

THE GRACE OF VINYASA KRAMA

Essential Breathing Practices The Turtle vs the Rabbit

There are a number of features that makes Vinyasa Krama unique, and especially practical. How we teach good breathing practices is fairly slow and simple (the turtle metaphor), without particularly increasing intensity, complexity, or trying to speed up (the rabbit metaphor.) The more we slow down - physiological, nervous system, psychological - the more our experiences integrate quietly and completely. VK Pranayama is uniquely designed to enhance both your physical practice and your meditation practice.

One of the dual aspects of VK Pranayama is that we equally emphasise balanced breathing within Asana and utilise Pranayama as a stepping stone for meditation. We don't wait for years and years of practice - meditation begins when we begin Pranayama.

We don't teach Pranayama to manipulate energy in any particular direction, or to advertise some kind of arbitrary spirituality. Also, we don't teach it with any particular label on tradition or dogma. Rather, we focus on what is simple, practical, and can be understood and applied for the majority of students. Once we establish a baseline, we can also modify any of it for contra-indicators and individual preference.

Conversely, I would say most Pranayama traditions will take you around some blind corners: It tends to be fast or intense, or both, and you really can't see what's coming until it hits you hard. It might be stimulating to learn something new and exciting (the blind corner), and even fear-producing, but is this practical?

A number of traditional Pranayama practices are unnecessary for most students, and dangerous for some. One other effect from this is low student retention - most students do not continue with such practices when it doesn't make sense, or has negative side-effects. For example, high level Kumbhaka, complex or long sequences of Nadi Shodana, and intense use of Bhastrika at the beginning of practice. Such practices become confusing, high impact on the nervous system, and largely impractical, at least at the start. This is especially so when there is not enough focus on the basics.

The basics are often assumed by many Pranayama teachers (I think due to some kind of boredom), but this is a dangerous mistake for the student. Sometimes the basics are also not taught because the teacher never learned that way themselves. This is unfortunate.

Most traditions (of any system) do not self-regulate or allow critique of the system - such criticism is either frowned upon, or completely denied. Thus, if you do decide something is inappropriate, and hold your ground, a backlash of excommunication is highly probable. For, when I say with my tongue-in-cheek, that such criticism is 'illegal', sadly, it's also true.

Most Yoga systems never really allow critical thinking, much like most religions. In the attempt to be more 'spiritual', which is to say more 'traditional' - these words are not synonymous! - many such systems become increasingly dogmatic, rather than free of the restrictions such an imposition creates.

Within Vinyasa Krama we aim to provide intelligent discussion, and thoughtful counter-arguments to intriguing and difficult subjects. We can (respectfully) criticise anything and everything related to Yoga. This also applies to me as the director of the VKM organisation; you can criticise both, as you like. Criticism does not automatically imply negativity. It may at times be judgmental, but also, when driven by intelligent discrimination, accurate. If you don't like criticism, and have a kind of negative perspective about it, the question is why? Is it pressing on a nerve, or am I making good points? Then read on :)

For example, specifically relating this back to Pranayama: Is stimulating the nervous system appropriate? Is the technique achievable with minimal or no stress and anxiety? Is the student taking anti-depressants or other medication that would prohibit learning certain techniques? What about difficulties with asthma, high or low blood pressure, extreme scoliosis, or back pain and knee pain?

All of these questions can be answered as long as we take care, take the time to be mindful of the impact of each situation, and then adjust accordingly.

Another aspect of some 'traditional' Pranayama - I use inverted commas here to indicate that the word is usually debatable if applied with historical accuracy - is the idea that we need to pull energy up in some way, that energy going down (Tamas / Apana) is bad, and that Mula Bandha and raising Kundalini is actually achievable in any kind of meaningful way. All of the latter would presuppose that somehow there is something fundamentally wrong, or lacking in your base character or energy. That is, you are somehow incomplete unless you practice pulling energy up, and going against your normal bad habits.

Secondly, even if this were true, it is also misinterpreted as some kind of spiritual activity. Putting those last two words together is obviously a misconception. How can any such 'doing' no matter how energetic, indicate any real spirituality? Quite the opposite. Although I can agree with some of that, most of it, no. You may have bad habits, and certainly you should avoid indulging them. But you cannot really resolve that by replacing them with another habit, no matter how well intentioned.

True non-duality speaks to us of another possibility: your energy is fine, as it is. All you need to do is be quiet and still, consistently, and observe that your bad habits can gradually fall away on their own. Being truly still and quiet is not mere passivity. It is one of the most challenging non-activities any human can ever encounter. But also, the most rewarding.

