

THREE SEASONS AYURVEDA



The Prāna Vāyus and Yoga



Prāna is defined as the "life force" and flows through all living and inanimate objects, comprising all the energy in nature and the universe. Prāna primarily enters the body through the breath but is also in what we physically ingest and mentally perceive. It feeds our cells and existence, bringing awareness, intelligence, introspectiveness, and higher consciousness.

On a physical level, prāna is responsible for respiration, food digestion, the absorption and circulation of nutrients, the elimination of wastes, and energy utilization. On a mental, emotional and spiritual level, it governs the intake, digestion, absorption, and circulation of information, removes mental and emotional wastes, and brings expansiveness, growth, and balance.

To understand prāna and its five winds (vāyus), it's helpful to know how energy moves within the body and its effects and functions. There are thousands of channels (nāḍīs) in the body that transport everything physically and mentally. The three main channels that directly affect prānic energy in the subtle body are suṣumnā, the center channel of the spine. Iḍā is the channel that is responsible for the left hemisphere of the body (lunar and cooling), and piṅgalā is the right hemisphere of the body (solar and heating). These nāḍīs crisscross through each of the seven cakras (energy centers) located along the spine. The cakras control subtle energy physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, creating balance and well-being with breath practices, mantras, mudrās, marma points, sounds, and color therapies.

The Cakras:

Crown: Sahasrarā cakra connects to self-realization and purpose, universal consciousness, and bliss.

Third Eye: Ajñā cakra relates to presence, intuitiveness, spiritual introspection, and pursuits.

Throat: Viśhuddha cakra brings communication, confidence, speaking your truth, and creativity.

Heart: Anāhata cakra encompasses love, compassion, faith, and the ability to connect to spirit.

Naval: Maṇipūra cakra establishes confidence, ambition, achievement, and the ability to take action.

Sacral: Svādhiṣṭhāna cakra brings a sense of individualism, ego, and the power of creation.

Root: Mūlādhāra cakra connects our identities, self-esteem, stability, security, and groundedness.

The Five Prāna Vāyus

1. Prāna Vāyu - Inward and Forward Moving Breath

The prāna vāyu is the most fundamental of the five vāyus because it encompasses all creation. Its movement is inwards and forward, and its location is between the brain and heart. It is associated with the air element (cool, light, and mobile) and the Anāhata (heart) cakra. It is responsible for everything we take in; breath, awareness, perceptions, and nourishment. Overstimulation and excessive information intake can create imbalanced digestion, poor immunity, breathing or respiratory irregularities, and mental and neurological disorders.

Prānāyāma practices that engage this vāyu includes the use of the three bandhas and kumbhaka's in ujjayi and viloma along with bhastrika, nāḍīs shodhana, and bhramari.

2. Udana Vāyu - *Upward-Moving Breath*

The udāna vāyu is located in the throat region and extends to the top of the head. Understood as the upward and outward breath, and is associated with the ether element (cold, light, and stable) and the Viśhuddha (throat) cakra. It governs speech, self-expression, enthusiasm, perception, and higher consciousness. Its connection to the thyroid gland controls growth, immunity, and metabolism. Imbalances with this vāyu can be associated with the respiratory, throat, and nasal dysfunctions, forgetfulness, and a lack of focus, expression, and self-esteem.

Prānāyāma practices that engage this vāyu is jālandhara-bandha (throat lock), antāra kumbhaka, all ujjayi with extended exhalations, viloma exhalations, kaplabhati, bastrika, and nādi shodhana.

3. Samāna Vāyu - *Energizing & Equalizing Breath*

The samāna vāyu is found around the solar plexus extending from the diaphragm area to the navel where the upper and lower body winds meet, moving from the periphery to the center. It is associated with the fire element (hot, light, and unstable) and the Maṇipūra cakra governing all digestion (Agni), the absorption and assimilation of nutrients and information. Its actions regulate metabolism and immunity, remove toxins, transform emotions, thoughts, and experiences, which help balance all bodily systems.

Prānāyāma practices that engage this vāyu are extended exhalations with bahya kumbhaka, uḍḍiāna-bandha, kapālabhāti, bhastrika, sūrya bhedana and sitali, and chandra bhedana for cooling.

4. Vyāna Vāyu- *Diffusive-Pervasive Breath*

The vyāna vāyu is located in the heart and lung region. It encompasses all circulation and movements in the body, from the crown of the head to our foundations. It is associated with the air element (cool, light, and mobile) and the Anāhata cakra, which moves from the center to the periphery. It circulates blood, oxygen, and nutrients, assists digestion, absorption, and eliminates wastes. It controls the muscles regulating movement and locomotion. Mentally it governs all thoughts, feelings, ideas, emotions, and impulses. When deficient, there can be a sense of weakness, anxiety, and disorientation.

Prānāyāma practices that engage this vāyu includes the retention of the breath on the inhalations and long, deep, wide diffusing exhalations. Nāḍis shodhana brings overall balance and equilibrium.

5. Apāna Vāyu - *Downward Moving Breath*

The apāna vāyu is located between the navel and anus in the pelvic region. It is responsible for all downward and outward movements. It is associated with the earth element (cool, heavy, and stable) and Mūlādhāra (root) cakra, which governs stability and groundedness. Its actions include all excretions, including urination, feces, sweat, semen, menstruation, and childbirth. Its location is the seat (home) of the Vata dosha, whose qualities are cold, light. When imbalanced, pain can be experienced in the bones, joints, and muscles, along with imbalances of the mind. Heavier qualities create stability and grounding.

Prānāyāma practices that engage this vāyu includes longer exhalations in ujjayi, viloma exhalations, uḍḍiāna, and mūlha-bandha, along with bahya kumbhaka and sūrya bhedana.

The Prāna Vāyus in the Yoga Practice

The prāna vāyus play an essential part in our yoga practices directing energy and enhancing our postures. For instance, when moving upwards in inversions, arm balances, or standing poses with the arms lifted engages the udnāa (upward) vāyu. When we are grounded to the earth in standing or seated poses, this is the apāna vāyu (downward). When practicing backbends, the movement of prāna and vyāna (inwards and the periphery to the core) vāyus protects the lower back and opens the heart. Finally, twists and abdominal postures engage the samāna (core to periphery) vāyu, allowing us to move deeply from the center and connect to inner power and strength.



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