness, openness and ‘moving inwards’ and gives everyone the opportunity to settle in and leave their everyday lives outside for some time. Many teachers then remind students to ‘come back to their breathing’ throughout the course of the class or to ‘keep breathing’ particularly in more challenging asanas. To enhance this focus on the breath, I personally have recently experimented practicing with ear plugs or closed eyes. This sensory withdrawal makes the focus on the breath and its rooting, stabilizing action even more obvious and accessible.

## **Breath and asanas**

The position of our body in space affects the rhythm and fullness of our breathing. At the same time the breath works like a constant feedback mechanism during practice – if we have trouble breathing it is a clear sign that we are pushing ourselves too much. In a recent workshop John Scott used the metaphor of the traffic light system of the breath.<sup>1</sup> Green symbolizes a free flowing full breath, orange means the breath is fast and sharp and – as he put it – you should “*proceed with caution or get through it quickly*” and red symbolizes held breath<sup>2</sup> in which case the asana should be released. I found this to be a helpful metaphor not only for my own practice, but also when listening to a student’s breath when giving hands on adjustments.

Below I would like to briefly explore body alignment through the breath and then examine how the breath is affected in different groups of asanas.

## **Alignment through breath**

I have noticed in the development of my personal practice that initiating and aligning movement from the breath rather than thinking about mechanical physical cue points

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<sup>1</sup> John Scott workshop, Triyoga, July 2009

<sup>2</sup> This describes an involuntarily held breath due to practicing an asana that is too challenging. In contrast, in pranayama breath retention is used consciously and deliberately and without strain or effort to promote stillness and focus.

and muscles to engage lets my body naturally discover alignment and energetic flow and directly affects the quality of the asana which in turn affects the quality of breathing in the posture. Explaining asanas in detail is a very helpful tool for many students, but when teaching I would like to also encourage a ‘feel’ for the body’s alignment in space through the breath to support balance and find steadiness and ease in an asana. Generally speaking inhalations stabilize the torso initiating a lifting action, exhalations carry us further into many postures.

### **Standing**

In standing asanas – particularly when combined with dynamic movement as in surya namaskara – breathing shortens slightly, as the body is moving through an aerobic physical exercise. Generally though many standing asanas allow relatively free unrestricted breathing and as they are often performed in the beginning of a class they can be used to develop awareness and tune in to the state of our body and breath.<sup>1</sup>

### **Forward bends**

In a forward bend like Paschimottanasana the internal organs are slightly compressed so that each inhalation automatically lifts the ribcage through the movement of the diaphragm and each exhalation lowers the body down again. This natural movement can be used actively to lengthen the spine on an inhale and release deeper into the asana on an exhale.<sup>2</sup> Moving and releasing into the asana with gravity and the breath can help release tension and pain.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p42

<sup>2</sup> It’s best to fold into a forward bend from the hips (if students have the flexibility), as this will keep the spine straighter for longer and compress the chest less therefore not restricting the breath in any way.

<sup>3</sup> Swami Satyananda, *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, p227

## Twists

Breathing in twists tends to be the most restricted out of all asanas, as the abdomen is stretched and the internal organs squeezed together so that the diaphragm cannot expand freely and the lower ribcage is constrained from moving out when inhaling. In addition in some twists like Marichiasana C the thigh presses into the abdomen and chest and the only way to inhale is to breathe into the upper chest. David Coulter describes that the pressure on the abdominal wall often causes a slowing of the inhalation and short exhalation.<sup>1</sup> Working with the breath we can inhale and lift up through the spine bringing some space between the vertebrae and release into a deeper twist as we exhale.

## Lateral bends

Side bends like Utthita Trikonasana or Parighasana are partly similar to twists, as one side of the body is squeezed restricting the expansion of the diaphragm. However the other side of the ribcage is opened up and stretched allowing a free flow of air into the lung on that side. Therefore according to Julie Gudmestad lateral bends improve expansiveness of the lungs<sup>2</sup> when practiced regularly on both sides.

## Backbends

Different types of backbends affect breathing in different ways: In backbends like Ustrasana or Urdhva Dhanurasana there's a strong stretch through the front of the body, which makes it difficult to expand the diaphragm down fully and there's also an element of being up side down which can be uncomfortable. For those reasons many backbends can be particularly susceptible to holding the breath.