Pranayama: Where to Start?

1. Simple techniques working on the natural balance between inhalation, exhalation, and the transitions between.
2. This means either focusing on the inhalation, or the exhalation, or the pauses between, or a combination of two of those.
3. Developing complementary length and softness with each. Subtle versus gross is the rule.
4. Generally, starting with the physiological aspects of breathing is a much better idea than focusing on energetic or esoteric concepts. For example, your posture, correcting anterior and posterior pelvic tilt; your front, back, and side ribs; diaphragmatic movements, including awareness of left and right diaphragms; subtle positioning of tongue, palate, and throat; three-dimensional breathing.

It is important to teach Pranayama to the individual rather than the group, and modify techniques accordingly. Pranayama should not be taught in a purely led-class or group setting: it must be tailored to each individual via self-practice. Secondly, Pranayama should be easy to learn and easy to understand. It is important that we find an avenue of consistency with practice that works for the greatest number of practitioners. Once a foundation is established, then each individual practitioner can choose a number of variations or modifications to suit their particular constitution and lifestyle.

As each practitioner develops understanding of what Pranayama is doing and why they are doing it, the results speak for themselves: increased student retention, and increased consistency of practice. This places greater responsibility on the teacher, to insist that all students work on the basics of Pranayama from the beginning. No matter how rudimentary a students' Asana practice may be, Pranayama is automatically included. No matter how advanced a student thinks they are, they start at the beginning and learn the basics of Pranayama first.

As you develop greater understanding of Pranayama this will significantly improve your refinement, understanding, and control of Asana.

Areas to explore via self-practice can include: are your left and right lungs balanced, and even in breathing rates? Are your left and right diaphragms balanced and relatively even? Can you notice the difference? Are your left and right nostrils, and the mucous membranes, balanced and even? What is the difference when you breathe between your back ribs and front ribs? How do they balance? What is the difference if you breathe in a supine position vs sitting upright? Are you comfortable and able to sit upright in a posture, for minimum 30 min, with no discomfort at all?

For the latter, ensure that you learn what posture suits your knees and lower back, and what postures cause pain, inflammation, or 'falling asleep.' Learn to modify! For example, sit in a chair. Also, learn to be mentally stoic, so you do not move or fidget after only 5 minutes. 30 minutes is a minimum time to be able to sit comfortably without interruptions or distractions: no movement other than the natural internal ones.

Now, for all humans, it is literally impossible for your left and right sides to be perfectly balanced, particularly the lungs, but also related to left- and right- handedness. The lungs are easy to figure out: your heart takes up a lot of the space there on the left side. This also makes it easy to figure out why most people are right-handed: opposite to the heart.

These particular 'imbalances' or asymmetries are worthy of observation, and at times, correction.

As an aware Yoga practitioner, start to figure out:

1. What are my natural breathing rates? Is this observable, or measurable? Do I exhibit any high or low blood pressure symptoms? Are there any other contra-indicators?
2. What are my extended breathing rates? That is, when doing exercise, postures, or dynamic activities. Can I improve on those *without* undue stress? Time them, and keep a Pranayama diary.
3. What happens to the pitch of the breath (sound / loudness / intensity), particularly when I do difficult postures or a longer practice?
4. Are these (points 1-3) any different if I do Pranayama on its own? That is, within a comfortable sitting posture. Does sitting comfortably improve my breathing rates?
5. How does 2-3 affect my movement and grace? That is, how does my breathing change when doing dynamic Vinyasa? Can I maintain physiological, respiratory, and psychological grace?

6. How does the time of the day, seasons, heat, humidity, phase of the moon, and what I eat, affect my Pranayama practice? Do any of these adversely affect my sleep? For example, the balance between dreaming (REM) and deep sleep. As all of these have a significant effect, keep a Pranayama diary to keep track, and modify accordingly.

Note: if you are holding your breath with any Vinyasa, no matter how small, or temporary, it is not graceful or complete. You will not reach your full potential, physically or otherwise.

VK Workshops in 2023

The Importance of Spacious Breathing

This year in September and October I conducted a series of workshops in Germany, France, Spain, Poland, and Thailand.

Breathing styles varied from country to country depending on experience, and a few other factors. For example, someone who is physically larger will generally breathe with more sound - a big man, for example, will be naturally louder than a small woman. Similarly, students opting for a gentler practice (Moon Sequence) will tend to be quieter than those doing something more dynamic (Sunshine Sequence.)

