

Kumbhaka1

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PART II: THE SADHANA PADA

Chapter 78: Kumbhaka and Concentration of Mind

There is a constant pressure felt within every individual due to an outgoing tendency which manifests itself continuously, right from birth onwards until the dissolution of the body. This outgoing tendency is the activity of the *prana*. It is an energy which seeks an outward expression, like a rushing stream which can flow only in one direction and its flow cannot be stopped because of the vehemence of the movement. It will topple down whatever is in its way and push onward due to the force of its flow. Likewise is the work of this energy within us called the *prana*. It is an impetuous urge directing itself in some particular fashion known to itself alone.

Together with its movement, it drags with itself all that is within us – our feelings, our thoughts, our emotions and what not – so that we are extrovert personalities throughout. We can think nothing inwardly; everything is outside. The moment we wake up in the morning, we begin to peep through our eyes into the external world and look at the atmosphere which is around us, incapable of knowing what is inside us. This is the great harassment that is caused by what is called the *prana*. Though it is the principle of life – without it no one can exist and live – it is also a direct medium of distress of every kind due to the incapacity of the mind to settle in itself, which is what we call lack of peace of mind.

The *prana* is different from the breath. This is also a feature that has to be observed. The *prana* is a very subtle tendency within us. We may say the characteristic of the total energy of the system is the *prana*. It is not located in any part of the body particularly. Though it has special emphasis laid in different parts of the body, it is equally distributed everywhere. *Prana* is nothing but the sum total of the energy of the system. Whatever our total capacity is, that is our *prana-shakti*. But, this capacity is outwardly directed. This is the difficulty. It is not introverted, and it is impossible to draw the *prana* within. We cannot hold the breath even for a few seconds, such is the strength of this outward tendency of the *prana*. And, from the force of this outward expression of the *prana*, we can also infer to what extent we are introverts or extroverts. How far we can withdraw the mind from thinking of objects, etc. can be known to some extent from the way in which this *prana* is functioning. Concentration is impossible for most people because they are completely ‘sold out’ to the outside world. We become slaves of conditions and circumstances, and puppets in the hands of these extrovert forces.

This is precisely the thing to be noted in the practice of yoga. This tendency has to be brought back to its original causative condition. Why has this urge arisen? Why are we running like this? Why is this total energy, or sum total of what we are, pressing itself forward? What is the purpose? What is the intention? What does it seek? And, why are we so restless? This subject was studied to some extent in the *sutras* preceding those which we are studying now. Now we are actually at the point of practice after having a comprehensive understanding of the causes of this urge within us; and the practice consists of a gradual retention of the breath,

of the flow of this outward tendency in us, the *prana*, by the technique called *pranayama*. We were trying to understand an outline of this process previously.

Patanjali's *sutras* relevant to this subject are very few. Bāhya ābhyantara stambha vṛttiḥ deśa kāla saṁkhyābhiḥ paridṛṣṭaḥ dīrgha sūkṣmaḥ (II.50) is a comprehensive *sutra*, followed by bāhya ābhyantara viśaya ākṣepi caturthaḥ (II.51). There are some people who cannot breathe in with force; there is a shallow intake of breath. There are others who cannot breathe out with force. It depends upon the peculiarity of the individual. They can breathe out, but they cannot breathe in – there is shallow breathing in, though there is a satisfactory breathing out; and conversely, there are others of a different nature.

The *pranayama* technique intends to shorten the period of these inhalation and exhalation processes in order that the force with which this process goes on, or continues, is brought to the minimum so that there is no strength in this flow, though the flow is tending to go outward and inward as it has been doing ever since the birth of the individual. How long does the breath remain outside in exhalation? How long does it remain inward in inhalation? These are the things to be observed, which is what is meant by these two terms in the *sutra*. *Deśa* is space, or place, or location. The extent or the measure, spatially, of the movement of the *prana* during the process of respiration is the meaning of the term 'deśa' in the *sutra*.

Generally it is believed that when we breathe out, the breath moves out to the extent of a cubit, or a little less than that. To find out where the breath is, we can place a little cotton in front of our nose and see whether it moves when we exhale. If we keep it near our nostrils and breathe out, we will find that the cotton moves because of the breath that is blown out. Then, we take it a little further and further away. The spot where the cotton ceases to move at the time of exhalation is the terminus of the movement of the exhalation process. From that we can find out the length of the exhalation.

