



YOGA JOURNEY
ADELAIDE

Whenever I get a new student joining my class for the first time, I like to give them an idea of what to expect during the class. One of the things I always explain is that as well as giving instructions on moving the body, I also give instructions on how to breathe at the same time.

Moving with the Breath

Synchronising the movement of the body with the breath during the practice of Yoga is the coordination of each movement with either an inhalation or an exhalation. It is a practice strongly advocated by T Krishnamacharya. This interaction between body and breath sets in motion the process necessary for transformation. Not only does it benefit us while we practice but it also prepares us for progression on the path of Yoga..

Breath links Body and Mind

"It doesn't matter how beautifully we do a posture or how flexible our bodies are. If we do not have the unification of the body, the breath and the mind, it is difficult to say that our practice falls within the definition of yoga".

- TKV Desikachar, Religiousness in Yoga

Uniting body, breath and mind is the essence of the word Yoga which comes from the root word 'Yuj' which means to bind. It is what makes Yoga a holistic practice rather than just a physical one.

Synchronising the movement of the body with the breath means we have to concentrate and focus. Our practice becomes mindful.

As Krishnamacharya is quoted as saying, "[Yoga] was never meant to be a physical discipline only, but rather a multi-disciplinary process that brings together the body, breath, mind and even our spiritual domains".¹

¹ Yoga Makaranda, p. 26

The Breath is a Mirror

"The breath is one of the best means for observing yourself in your Yoga practice".

- TKV Desikachar, The Heart of Yoga

When we practice mindfully through the integration of body, breath and mind, observing the breath while we practice becomes like looking in a mirror.

Have you ever noticed how different your breath is when you're stressed or anxious compared to when you are relaxed?

We are not usually aware of our breath as we go about our day. It is something that happens naturally so we generally take it for granted; but physical capacity and state of mind can affect the quality of the breath at any given moment.

By observing the breath during our practice we can see whether we are practising within our own comfort levels and how our mind is responding to what we are doing. It is how we know whether we have achieved the two qualities that make an āsana: sthiram (stability) and sukham (ease-fulness). If our effort is too little, too much, or just right, our breath will tell us; similarly, our breath will also let us know if the speed and range of our movement is appropriate.

Synchronising the movement of the body with the breath also gives us an insight as to what is going on in our mind. Try it: sit quietly for a few moments and take a few conscious breaths, observing the breath and mind as you do this. Don't rush. Give yourself time to stay for 8 - 12 breaths. What did you notice? As Patañjali tells us in Yoga Sūtra II:52: when the mind becomes attentive and focussed and the activities of the mind subside, the breath becomes longer (dīrgha) and smoother (sūkṣmaḥ).

The Breath enhances the Posture

"The body's natural elasticity is enhanced with the breath"

- TKV Desikachar, The Heart of Yoga

There are many Yoga āsana-s (postures) and each one has a natural breath focus. For example, when we bend forward and contract the abdomen, it facilitates the exhale. When we bend backwards and open up the chest, it facilitates the inhale.

Bringing attention to the natural breath focus of a posture whilst synchronising the movement of the body with the breath can enhance the posture. In fact, "maintaining the

link between breath and body... has more significance to the purpose of Yoga than achieving a classic āsana for its own sake"².

Leading with the Breath

"We should not compromise the easy flow of the breath to achieve the āsana".

- TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*

Once we become established in synchronising the body with the breath, the next step is to let the breath *initiate* the movement.

As mentioned previously, when the activities of the mind subside our breath becomes long, smooth and steady. When this happens, it becomes much easier to control the movement of the body in time with the breath rather than adjust the breath for the body. If we don't follow our breath, we can create internal tension and discomfort which will agitate the mind and bring about the opposite effect of the goal of Yoga.

Breath is the carrier of Prāṇa

Prāṇa is the vitality - the life energy - that pervades the body-mind-senses complex of every living being.

We can't see it or touch it, nor can we increase or reduce the amount of prāṇa that we have inside us. But we can 'manage' our prāṇa through conscious control of the breath (prāṇāyāma).

Just as each posture has a natural breath focus, the function of each classic āsana has a particular implication on the movement of prāṇa in the body. In synchronising the movement of the body with the breath, we facilitate the movement of prāṇa within, ensuring that we keep more of this precious vitality within us. As the quality of the prāṇa within us is closely linked to the state of our mind, the more peaceful and well-balanced we are, the less our prāṇa is dispersed outside the body.

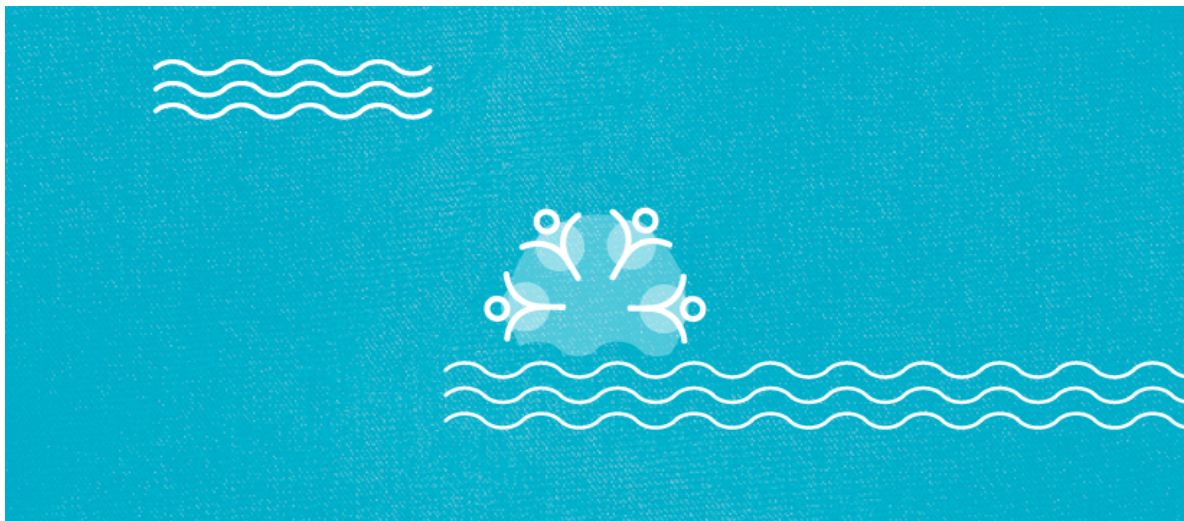
² TKV Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, p. 51

Breath leads us towards Meditation

Yoga is a journey. It is about achieving something that we have not achieved before; of attaining something that was previously unattainable.

What brings us to Yoga is different for each of us. For many, the first approach to Yoga is often through the physical practice of Yoga āsana-s (postures) and achievement at the start the journey may come in the form of performing a particular posture. But gradually over time, the practice of āsana should imperceptibly lead us further.

The physical stability and mental stillness that comes from synchronising the movement of the body with the breath not only prepares us for sitting in a comfortable position for the practice of prāṇāyāma also prepares through the mind for meditation. Through continuous practice, the mind becomes clearer, more focussed and we become ready to turn our attention further inwards.



Polly Holmes is both a teacher of Yoga and Vedic Chant. She began her own Yoga journey in earnest almost twenty years ago. A teacher in the tradition of T Krishnamacharya, Polly has had the privilege of studying with Barbara Brian at Āgama Yoga Centre in Melbourne as well as at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai. Polly is passionate about all aspects of Yoga and offers workshops and training as well as regular group classes. She has an aptitude for Yoga Philosophy, Vedic Chanting and the use of mantra in āsana, prāṇāyāma and meditation.