Having said that, you might also think that students who have more experience would breathe more quietly. That is, with greater control AND greater subtlety. It would be a logical conclusion, but mostly incorrect. Unfortunately, improved overall breathing patterns are not overly aligned with greater postural experience. Often with greater Asana experience, particularly if the practitioner is coming from a dynamic tradition like Ashtanga Yoga, the general level of *intensity* of breathing increases, just as the level of intensity of postures increases. But this very intensity typically leads to some bad habits: more forceful breathing in order to achieve the posture. This then carries over into other areas of practice. It might be consistent (loud exhalation, shortened inhalation), but still a bad habit nonetheless.

In such situations the 'advanced' practitioner may have a certain amount of controlled breathing, but without actual refinement and full understanding of what is possible. This is typically due a lack of actual practice in this area (refined Pranayama) not a lack of experience with postures. This is not arbitrary criticism: it is also just an observation that it would take such a practitioner a significant amount of time and work (change!) to gain refined control with some foundation level Pranayama.

During each of the self-practice sections of the courses I conducted recently, this became particularly evident. Students who had prior instruction from me (or from another qualified VK SP teacher), demonstrated this admirably. If the student had learned one of the Vinyasa Krama Sequences with VK Pranayama as their 'main practice' - or the central technique - they would move through the postures with control AND with greater subtlety and grace. This is not indicative of physical ability; rather, greater awareness.

Many such students have been learning online from me over the past few years. The latter has proven particularly effective for teaching Pranayama, and insisting that students learn all aspects of VK Pranayama from the ground up. We can be more consistent, but also with significant individual choice as to how much / how often, which specific technique to focus on, the direction it goes, and how to modify.

Noticing this was particularly eye-opening because of the contrast between VK students, and students without this experience. Firstly, it is incredibly gratifying to see students following such instructions willingly (not blindly!) Secondly, I could see experienced Vinyasa Krama practitioners being graceful. This word is interesting.

These students were breathing and moving *quietly*. And slowly. When I step into a room like that, the energy is quite different, compared to a room full of students struggling with their breath, and therefore struggling with the postures - often without even realising it. And generally, everyone speeding up when that energy accumulates.

In the latter setting breathing rates become more erratic, the exhalation particularly loud, and discernible across the room. I can feel the struggle and the tension and strain involved.

When I step into a room full of experienced VK practitioners, most of that disperses: I feel more quietness, centredness, self-awareness, and minimal pushing with the postures. It feels almost 180 degrees different. This really caught my attention.

The more the students' breathing rates were balanced, the more it matched the movement and natural physical abilities of the individual practitioner: Graceful. That is, controlled breathing with Ujjayi but without the typical noise, stress, loud exhalation, pushy breathing, and pushy postures evidenced in other self-practice scenarios.

Having said that, there were a number of inexperienced practitioners who would also breathe more quietly - often because of hesitation and unfamiliarity. That is, unsure of the sequence, unsure of how to put it all together with their breath - so sometimes the quietness could stem from a little under-confidence. This is natural when you do not know the Asana sequence or the Pranayama practice in detail.

And so, it is fairly easy to help such students gradually build their confidence and grace. I enjoy this very much - helping such students to move from a kind of physical and mental clunkiness towards something decidedly more flowing and refined.

The Negative Tendencies

Here is what often happens with new students and experienced students with some poor habits:

1. Holding the breath at the end of a movement, or within difficult postures, is unfortunately common. For example: upward-dog, jumps, most back bends, most twists, most inversions. This can be either conscious or unconscious. If it is unconscious, such breath-holding is usually temporary and residual, but still a significant problem - largely because it is unconscious, and secondly because it leads to a number of bad habits. If it is conscious, it is often from a mistaken idea of how to breathe, or how to apply Bandha correctly, both of which will be a disadvantage if your breathing rates are arbitrarily curtailed.
2. Ujjayi is over-emphasised. The throat and glottis are overly contracted. This indicates Rajas rather than Sattva.
3. The exhalation is significantly louder than the inhalation. This also indicates Rajas, stress, and too much focus on the goal over the process.
4. The exhalation is significantly longer than the inhalation, and when the practitioner is tired or doing a difficult posture (for example all back bends, most twists) the ratio becomes 1:2 or worse, vs the ideal ratio of 3:4 or better 4:5.

5. The common result of this loud and pushy exhalation is increasing tiredness at the end of every practice: you exhale more, you eliminate more carbon; you inhale less, you take in less oxygen. Too much output, not enough input = energy imbalance between CO₂ and O₂. This is not merely a theory. Look up breathing rates in any scientific journal and you'll see this supported.
6. Postures are over-emphasised relative to the breath. Achieving postures (Marichyasana D, Kurmasana, Urdhva Dhanurasana, Kapotasana, jumps etc) becomes a pushy kind of goal, vs emphasising balanced breathing first, postures second.