In prone backbends like Bhujangasana or Shalabhasana it is easier to encourage students to lift up further with each inhalation (while keeping the thoracic spine long) moving

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<sup>1</sup> David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga*, p434

<sup>2</sup> Julie Gudmestad, *Side Stretch Satisfaction*, [http://www.yogajournal.com/for\\_teachers/2640?print=1](http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/2640?print=1)

deeper into the posture. Prone backbends are some of the ‘safest’ backbends to practice, as the back muscles have to be strongly engaged to lift the body up against gravity and protect the lumbar spine from arching too strongly.

Urdhva Mukha Svavasana – where the body is suspended in the air through lifting through the arms – and Matsyasana – where the backbend is relatively solidly supported by the lower body and head resting on the floor – are good asanas to explore breathing and expanding into the front of the body fully, as the upper torso is relatively unrestricted and the diaphragm still has some range of movement.

### **Inversions**

Inversions literally turn our world on its head, enabling us to see things in a new light. The diaphragm actively presses the abdominal organs towards the ceiling during the inhalation and the weight of the abdominal organs against the diaphragm on the exhalation lengthens and stretches the muscle fibres of the diaphragm and causes a deeper exhalation. As the abdominal organs aren’t pulled down through gravity and receive some rest, inversions have a restorative effect<sup>1</sup>. They are generally considered to improve health and self-confidence and reduce anxiety and stress.

Sirsasana promotes slow abdominal and diaphragmatic breathing, as the ribcage is held in place through contraction of the muscles throughout the torso making it very difficult to breathe into the chest.<sup>2</sup> Swami Sivananda says about sirasana: *“If you watch the breath, you will notice that it becomes finer and finer. In the beginning of practice, there will be slight difficulty in breathing. As you advance in practice, this vanishes entirely. You will find real pleasure, exhilaration of spirit, in this Asana.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Swami Satyananda, *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, p258

<sup>2</sup> David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga*, p474

<sup>3</sup> Swami Sivananda, *Yoga Asana*, p16

Sarvangasana and similar inversions affect breathing in a comparable way to sirsasana, but at the same time the body has a stronger foundation and support through the shoulders and you can actively watch your breath expanding your belly.<sup>1</sup> Breathing in sarvangasana is usually faster than in sirsasana.

### **Savasana**

In this asana particularly we can smooth and even out our breathing. Teachers will often remind us that we can ‘breathe into’ any parts of our body that feel tense and consciously release and relax the whole body through the breath. Even, relaxed breathing in savasana has a soothing effect and seems to generally diminish activity in motor neurons.<sup>2</sup> The diaphragm expands the abdominal wall very easily in this position and respiration produces little movement in the rest of the body. To achieve a deep relaxation it is as important to quieten the mind as it is to quieten the body. In savasana this stilling of the mind can be practiced easily by bringing attention to different areas of the body, watching the breath at a specific place – like the nostrils –, or following the breath up and down the body.

### **Encouraging movement through breath**

The body is never still, the breath always creates little movements just through inhaling and exhaling and there are more subtle movements of blood through the body, the workings of the organs and nerve impulses right down to the tiny vibrations of cells. Through my personal experience I feel that a dynamic yoga practice like Vinyasa Flow or Asthanga yoga takes this internal uninterrupted movement to the outside in a very natural way, consciously linking breath and body by allowing every movement to be led by the breath and smooth, even breathing supporting the rhythm and flow of the practice

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<sup>1</sup> David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga*, p527

<sup>2</sup> David Coulter, *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga*, p552

– an outward expression of the subtle movements of prana<sup>1</sup>. The synchronization of one movement with one breath is called vinyasa, from the Sanskrit *nyasa* “to place” and the prefix *vi* “in a special way”. Sri Krishnamacharya defines vinyasa as “*the intelligent unfolding of a sequence in practice, life or nature*”<sup>2</sup>, a balance of opposites – strength and flexibility, lightness and heaviness, movement and stillness.<sup>3 4</sup> Starting and ending movement and breath at the same time also means that there is much less scope for holding the breath. Inhale and exhale are threaded together continuously and evenly.

Bringing movement into an otherwise static asana with each breath can also make it more accessible especially for less flexible people. A common example of flowing through movement with the breath is cat cow breathing, but could be expanded by flowing between Adho Mukha Svavasana and Urdhva Mukha Svavasana or simply lengthening into a forward bend and coming back up in Baddha Konasana.

