

GET GROUNDED

Breathing Practices to Ground Excessive *Vaat Dosh*

Have you ever noticed how your breathing changes throughout the day? Have you noticed that you breathe more predominantly through your right nostril when you are active and through your left when you are relaxed? Have you found yourself spontaneously taking quick gasps of air while rushing or doing your activities? Do you voice your laugh on the inhalation or on the exhalation?

Have you noticed that when you are tired your in-breath is belaboured and your out-breath is sharp and heavy – as if you ‘puff your breath out’? Or when you are feeling stressed and anxious how your breathing is shallow, quick, and erratic.

Have you watched babies breathing? As they breathe in, their bellies rise – smoothly and fully – and lower gently as they breathe out. Then there is a beautifully relaxed gap before their next inhalation.

When you start to observe the varying rhythms of your breath, you will realise that most often you breathe unconsciously. To consciously bring the mind's awareness into alignment with the breath is an ancient tradition in many disciplines. These practices have enhanced the breath's power for several reasons:

1. As a guide in meditation.
2. To balance –stimulate or calm– the body's energies.
3. To enliven and advance the brilliance of the mind.
4. To remedy physical and mental health.

Our Individual Uniqueness According to the Ayurvedic Tradition

Praan is the life-giving force, the universal energy. *Praan* is the subtle energy that moves our entire nervous system. The science of *praan* was developed by yogis, who perceived these subtle energies and designed various breathing exercises (they called *pranayam*) to balance the *praan* and thereby control the nervous system; otherwise the nervous system will control you.

The ancient *Ayurvedic* system of health and wellbeing is based on the principle that the five elements of nature – earth, water, fire, air and space –

are represented in people by three *dosh*, or energies: *vaat* (space/air), *pitt* (fire), and *kaph* (earth/water). In health, all three *dosh* are in balance, but when any of these *dosh* are in excess it causes a discordant energy. Ayurved recognizes the constitutional uniqueness of each nervous system, and its curative regimen recommends appropriate *pranayam*, depending on the *dosh* that is in excess.

The Wind Element – Vaat Dosh

Today, I would like to write about how the breath can be directed to balance the body's energies in order to reduce excess *vaat dosh*. Just as how the wind freely blows in nature, the body's wind energy generates the qualities of lightness, motion, speed, and subtlety, causing one to feel energetic, creative, naturally drawn to abstract thinking, and open to perceive subtle, unseen realms and energies. The challenge is when the wind energy is excessive, and then it is not naturally grounded. Excessive *vaat praan* is sensitive to stress, and when it is not grounded it causes nervous energy, whirling in the mind so that one feels scattered, rushed, anxious, and easily overwhelmed with relative activities. When *vaat praan* effects the nervous system in this way, it becomes difficult to unwind, rest and relax, contributing to wind-related disorders in the body such as insomnia, high blood pressure, digestive issues, etc.

Having found *pranayam* to be a wonderful entrance into meditation, I want to talk about and write about those who find difficulty in feeling grounded in their day-to-day lives. I discovered that awareness of the breath centres the mind and works as a direct route to integrate one's high frequency, airy energy to resonate in alignment with an earthed energy. Once the *vaat* live-wire is grounded, the restlessness one may feel as a hindrance in meditation will be settled and one will find meditation to be a natural state. Understanding the *vaat* sensitivity as a power, rather than a weakness, opens pathways to perceive more subtle aspects of life.

Pranayam to Promote the Vagus Nerve's Relaxed Response

As a homeopath living in a spiritual community, I have had a unique insight into the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of the *vaat*-imbalanced nervous system. Inspired by my wonderful 'wind-excited' patients, from my own experience, and from ancient texts on *pranayam*, I adapted traditional *pranayam* techniques to pacify excess *vaat praan* through specific calming,

grounding, breathing practices that work directly on the body's vagus nerve to promote a relaxed response.

The vagus nerve commands the function of two polar opposite responses. One is the sympathetic nervous system, designed to rev us up like a car's accelerator. Thriving on adrenalin and cortisol, it signals the fight-flight-freeze response. Whereas the parasympathetic nervous system works as the car's brake, signaling the rest-relax-repair response. The accelerator and the brake work to intelligently modify our reactions to situations. But when the vagus nerve loses its ability to release the accelerator, then it is not intelligent. Rather, it creates chronic stress.

Excess Vaat Dosh Loses Touch with the Brakes

From excessive *vaat* in the nervous system, one loses touch with how to engage the brake. Therefore, when faced with demands, expectations, deadlines, or even moderate stress, the tendency is to disassociate from the body, triggering the vagus nerve's flight-freeze response. Then one becomes ungrounded, spaced-out, scattered and easily anxious; a non-present state. Psychologist Louis Cozolino writes, "When the structures of the brain lose, or lack, integration, dissociation may occur. While dissociation is a creative way of surviving in the moment, it bodes ill for future psychological and physical wellbeing."

I practise and teach a method of *pranayam* that I call *Pranic Awareness*, which uses grounding, soothing breathing techniques that guide the mind, in partnership with the vagus nerve, to locate the brakes and integrate subtle energy harmoniously with down-to-earth energy in order to ground the excessive wind energy in the body and mind.

How to Ground Vaat Dosh

Today I wish to share three essential *pranayam* practices that promote the relaxation response:

1. Yogic breath - the belly breath.
2. *Ujjai* breath - the ocean breath.
3. *Kumbhak* – to reduce and retain the breath.

The first two *pranayam* practices are the foundation of all the breathing practices. Like the salmon swimming upstream, the yogic breath is the exact

reverse of a disordered breath that raises the chest on the inhalation in a big gasp, and thereby tenses the diaphragm and lower belly, and then the body slumps down, puffing out the breath and collapsing the chest and belly on the exhalation.

The yogic breath guides the energy in the opposite direction with a slow, gentle inhalation, widening the diaphragm and lower belly to ground the breath. The exhalation is deliberate, and engages the lower belly to guide the breath upwards. The *ujjai* breath is an extension of the yogic breath, creating a slight resistance at the back of the throat, in order to channel the breath with an ocean sound. The ocean breath is more deliberate, as if one is leaning into the breath.

You will benefit more deeply from *pranic* breathing when you practise yogic breath and *ujjai* for some time, before moving on to practise *kumbhak*. *Kumbhak* is the gateway to the subtle body – the most gentle and effortless access into meditation.

Listen to the guided recording of Yogic Breath and *Ujjai*. Next month, I will guide you in the practice of *kumbhak*.