Some students make the transition towards better habits quickly, some slowly, and some not at all. In a way, the resistance to change is understandable, even if it is not ideal: If you've spent years developing your abilities with difficult (intermediate / advanced) postures, you won't want to let that go in favour of developing Sattvic, balanced breathing rates.

The habit of emphasising difficult postures over balanced breathing carries over into personalities and obsessive-compulsive behavior. Or perhaps I should say that the other way around: Compulsive personalities tend to breathe and practice more compulsively. Essentially, a kind of tunnel vision, making the goal more important than the journey. If this is you, consider trying the alternative.

Over the past 30 years of Yoga, I have observed almost no significant health advantages from accomplishing high-level postures. And usually, significant physical and mental health risks. Injuries are obvious, obsessive-compulsive disorder is more difficult to discuss.

Some humans really like to push. Personally, I don't mind this much with beginners, as it's understandable and fairly easy to correct. Plus, they are usually only doing basic or remedial postures anyway.

Changing Bad Habits to Good Best Practices

Good breathing practices equally involve:

discipline, focus, consistency

AND

relaxation, balance, observation

Abhyasa Vairgyabhyam Tan Nirodhah

Practice Non-Attachment = the path to a quiet mind

- *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*

Take note of the text in bold: NOT holding your breath with all postures and all Vinyasa, directly equals the practice of non-attachment. This is both literal and figurative. Why? Because creating space means saying 'yes', and also means acknowledging that 'you' are not in control. Non-attachment can be practiced with this in mind. In addition, the practice of not holding your breath leads to Kevala Kumbhaka, which is one the most direct expressions of non-attachment.

Kevala Kumbhaka is considered the most important of all Pranayama to practice - as evidenced in Patanjali's Sutra, the Yoga Taravali, and other Yoga texts. It is not lengthening the inhalation or exhalation. It is not holding the breath. It is observing the breath, without control, and without attachment. The breath and mind will become increasingly quiet and peaceful.

'Good breathing practices' also means separate time for Pranayama, in addition to your Asana practice. This means your Pranayama practice (such as Kevala Kumbhaka) requires separate attention, not just during your Vinyasa practice. Start by practicing such things 1-2 times per week at a separate time, typically before Asana. Then gradually increase that to 3-4 times per week, especially if you can take time for a Yoga retreat once per year.

Here are some things to focus on from the beginning:

1. Do not hold your breath, particularly at the end / peak of a movement. Allow for a soft pause and a slightly open throat instead. The belly can be firm; the throat fairly relaxed. A smooth breath is better than a held breath or an overly controlled (restricted) breathing pattern. Opening the throat (slightly) leads to a longer breath, balanced energy, and mindful consciousness vs mental control. It is an important aspect of non-attachment. Initially (the first few years!) there is no good reason to hold your breath for any posture or any movement in a standard Vinyasa sequence. Uddiyana Bandha before practice is a significant (good) exception.
2. The inhalation needs to be soft and smooth, **particularly the first 25%**, rather than overly restricted / stuck, or fast / uncontrolled. There is a subtle balance between these two tendencies. Many students' default to one of them, and then stay with that pattern for years of practice afterwards. This applies to all postures, all movements. Take note of inhaling in upward dog! Slow it down; in particular, move your head slooowly.
3. The inhalation quality (Ujjayi sound at the throat) needs to be the same as the exhalation. The exhalation must NOT be louder than the inhalation. BOTH are relatively quiet. This doesn't mean you're not focused or in control. You are definitely controlling your breath, but subtle vs gross. A slight contraction at the glottis only, for delicate control vs erratic control.
4. Breathing ratios should almost always be 3:4 - difficult postures, or 4:5 - easier postures. The exhalation is always slightly longer, but not by much!
5. Therefore, developing good inhalation breathing is critical! For example, 123 Pause and Viloma Pranayama. Come to a VK course to learn these.
6. Therefore, breathing practices are emphasised BEFORE achieving the posture, every time. Don't put the cart before the horse!

Some Teaching Tips

For EVERY teacher of Vinyasa Krama: Teaching Pranayama is your first job and your main job. Perhaps, your only job. Anything else will lead to imbalance. Your job is not to teach increasingly complex postures. It is not to teach Bandha or breath retention. It is not to teach intricate levels of anatomy and physiology. You can teach these things, they can be appropriate, but they are not our primary goal! Obviously clear instructions for alignment, pacing and scaling are important, but in my opinion, also secondary.

