

Controlling the Breath (Pranayama) for Longevity

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Received: January 16, 2019; **Published:** February 22, 2019

We talk of our near and dear ones. They are those people or things that we refer to as being so close to us that we cannot be away from them for even a moment. Who indeed is closer to us and has been with us from the very moment we were born, until now and every moment of our life till the end does come? If we take a deep breath to seek for an answer, we will realize that it is this very breath that is closest to us and without which we cannot even take the next breath [1].

According to Yoga, man's life is constituted of so many breaths. The number of respiration per minute is fifteen. If you can reduce the number of breaths by the practice of Kumbhak or retention of breath, or stop the breath through Kechri Mudra you can increase your span of life. Yogis attain the Siddhi to die at their will (Icchamrityu) [2].

'Breathing is a very basic phenomenon concerning life. Almost all forms of life seem to depend very largely on the process of breathing. This process may be conveniently divided into two parts, one connected with the external environment, the other with the internal environment. Taking oxygen from the external environment into the body constitutes the first part of breathing, while making the oxygen available to every cell and tissue, is a function of internal breathing. In human beings, the first part is played by the respiratory system, and the second by the circulatory system'.

'Ancient masters of yoga knew it fully well that life activity depends fundamentally upon the vital air which they called "Prana". They distinguished ten different forms of vital air. Five of these ten vayus (air) were supposed to be more important. They are: Prana, Alana, Vyana, Udana and Samana'.

'Pranayama, which may be called yogic breathing, is a technique of silencing the breath. It is customary to divide the process of yogic breathing into three constituents such as controlled inhalation, controlled exhalation, and holding the breath'.

'Patanjali has defined yogic breathing (Yoga Sutra, II, 49) as the cessation of the movement of shvasa (inhalation) and prashvasa (exhalation). Breathing is made up of two acts, namely inhalation and exhalation. After each exhalation there is a state of pause. All these three acts together constitute what may be called one respiration. We respire nearly times every minute. In each respiration we breathe (in and out) nearly 400 cubic centimeters of air (i.e. 0.4 litres). As it is alternately taken in and drawn out in each respiration, this area is known as the tidal air. The amount of air that one can exhale in a deep exhalation after making a deep inhalation is called Vital Capacity. This amount, divided by the weight of the body, is known as the Vital Index. It indicates one's capacity to breathe, as well as the vitality of the body and efficiency of its function. It is observed that the Vital Index can be considerably increased through a regular practice of yogic breathing'.

'Yogic breathing involves a reduction in the number of respiration made per minute. This should be achieved slowly through increasing practice' [3].

Ordinarily, a man breaths 15 times per minute. If it is reduced through Yoga practice, longevity is achieved. There are Yogins who by practice could reduce it to 5 breaths per minute. It is believed that a healthy man can live for 100 - 125 years. Now if a man who has developed full control over his prana, mind and seminal fluid can reduce his breath to 5 per minute, it may be possible for him to live up to 300 years [4].

According to Yoga theory, slow controlled breathing (pranayama) has an energizing role, which is tonic to entire cardio-respiratory system and facilitates obtaining deep relaxation and concentration. Through such breathing one can assimilate more prana (cosmic life

energy), which W Sedlak identified with bioplasm. Experience revealed that proper training of Sirshasana (headstand) facilitates obtaining of this breathing skill. Co-author, Tadeusz Pasek (TP) born in 1925 was the subject of these physiological studies, who was trained in 1962 in Sirshasana by a well-known Indian yoga expert Swami Sivananda Saraswati. After 8 months of daily standing on his head, TP obtained the state of pleasant, slow yogic breathing. He was physiologically tested in 1963 by H Geartner, 1967 by prof. W Romanowski (Academy of Physical Education in Warsaw) and in 1995 by prof. M Plyley. All research showed the number of respiration as 2 - 4 per minute, the mean ventilation at approximately 3.0 L/min and RQ of 0.4. Co-author TP, now 80, has continued this breathing skill for 41 years and praises its benefits in improving general health and mental conditions.

Similar results of proper practice of Sirshasana training and results in breathing among a group of trainees were presented in the paper of W Romanowski and T Pasek in 1969. These observations suggest that health professionals and physical educators should consider successful training of Sirshasana for enhancing general health [5].

This article is dedicated to my beloved wife Mala Satsangi whose loving memories, in my each breath, are the constant source of my inspiration ever.

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Volume 8 Issue 3 March 2019

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