As far as the inhalation is concerned, we cannot use this technique; we have to infer the movement of the *prana* when we inhale merely by feeling its movement within. If we are cautious and contemplative, we can feel how the *prana* moves when we deeply breathe in. The purpose is to stop this lengthening of the breath, outwardly as well as inwardly – to shorten it as far as possible, until it becomes so short that there is practically no movement at all. That cessation of movement is called *kumbhaka*.

This cessation of the breath can be brought about in many ways. Though the yoga *shastras* speak of several types of *pranayama* or *kumbhaka*, Patanjali concerns himself with only four types – which are actually not four, really speaking. They are only one, mentioned in four different ways. Bāhya ābhyantara stambha vṛttiḥ (II.50) are the terms used in the *sutra*. *Bahya* is external; *abhyantara* is internal; *stambha* is sudden retention; *vritti* is the process. The external retention is what is known as *bahya vritti*, the internal retention is what is known as *abhyantara vritti*, and the sudden retention is what is known as *stambha vritti*.

These *vrittis*, or the processes of the movement of the *prana*, are measured across different parameters, as enumerated through the other terms in the *sutra*, deśa kāla saṁkhyābhiḥ (II.50), for calculating the retention of the breath. The *prana* can be stopped by way of retention after exhalation. This was referred to in an earlier *sutra* where a particular method of breathing was prescribed as a way of bringing about peace of mind when the mind is very much disturbed. That *sutra* is in the Samadhi Pada: pracchardana vidhāraṇābhyām vā prāṇasya (I.34). *Pracchardana* is expulsion; *vidharana* is retention. The expulsion and the

retention of the breath are supposed to be one of the means of bringing about composure of mind.

This is almost the same as one of the *pranayamas* mentioned here as *bahya vritti*. We breathe out, gradually and intensely, in a very spontaneous, flowing manner, and then do not breathe in; this is one *pranayama*. We can press the abdomen inward and then raise up the diaphragm. After the inhalation, generally the chest is forward at this time. The breath is then blown out – not suddenly with a jerk, which should not be done – but very calmly so that we will not even know that it is blowing out. Then, we do not breathe in immediately; we see how far we can maintain this position of expulsion without it being followed by inward breathing. This sort of retention of the breath, which means to say the cessation of breathing in after the breathing out, is called *bahya vritti* – the *pranayama*, or the *kumbhaka*, which follows expulsion.

Or there can be *abhyantara vritti*, which is retention of the breath after inhalation. We breathe in, in the same way as we exhale – calmly, forcefully, deeply – and then do not breathe out. That retention of the breath after deep inhalation is a *pranayama* by itself. The way in which we retain the breath is called *kumbhaka*. *Kumbha* means a kind of pot which can be filled with things. We fill our system with the whole *prana* in *pranayama*. You may ask me, “Is not the body filled with *prana* at other times? Is it filled with *prana* only during *kumbhaka*?”

The idea behind this filling is very peculiar. Though the *prana* is moving everywhere in the system even at other times than during the time of *kumbhaka*, something very peculiar takes place during *kumbhaka* which does not happen at other times. During *kumbhaka* the *prana* in the system is filled to the brim, and it remains unmoving and unshaken, just as a pot may be filled to the brim and the content or liquid inside does not shake due to its being filled up to the brim, to the utmost possible extent. There is no movement of the *prana* in *kumbhaka*; it is not trying to escape from one place to another place.

The escaping of the *prana* from one place to another place actually means the difference which it introduces in the density of its activity, which is the cause of unequal distribution of energy in the system. Because there is no equal distribution of force in the body, there is difficulty – physiological as well as psychological. The senses, especially, become very active and uncontrollable on account of the unequal distribution of energy, or *prana*, in the system and a capitalist attitude of the *prana* towards the senses only, where it is stored up in an excessive measure, depriving the other parts of the required energy.

When a particular sense organ is very active, there is an excessive measure of *prana* supply given to that particular location of the organ which intends to fulfil itself. There is the irritation of the senses or an itching of the particular organ due to the excessive flow of the *prana* there. It may be the eye, the ear, or any organ. We have ten organs, and one of the organs will start itching. This itching, or irritation, or craving of a particular organ is due to an abundant supply of *prana* in that particular part of the body, which implies a deprivation of other parts of the body from the requisite energy.