Help your students to understand and apply graceful breathing patterns. Help them work through the tendencies of fight or flight - in between psychological control patterns (Rajas / Surya) and unconscious anxiety patterns (Tamas / Chandra) lies Sattva. The rhythmic, graceful, balance of all. Shiva and Shakti are dancing, and you are the contented witness to it.

Just teaching basic Ujjayi is not enough (within even a casual-class setting) - or worse, only instructing something rudimentary like "breathing with sound" without any ongoing instruction at all. And then leaving students to figure it out for themselves. In my experience the latter is a

common scenario. Students will then default to forceful exhalation breathing as explained above, particularly as the postures become more difficult.

You've all learned this (as a VK teacher / VK practitioner): if these Pranayama practices are not your first goal for your students, if you have not included Pranayama at the beginning or end of every class, if you do not include extra / separate Pranayama classes, and 'private' Pranayama classes in your weekly teaching program, you have not been properly listening to me :)

For general Yoga practitioners reading this, I am not aiming to be mysterious, or clever with articles such as this. I hope the 'mystery' has been clarified, brought into the light and revealed, rather than increased. This style of teaching has been developed to be practical and helpful:

Breathing is first. Posture is second. The inhalation is for energy and balance, the exhalation is for stability and release. The pause between the breaths is identifying the truth of consciousness.

The exhalation will tend to contract the abdomen, but do not do so forcefully, or with 'Bandha' arbitrarily. In fact, you do not need to be overly concerned with Bandha at all. Learn flowing breathing first, and true / experiential understanding of the Bandha will flow out of that. If you are not strong around the abdomen or lower back, it's simple enough: do some core strength and back strength exercises before every class. No need to call that Bandha.

Mula Bandha is not something you do; it is a blockage that gets removed
- Prof. TKV Krishnamacharya

What is the blockage? Any issues relating to Body, Sex, Food, Money, Relationships, Emotions, the Mind.

You're either too controlling - Rajas - and thus doing 'Bandha' is an illusion - they do not exist. Or, you are not disciplined enough - Tamas - and you cannot grasp the Bandha metaphor in the first place.

Mula Bandha - love your body. Dance like no one is watching.

Uddiyana Bandha - love your neighbour. Go dancing with them.

Jalandhara Bandha - love the universe. Dance with Shiva.

The Asana Table

The Four Limbs of Asana

These are the four aspects of physical Yoga that I consider most important, and empirically self-evident. The Asana Table, as it were:

Balanced Graceful Breathing. If you're not sure what that means, please re-read this article.
Alignment and proprioception. Your awareness of your body and posture in time and space. (Time = change, do not assume based on the past; be present, and modify accordingly.)
Stability and Strength. Some of this may be muscular, some of it, particularly stability, relates to alignment. Strength also aids stability, particularly over time, and prevents mishaps with flexibility.
Mobility and Flexibility. Developing ease, balance, and (gradually) more depth with more postures.

Note 1: Alignment. If you can gain consistently good alignment with Parivrtta Trikonasana (twisting triangle) and Virabhadrasana I (first hero-warrior) then your alignment with everything else (all

other postures) will tend to be quite good. If you do not have good alignment with these two postures, your alignment with everything else ***will be less than ideal***.

Note 2: The last leg of the table is flexibility. It does not come first. Strength comes before flexibility: strength = safety. Flexibility without corresponding strength in that area is not safe! And likely to lead to greater imbalance and injury. Just as stability comes before strength. Breathing is above all.

Having said that, the table cannot stand on three legs. You need to balance all four aspects to have a balanced table. Just that 1 comes before 2, which precedes 3, etc.

Finally, the table may have four legs, but what is the table? The table is you. Consciousness, or undifferentiated awareness. The undivided self. This is the only true goal of yoga. In the meantime, however, balance those four legs :)

This is where true grace comes from. It does not come from psychological control. Certainly, it does not come from postural achievement. Grace does not come purely from habits, good or bad, or even from 'best practices'. Grace is letting go, being open to the moment, whatever is revealed. Grace is smiling at your own pain.

The Dancer and the Dance are one, inseparable. Be in your own dance so fully, completely, that the universe dances with you. You are not controlling the universe: You are aligning your dance to the universal one. The pause between your breaths, the pause between heartbeats is opening to this universal truth. Your inhalation and exhalation collapse into each-other and become one: true quietness, true stillness; universality. All is one, nothing is all, one-self is nothing.

Hare Om Tatsat

I hope this article is of assistance.

Namaste
Matthew Sweeney