

they enable us to sit upright and stand for long periods of time and to meet with greater ease the many demands made on us by our daily lives.

In the *Yoga Sūtra* there is another very interesting claim made about the effects of āsanās. It says that when we master āsanās we are able to handle opposites. To be able to handle opposites does not mean going around half-naked in cold weather or dressing in warm woolen clothing when it is hot. Rather, it means becoming more sensitive and learning to adapt because we know the body better; we can listen to it and know how it reacts in different situations.

Practically speaking, we should be able to stand for a few minutes with ease; we should be able to sit for a while easily as well. One advantage of āsana practice is that it helps us get used to different situations and be able to cope with different demands. If we want to practice prāṇāyāma, for example, we have to be able to sit comfortably erect for a period of time. Āsanās help us focus on the breath rather than the body during prāṇāyāma practice, for if we can sit comfortably and effortlessly erect there is nothing to distract us from our concentration on the breath.

Prāṇāyāma: The Breathing Exercises of Yoga

The word *prāṇāyāma* consists of two parts: *prāṇa* and *āyāma*. *Āyāma* means "stretch" or "extend," and describes the action of *prāṇāyāma*. *Prāṇa* refers to "that which is infinitely everywhere." With reference to us humans *prāṇa* can be described as something that flows continuously from somewhere inside us, filling us and keeping us alive: it is vitality. In this image, the *prāṇa* streams out from the center through the whole body.

Ancient texts such as the *Yoga Yājñavalkya* (see appendix 1) tell us that someone who is troubled, restless, or confused has more *prāṇa* outside the body than within. The amount of *prāṇa* outside the body is greater when we feel unwell; at those times the quality of *prāṇa* and its density within the body is reduced. Too little *prāṇa* in the body can be expressed as a feeling of being stuck or restricted. It can also show as a lack of drive or motivation to do anything; we are listless or even depressed. We may suffer from physical ailments when *prāṇa* is lacking in the body. And finally the *Yoga Sūtra* mentions disturbances in the breath, which can take very different forms.¹ On the other hand, the more peaceful and well-balanced we are, the less our *prāṇa* is dispersed outside the body. And if all the *prāṇa* is within the body, we are free of these symptoms.

If *prāṇa* does not find sufficient room in the body there can be only one reason: it is being forced out by something that really does not belong there—let's call it rubbish. What we are trying to do when we practice *prāṇāyāma* is nothing more than reduce this rubbish and so concentrate more and more *prāṇa* within the body.

Our state of mind is closely linked to the quality of *prāṇa* within. Because we can influence the flow of *prāṇa* through the flow of our breath, the quality of

¹ In the *Yoga Sūtra* 1.31, Patañjali calls these symptoms of a disturbed mind *duḥkha* (the experience of suffering), *daurmanasya* (negative attitude), *anāgamejayatva* (physical ailments), and *svāsapraśvāsa* (breathing disturbances).