

Prāṇā – the Life Force

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of *Prāṇā*, derived from ancient Indian martial practices, specifically the *Kshatriya's* code of ethical combat. *Prāṇā* is defined as a force in constant motion, representing life, breath, and energy. It is considered eternal and serves as the substratum of life, encompassing cosmic energy at both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. The visibility and tracking of *Prāṇā* through Kirlian photography are discussed, emphasizing its connection to the bio-plasmic body. The paper advocates for incorporating the philosophical knowledge of these ancient arts into modern social systems to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Self-evolution is promoted through awareness and observation, breaking habituated patterns for individual development. The relevance of *Prāṇā* in human lives is highlighted, with practical benefits observed in individuals. The paper suggests that understanding and incorporating this ancient wisdom can contribute to the revival of overall well-being in human societies.

Keywords: *Prāṇā*, *Kshatriya's* code, Ancient Indian martial practices, Cosmic energy...

Introduction:

In today's uncertain stressful world, building immunity and developing resilience against unforeseen events has become essential. The ancient *Kshatriya's* code of ethical combat practices, endurance, and handling stress as practiced through *Vajramushti martial arts*, is a remarkable field of study and research for the same. Will looking back into our ancient ancestral past offer ways to develop resilience, vigour and strength such that human beings are better equipped to handle today's stresses and unforeseen natural events? This paper looks into these aspects

and presents a simple, practical useful explanation on *Prāṇā* culled from ancient texts based on Indian martial practices of *Vajramushti*.

In a first attempt of its kind, this explanation of *Prāṇā* has been researched by following the practices of *Kshatriya* warriors in the time of prehistory, right through proto history up to the present, where these techniques and their practices are alive in few places in the Indian subcontinent today. The long history, buried in secretive hand-down from *guru* to *shishya* follows the robust Indian oral traditions of teaching-and-learning where knowledge of combat techniques was applied in battle and for healing of warriors using *Prāṇā*. In addition to this, comparative analysis with contemporary Western and scientific understanding of the human body is undertaken to ensure contemporary relevance of this research.

Hence, furthering this path, this unique research is placed at the confluence of Western and Indian traditions by placing it in the emerging branch of applied philosophy. As per Loretta Kopelmann, “Applied” is an established technical term used to describe many new and popular areas of teaching and research in philosophy. These include ‘ethical issues about business, medicine, engineering, war, nursing, bio-systems, allied health, and veterinary medicine.’¹

Prāṇā holds continuous relevance in human lives and several remarkable benefits have been evidenced through practice as seen in individual lives. Therefore, this explanation of has applicable advantages for human societies as a whole by focusing on individual development of their innate abilities.

***Prāṇā* Defined:**

Prāṇā is a Sanskrit word derived from the syllables ‘*Prā*’ meaning constant and ‘*An*’ means movement (Saraswati S. N., 2009), meaning a force which is in constant motion, or to breathe, to live, to go about in life. *Prāṇā* means constant motion giving power, strength, vigour, breath of life and energy, and this comes through *vāyu* or air. This constant motion starts in the womb and it ends in the death of an individual. Contrary to popular belief, *Prāṇā* is **eternal** energy and not internal energy. It is perpetual, and

already here *nasti ākrtah krtenā* (*Mundakopanisad I.2.12*). *Prāṇā* is the substratum of life. It is the collective term that refers to cosmic energy, permeating at all levels alternately referring to ‘life force’ both at microcosmic or macrocosmic energetic level.

Can *Prāṇā* be seen or tracked? Yes – through Kirlian photography. John White and Stanley Krippner in their book *Future Science – Life Energies and the Physics of Paranormal Phenomena*, describe Soviet scientists doing important research in bio-plasma, which states that all human beings are *Kshir Sagar* or ocean of milk. Since each of a human’s billions of living cells are self-charging battery of *prāṇā*, an extremely subtle organic essence which can be readily converted into psychic energy. In heightened states of consciousness induced by an awakened *Kundalini*, the bio-plasmic body is the primary object of observation in the Kirlian photography caused by bio-plasma (White 1977, 82).

This paper maintains that understanding, re-formulating, and incorporating the philosophical knowledge of *Kshatriya Lion’s skills* arts which actively used *prāṇā* to strengthen, to heal, and survive and live their lives into various contemporary social systems. It revives physical, mental and emotional states of all individuals. Self-evolution through continues and sustained practice was the best self-defense for warriors. They practiced techniques that utilized *prāṇā* to build mind, body, awareness and instinct to much above average levels. Since, during a battle a warrior would need to make many instinctive, split-second decisions from dawn (start of battle) to dusk (end of battle), especially if he is on his feet with the chaos of the battlefield around him for several hours.

This specific type of self-evolution is achieved by being aware of oneself and observing the rise and fall of action or emotion, which creates vibration and frequency, originating from the body, mind, or instinct, thereby breaking habituated patterns and motivating self-development through sustained effort. Several techniques for this were handed down from teacher to student in guarded ways in order to maintain secrecy and the advantage of surprise during battle. These were also transformed for relevance to terrain, region, temperament of student etc. every few generations. They were constantly being used, reused, repurposed for several activities beyond the battlefield. In the current context, one can

benefit from these techniques by boosting the immune system, developing mental resilience, cultivating awareness and inculcating a deep appreciation of the interconnectedness of all life since *prāṇā* runs through all living beings on earth.

