

Paradox of Pranayama: the breath's path from god to element

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This paper investigates the transition of prāṇa from a central deity to a mere element of the material world, one that must be restrained and even stopped in favor of the mind and the eternal ātman. Given the Vedic and early Upaniṣadic importance of prāṇa and the breath, how can we understand the restraint of prāṇa — prāṇāyāma — in classical and later yogic teachings?

In the early Upaniṣads, prāṇa is the greatest of the five deities: breath, mind, sight, speech and semen. The 'contest of the faculties' is repeated throughout the Upaniṣads to illuminate the superiority and vitality of the breath. Then a twofold transformation occurs. Prāṇa is demoted as the middle Upaniṣads turn toward the ātman as the ultimate essence of existence. The present paper examines this transformation.

First is the 'mentalisation' of spiritual practice. With the development of early systems of Sāṃkhya, the material universe is explained as an intellectual creation — one that unfolds through the buddhi first before evolving into grosser elements. The breath and prāṇa are overlooked in most iterations of Sāṃkhya, the systems that inform the development and early practice of yoga. This paper examines how, in these systems, the pursuit of human spiritual liberation is via the mind and intellect rather than the breath.

Second is the stopping of the material to pursue the eternal; the desire to restrain or stop the material elements in order to realize the spiritual. This includes restraining the senses and stopping the turnings of the mind, in search of the "breath behind the breath". The breath, as part of material manifestation, must be stopped in pursuit of puruṣa. Thus prāṇāyāma is born, the restraint of the breath.

The methodology of this paper is historical, philological and intertextual, drawing from the Veda, the principal Upaniṣads, the Mahābhārata, the Sāṃkhyakārikā and the Pātañjalayogaśāstra.

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