A flowing yoga practice often includes a special breathing technique called ujjayi and uses the engagement of subtle energy locks – bandhas – to support awareness and produce heat in the body producing detoxifying sweat and warming up the muscles, which naturally increases flexibility and protects the body from injury.

### **Ujjayi breathing**

*“Closing the mouth, inhale with control and concentration through ida and pingala, so that the breath is felt from the throat to the hearth and produces a sonorous sound.”*<sup>5</sup>

This is how the Hatha Yoga Pradipika describes ujjayi breath. The prefix *uj* means “to

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<sup>1</sup> Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Asana Pranayama, Mudra, Bandha*, p160

<sup>2</sup> Shiva Rea, *Embodying the Flow*, teacher training manual June2008, p7

<sup>3</sup> David Swenson, *Astanga Yoga*, p11

<sup>4</sup> According to Swami Satyananda Saraswati on a physical level a vinyasa ‘resets’ the spine, loosens and massages the whole body and stimulates and balances the internal organs and other body systems after a held asana.

<sup>5</sup> Swami Muktibodhananda, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, p240

expand” and the word *jayi* means “success” or “victory”. Breathing through the nose only<sup>1</sup>, in ujjayi breathing the flow of air through the throat is slightly restricted by contracting the back of the larynx. The breath then has to be drawn in and out more actively which lengthens, deepens and regulates it and makes it easier to evenly connect inhale and exhale. This soft guiding of the breath in and out of the body is also deeply soothing to the lungs and nervous system.<sup>2</sup> Doug Keller describes the hissing sound caused by the breath travelling over the vocal cords as „*the music of the prana when directed skillfully through the instrument of the body.*“<sup>3</sup> Listening to the sound focuses awareness and quietens the senses and fluctuations of the mind, which according to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is one of the main goals of yoga practice<sup>4</sup>. It also makes it more noticeable when the breath stops and we have to come out of or modify an asana and is therefore the clearest indication of the quality of our asana practice.<sup>5</sup> As a breathing technique in itself ujjayi is calming, but in combination with asana practice it can increase the heat in the body and is particularly relevant for a dynamic practice. It is also valuable for elderly people or others that do not exercise, as the deep slow breathing aerates parts of the lungs that are usually only used during exercise.<sup>6</sup>

Mastering ujjayi breathing takes practice and patience. When I started I found it quite hard to sustain throughout a whole class, but with time ujjayi breathing starts to happen naturally and effortlessly.

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<sup>1</sup> In yoga breathing is generally only through the nose apart from a few special breathing techniques.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Farhi, *Yoga Mind, Body & Spirit*, p34

<sup>3</sup> Doug Keller, *Refining the breath*, p15

<sup>4</sup> Sri Swami Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, verse 2, p3

<sup>5</sup> TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p23

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Gilmore, *Anatomy & Physiology teacher training handout*, p10

## Breath and Bandhas

Bandhas are a series of internal valves (literally “locks”) within the subtle body, which regulate the flow of energy or prana.<sup>1</sup> In the physical body they manifest as muscular contractions of certain areas in the body which aid with inner alignment, support a strong core, focus concentration and stimulate heat. With regards to the breath mula bandha and uddiyana bandha are of particular importance.<sup>2</sup>

Mula bandha lies at the root of the spinal column and can be described in simple terms as the contraction and lifting of the perineal muscles (the exact location is slightly different in men and women). The tailbone lengthens downward, while the front of the lumbar spine lifts upward. When we engage mula bandha we bring together the downward rooting action of the ujjayi breath and the upward lifting action of mula bandha.<sup>3</sup> “By contracting the perineum the downward moving apana vayu is forced to go upward. Yogis call this moola bandha.”<sup>4</sup> Through mula bandha the yogi tries to connect to the source (‘root’) of creation and control mind, intellect and ego.<sup>5</sup>

The counterpart to mula bandha is uddiyana bandha. Uddiyana means “flying up” and is an inward drawing and upward lifting action of the lower abdominal muscles towards the spine,<sup>6</sup> but not as much as to restrict a downward movement of the diaphragm on the inhalation. Engaging uddiyana bandha in a practice is a good way to stabilize the

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<sup>1</sup> David Swenson, *Astanga Yoga*, p9

<sup>2</sup> This refers to breathing in an asana practice. Jalandhara bandha – the throat or chin lock – is very important in pranayama alongside uddiyana and mula bandha.