This is also one of the reasons why people with intense cravings have a peculiar physical feature – which can be observed, to some extent, if we are cautious. The beauty of the body that is seen in childhood vanishes gradually when the body grows into the stages of youth and adult. There is a sort of equal distribution of the *pranic* energy in childhood, so that we see a blooming youthfulness, beauty and exuberance in children which is absent in youths and adults because the sense organs of grown-up persons are more active than the sense organs of

children. Due to a particular vehemence of a group of senses in adults, or grown-up people, the energy withdraws itself from other parts of the body and directs itself only to that particular part which is asking for fulfilment, so a kind of absence of symmetry can be seen in the system. Symmetry is beauty. Where symmetry and beauty are absent, we find a kind of ugliness gradually creeping into the system, due to the simple reason that the *prana* is unequally distributed. Hence, the unequal distribution of the *prana* in the system is due to the presence of desires. The child also has desires. It does not mean that desires are absent there, but they are not manifest; they are not revealed. They are not pressing themselves forward in any particular manner.

The *prana* shifts its centre of pressure from time to time according to the circumstances, and this should be prevented. The *kumbhaka* process is a technique by which this excessive emphasis which *prana* lays on any particular part of the body is obviated, and it is allowed to equally distribute itself in the whole system, which is another way of saying that the *rajas* of the *prana* is made to cease. The excessive emphasis of the *prana* in any particular part of the system is due to *rajas*, which means there is movement. Without movement, how can there be any kind of unequal distribution of energy? This is prevented by the process of *kumbhaka*. The filling of the system with the *pranic* energy means distributing the energy equally in the whole system and making it felt everywhere equally, with equal intensity, and without the special favour it sometimes does to a particular limb or organ. This is what happens in *kumbhaka*. It can be done, as mentioned, either after exhalation or after inhalation. Either we breathe out and retain the breath, or we breathe in and retain it. These are the two types of *kumbhaka* mentioned as *bahya vritti* and *abhyantara vritti*.

There is a third type called *stambha vritti*, which is not followed either by inhalation or exhalation. Suddenly a cobra drops on our head, just now. What will happen? Our breath will stop at that time; we will not breathe in or breathe out. From the ceiling some snake drops, and we see it on our lap. What happens at that time? The breath is not there – it has stopped. Did we breathe in or breathe out? Neither did we breathe in, nor did we breathe out; nothing has happened. We do not know whether the *prana* exists at all. It has immediately stopped activity due to the shock it received. Any kind of sudden stopping of the breath is called *stambha vritti*.

Of course, it does not mean that this *stambha* is to be introduced into *pranayama* by shock or fear; that is not the idea. What is intended is that the absorption of the mind in the object or ideal of yoga should be so comprehensive – so deep and absorbing, and intense – that there will be no time for the mind to supply the motive force to the *prana* to move at all. When we are deeply absorbed in a particular thought, very deeply absorbed, and we are not able to think anything other than that one particular thought due to intense affection or intense hatred, or for any reason whatsoever, the *prana* stops; there will be no breathing at that time. When we are overpowered with the emotion of love, or fear, or hatred, there will be a stoppage of *prana*. Thus, *raga*, *bahya* and *krodha* are the causes of the *prana* suddenly stopping – intense *raga*, intense *bahya* and intense *krodha*.

Here we are not concerned with *bahya* or *krodha*, or with *raga* of the ordinary type; but if we want to call it *raga*, we may call it so. It is a great love for the great ideal of yoga; the ardour that is expected in every student of yoga. The yearning that he cherishes within, the longing that is uncontrollable for God-realisation may be regarded as a kind of superior *raga* that is present, which prevents the mind from thinking anything else. When the *prana* is suddenly withheld – not accompanied either by expulsion or inhalation – that type of retention which is

suddenly introduced, for any reason whatsoever, is called *stambha vritti*. They are the three types of *kumbhaka* mentioned in the *sutra*, *bāhya ābhyantara stambha vṛttiḥ* (II.50).

Now Patanjali mentions *deśa kāla saṁkhyābhiḥ paridr̥ṣṭaḥ* (II.50). The measure or the calculation of the method of breathing for the purpose of retention is referred to here. We can find out to what extent we have mastered the technique of *pranayama* by the extent of the length of space occupied by the movement of the *prana*, externally or internally. As it was suggested, a cotton fibre held near the nostrils will give us an idea of the space that is occupied by the *prana* in expulsion. When we have greater and greater mastery over the *prana*, the distance will be lessened gradually so that we may have to bring the cotton fibre nearer and nearer the nose to see its movement.

So also is the case with internal movement, or inhalation. This has to be practised very, very gradually. What the *sutra* tells us is that *kumbhaka*, or retention of the breath, should be acquired by a gradual diminishing of the distance covered by the movement of the *prana* in expulsion as well as inhalation; that is *desa. Kala* means the time, the ratio, or the proportion that is maintained in the processes of inhalation, retention and expulsion.

There are various views or opinions expressed by the yoga *shastras* and by adepts in yoga in regard to this proportion. Proportion means the time that we take to inhale, the time that we retain the breath for, and the time that we take to exhale. This is what is called proportion – that is the ratio. While there are many different opinions in regard to this, the usually accepted one is that if we take one second to inhale, we must take four seconds to retain, and two seconds to exhale. One is to four is to two – that is the proportion maintained. This is not a standard prescription for all people, but the usually accepted method. It does not mean that the number should be four in retention at the very beginning itself. As it was pointed out previously, there should be no retention at all in the earlier stages; there should be only deep inhalation and exhalation. For some days and months perhaps, we may have to practise only inhalation and exhalation without retention. Later on, when retention is introduced, it should not be in this ratio of one to four to two, as it is a more advanced practice. There should be only a comfortable retention, to the extent possible, even if the ratio is not maintained.

But the suggestion given in this term ‘*kala*’ is that a ratio is maintained, and that ratio can be modified according to one’s convenience, level of evolution, the extent of practice, etc. This has to be done with the guidance of a Guru. One should not meddle with the *prana* without knowing what happens. Thus, the ratio that is associated with the processes of inhalation, retention and exhalation is what is meant by the term ‘*kala*’.

Samkhya is the number of rounds that we practise. People who are exclusively devoted to the *pranayama* process sit for it often. In advanced stages, it is said we may have to sit four times – in the morning, at noon, in the evening, at midnight. These are the four times that we sit for meditation and practise *pranayama*. How many times, how many rounds of breathing, can we practise at each sitting? This calculation is the number that is mentioned – *samkhya*. It should increase gradually, not suddenly. *Pranayama* is a most dangerous practice when it is not correctly understood, because we are dealing directly with the physical system, and so one has to be very cautious. We should not interfere with it unnecessarily. It should be done with a great understanding of one’s strengths as well as one’s weaknesses.

Deśa kāla saṁkhyābhiḥ paridr̥ṣṭaḥ (II.50). By the measurements of the processes of breathing, in respect of place, time and number, the quality of the *pranayama* should be determined. It is either *dirgha* or it is *sukshma*; it is elongated, protracted, or it is short and

subtle. It may be a protracted breathing, or it may be a very subtle breathing, which means to say that it can be elongated in quantity and intensified in quality; that is the meaning of *dirgha*. Or it can be contracted, and reduced in quantity as well as in quality; that is *sukshma*.

This definition that is mentioned is only a kind of theory for beginners who are not accustomed to the type of breathing that is prescribed here, as one will not know what this elongation is, what this shortening is, and what the space is, etc. For us it is only a kind of story, like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana. It has no sense, because when we actually sit for practice of this kind, we will know what changes take place in the system. And, nothing but practice is what is intended here. Yoga is nothing but practice, a hundred-percent practice – only that and nothing but that. We are not going to tell a story or listen to any kind of narration. It is a very serious matter that we are discussing, which is life and death for us – namely, how we can become better inwardly as well as outwardly so that we take one step, at least, towards the superhuman condition which is waiting for us.

When this is acquired, this mastery is gained, some sort of a control is maintained over the *pranic* movements. Great consequences – unexpected and unforeseen – will follow. We will see strange phenomena appear within us as well as outside us if we gain mastery over the *prana*, because this *kumbhaka* that we are speaking of is nothing but another form of concentration of mind, as the mind is associated with the *prana* always. The object, or the ideal before oneself, is united with the meditating consciousness in a fast embrace, as it were, when the *prana* is withheld, and it is made to stick to one's consciousness inseparably. It becomes one with one's own self, and there is a sudden impact felt upon the object on account of the *kumbhaka* that we practise.

The *kumbhaka*, the retention of the breath that we practise, coupled with concentration of mind on the object that is before us, will tell upon the nature of that object which we are thinking of, whatever be the distance of that object. It may be millions of miles away – it makes no difference. This is because *prana* is omnipresent. It is like ether, and so it will produce an impact upon the object that we are thinking of in our meditation. It will stir it up into an activity of a desired manner, according to what we are contemplating in the mind. This effect cannot be produced if the *prana* is allowed to move hither and thither, distractedly. If we want quick success in meditation, the retention of the breath is absolutely necessary because it is this that impresses upon the object of meditation the necessity to commingle itself with the subject. Therefore, a combination of *pranayama* and *dharana*, concentration, is the most effective method of bringing about a union of oneself with the ideal of meditation.