<sup>3</sup> Beryl Bender-Birch, *Power Yoga*, p92

<sup>4</sup> Swami Muktibodhananda, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, verse 62, p340

<sup>5</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, p367

<sup>6</sup> During asana practice uddiyana bandha is only gently engaged. In its complete expression it is used as a Kriya or cleansing technique.

spine and helps to expand the lungs into the side ribs, back and chest.<sup>1</sup> The Hatha Yoga Pradipika describes uddiyana bandha as follows: “*The portions above and below the navel should be drawn backwards towards the spine.*”<sup>2</sup> It is said that through practice of uddiyana bandha prana is forced to move up through sushumna nadi – the central energy channel located in the spinal column – and traditionally it is believed to conquer old age and death.<sup>3</sup>

The physical actions of the bandhas work to maintain the upward extension of the spine – creating more room for the breath to move – and tone of the internal organs. On a more subtle level the lift, support and centering action of the bandhas directs and regulates the flow of prana.<sup>4</sup> The bandhas are the bridge that allows us to move from practice on a merely physical level to practice as inner energy work.<sup>5</sup>

## **Prana and the movements of breath – Prana Vayu**

*“Breath is life. And life is breath.”*

*Kaushitaki Upanishad<sup>6</sup>*

Many ancient philosophies have a name for the unifying energy that flows through all of creation and pervades each individual and the whole world and universe. In Taoism this energy is called *chi* – air or spirit, in ancient Rome it is called *anima* – soul and the yogis call it *prana*. *Pra* in sanskrit means “to fill” and the root *an* means “to breathe” or “to live”. Common translations of prana include “life force”, “energy”, “breath” or

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<sup>1</sup> David Swenson, *Asthanga Yoga*, p10

<sup>2</sup> Swami Muktibodhananda, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, verse 58, p337

<sup>3</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Pranayama*, p95

<sup>4</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, p365

<sup>5</sup> Doug Keller, *Refining the Breath*, p91

<sup>6</sup> *Kaushitaki Upanishad* quoted in Rolf Sovik, *Moving Inward*, p83

“spirit”. Prana is closely linked with the breath and influenced by its quality. In my understanding Prana is the energy that we receive with each inhalation and distribute into the world again with each exhalation, the element that links us to each other and to the world and that gives us life. Through the flow of our breath we can influence the flow of prana in our body<sup>1</sup> and a smooth, undisturbed flow of prana produces health and ease in body and mind.<sup>2</sup>

The Prana inside each individual body is understood to have different qualities or aspects described as *vayu* “movement” or “wind”. The five main ones<sup>3</sup> are prana (often differentiated with a lower case p as opposed to the overall category Prana with a capital P), samana, apana, udana and vyana. Each of the Prana vayus is connected to different areas of the body and different subtle energy centres (chakras). Balance between all of them is required for them to be effective<sup>4</sup> and for body and mind to be healthy.

The prana vayus are widely described in the relevant literature<sup>5</sup>, so I just want to give a brief summary here and explain how their workings can be demonstrated in a yoga class.

Of the five primary pranas in the body, prana and apana vayu are regarded as most important.

## **Prana**

Prana, literally „the forward moving air“, is mainly active in the heart region and is responsible for anything that is „received“ like food or air when inhaling, but also all

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<sup>1</sup> TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p54

<sup>2</sup> Doug Keller, *Refining the Breath*, p9

<sup>3</sup> These are the ones understood to be directly influenced by the practice of yoga.

<sup>4</sup> TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p57

<sup>5</sup> For an in depth description I recommend Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati's *Prana Pranayama Prana Vidya*

sensory impressions and mental experiences and it maintains the functions of the lungs and heart. Although the inhalation draws the breath down into the body, the energy of the inhalation is at the same time experienced as rising inward and upward, bringing a lift, opening and expansion.

### **Apana**

Apana, the „air that moves away“, is a grounding, rooting movement and provides our foundation in asanas. It is associated with the exhalation and any other movement of „expelling“ or eliminating anything from the body like evacuation of the bowels, the expelling of semen or menstrual fluid, the fetus at birth and any foreign element in our body – it is the basis of our immune function. More subtly it also eliminates negative sensory, emotional and mental experiences. Its home is the pelvic region between navel and perineum.

### **Udana**

Udana, the "upward moving air," is a rising, outward moving energy. Associated with the motor and sensory nervous system, it moves the limbs, is responsible for speech, governs growth of the body and – on a subtle level – effort, enthusiasm and will. It is our main positive energy in life and is active through the head region and the limbs.

### **Samana**

Samana, literally the "balancing air," has a contracting action, moving from the periphery to the centre. It digests food, absorbs oxygen in the lungs and homogenizes and assimilates sensory, emotional or mental experiences in the mind.<sup>1</sup> It resides in the central region of the body between diaphragm and navel.

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<sup>1</sup> David Frawley, *The Secret of Prana*, <http://www.dharmacentral.com/articles/prana.htm>

## **Vyana**

Vyana is the "outward moving air," expanding in all directions from the core. It pervades the whole body, distributing energy to all areas and supporting the actions of the others pranas. It governs all circulation like moving food, water and oxygen through the body and prevents disease. It also keeps our emotions and thoughts circulating in the mind.

The five movements of Prana underly every movement we see around and within us. Every aspect of a yoga practice – asana, pranayama, bandha, mudra or chanting – is created by these movements of Prana.<sup>1</sup>

Although the concept of prana vayu might be quite a subtle and philosophical one at first sight, I find that it can be demonstrated very clearly through the opposition of forces applicable in asana practice and as such be made accessible to students during a class. A grounding and at the same time rebounding movement is obvious in many standing postures and can be emphasized even more by a subtle movement with the breath. Virabadhrasana I is a good example, where we ground down through the legs, strongly connecting to the floor through the feet and at the same time reach up to the sky through the fingertips. Bending the front knee just slightly further on each exhalation will access apana – the grounding force – and lifting the hips and straightening the front leg ever so slightly on each inhalation will demonstrate the upward lifting movements of prana and udana.

Equally samana and vyana vayu can be emphasized by moving through a “tiger stretch”, from hands and knees on the floor straightening one leg back and up, radiating out from the core (vyana vayu) and exhaling the leg into the chest, contracting from the core as the back rounds and the head touches the knee (samana vayu).

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<sup>1</sup> Shiva Rea, *Embodying the Flow*, teacher training manual June2008, p34

Flowing through asanas with an awareness of the movements of prana can promote a greater sense of opening or releasing of areas that feel held or tense and enhance the breath flow in an asana.<sup>1</sup> It can also help to demonstrate the effects of bandhas through the interaction of grounding and rising forces, promote a sense of space in the joints and a sense of balance.

## Breath and mind

*“Prana is the vehicle for the mind;  
where the prana takes it, the mind goes.”*

*Yoga Vashista<sup>2</sup>*

While a holistic approach to body and mind has long been neglected in the west, eastern philosophies always emphasized the inextricable link between body and mind. Ultimately the aim of yoga is to control the mind and unite body, mind and spirit. Controlling the breath<sup>3</sup> is one step towards that. Yogis believe that if we can control our breathing we can control every aspect of our being. Thich Nhat Hanh says *“Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind, the element which reconciles our body and mind and which makes possible oneness of body and mind. Breath is aligned to both body and mind and it alone is the tool which can bring them both together, illuminating both and bringing both peace and calm.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shiva Rea, *Embodying the Flow*, teacher training manual June 2008, p37

<sup>2</sup> Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vashista*, p294

<sup>3</sup> and controlling the body through asana

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

As long as the breath remains unconscious, it is not part of spiritual practice<sup>1</sup>. By bringing this previously unconscious activity into consciousness, and by focusing our awareness totally on the present moment, the breath works as a guide from asana to pranayama and on to pratyahara and meditation. By turning our senses and attention inward and focussing on our breath, we start to tune in to prana with its potential and its healing qualities. As Beryl Bender Birch puts it “*By being in constant touch with your breathing, you are training yourself to be in touch with the process of life and growth.*”<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

Cultivating an awareness of the breath and keeping that awareness throughout an asana practice supports the health benefits of a physical exercise and beyond that is an essential stepping stone into mindfulness and spiritual development. It helps to root the mind in the present moment and guides the way to deeper levels of practice towards a moving mediation. The breath teaches us a lot about the state our body and mind are in at any moment. The more we know about our body and mind and can truly ‘occupy’ it, the more we have the potential to achieve happiness in our lives.

Word count: 3,974

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Lasater, *Breath of God: the breathing practices of pranayama*, <http://www.judithlasater.com/a/breathofgod.html>

<sup>2</sup> Beryl Bender-Birch, *Power Yoga*, p31

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