Requirement for tapping into *Prāṇā*

To tap into eternal energy or *Prāṇā* one needs to have good *karma-phala* i.e. result of deeds done have to be of a certain quality. Since *karma-phala* is the product of one's action, to discard it requires effort for which *tattva-viveka* (discriminative knowledge) is required. Without it one wouldn't understand the search for understanding *prāṇā* and cultivating it or practicing with it. (Saraswati S. N., 2009).

Prāṇa, ever present in the knower or the practitioner and to comprehend its true nature (*svarupa*), one requires *pramana* i.e. the right knowledge. The researcher explains that the *Jnanalakshana pratyaksa* of *Nyaya sutra*², leads to one-pointed focus or *Citta-ekagrata samadhana*, the path of unfolding and discovering the flow of *Prāṇā*. Without *Citta-ekagrata samadhana* or one-point focus, one cannot become a *mumuksu*. Without the tools, many try to tap into the source or focus deeply into the resource of *Prāṇā* but very few can skim the outer layer (Saraswati 2012).

Tapping into the resource of *Prāṇā* one can build *siddhis* or supernatural powers as mentioned in the *Yoga Sutra, Kaivalya Pada* book 4:1: *janma auṣadhi mantra tapaḥ samādhijāḥ siddhayaḥ*. This verse means the mystics can build *siddhi* if he/she is born in a particular sect/*gotra*; or ingesting drugs at regulated or auspicious occasions; or reciting special sounds (chanting); or physical bodily austerities; or through continuous effortless linkage of concentration to a higher force, object or person. There are eight such *siddhis* mentioned in the Indian Philosophy, such as *anima* – becoming smaller, *mahima* – becoming bigger, *laghima* – becoming lighter, *prapti* – travel at will, and so on...

Understanding of *Prāṇā* through *Prāṇāyāmaa*

The word *prāṇāyāmaa* is translated as breath control but it's a deeper internal process as researched through *Kshatriya* techniques is

pran+ayama or expansion of the *prāṇāyāmaa kosha*. In the *Ramayana*, there are references to the importance of controlling the mind and senses, which indirectly relate to the practice of breath control and meditation. Whereas the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a part of the *Mahabharata*, includes teachings from Lord *Krishna* to *Arjuna* on topics like self-realization, self-discipline, and controlling the mind. These teachings are foundational to the practices of meditation and breath-work. The chunk of knowledge on breath work is presented in few seminal texts written in Sanskrit, one is the *Sangitaratnakara* by *Sarangadeva* and the other is *Siva Svarodaya Shastra*.

The *Kshatriya* skill set of breath-work, and meditative techniques were passed from India to Tibet, Nepal, and China through Buddhist or non-Buddhist traditions. One of the teachings known as *Amrtasiddhi*, or the Attainment of Immortality, was popularised by the Buddhists and by the *Nathas* sect (foremost proponents of *hatha* or ‘forceful’ yoga), and which stand as witnesses to a long period of multi-traditional trans-Himalayan cultural exchange³.

The techniques and theories presented in *Amrtasiddhi* revolve around the manipulation of the energy of the subtle body, the '*prāṇāmaya kosha*,' through physical and mental exercises. The researcher explicit that breathing is a direct means of absorbing *Prāṇā* and the way the breath is set to build *prāṇic* vibration influences the entire human being. *Prāṇāyāma* is practiced to understand and control the *prāṇic* process in the body. He further states there are three types of *prāṇāyāmaa* and they are:

1. **External Breath:** This means to work or to control the breath on conscious level and denoted by the word *Praṇa+yama* where *prāṇa* translate as life force and *yama* means control or manipulation. It is also called as *bahir-anga* or external or conscious level breathing. On the conscious level, it is the manipulation of inhalation (*puraka*), hold (*sahita-kumbhaka*), exhalation (*rechaka*), and suspension (*kevala-kumbhaka*). On conscious level the *bahir-anga prāṇāyāma* techniques are used to cleanse or detox the subtle energetic channels in the body called *nadis* for free flow of *prāṇa*.
2. **Internal Breath:** This means expansion of life force or activating the *prāṇā* to higher frequency in the *prāṇāmaya kosha* through

subconscious level of breathing with the help of mind intention (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). Here the word *Praṇ+iyama* where *praṇ* means life and *iyama* means vistarā or expansion, meaning lengthening or expansion of *pranic* capacity. It is also called as *ābhyantara-anga* meaning internal or subconscious level of breathing. Now on the subconscious level, the breath has to move internally along the central channel of the body (known as internal breath-control, *ābhyantaraprāṇāyāma*), starting in the fourth stage of conscious breath ‘the quiescent’ (*suprasānta*) which is effortless, natural, and occurs by itself.

3. **Cellular Breath:** Cellular respiration is the process by which biological fuels are oxidized in the presence of an inorganic electron acceptor, such as oxygen, to drive the bulk production of adenosine triphosphate, which contains energy. In ancient Indian literature, cellular breathing is often referred to as ‘*antar-anga prāṇāyāmaa*’. Here the practitioner guides the vital breath from the heart to the navel and the ‘mind’ accompanies the vital breath. The precise meaning of holding the breath after exhalation results in *udghāta*.

Prāṇā Vayu, Udghata Explained

Prāṇā Vayu encompasses the concept of vital life force or energy and plays a crucial role in various physiological processes, including respiration and cellular metabolism. It is a fundamental concept in Indian philosophies, particularly in yoga and Ayurveda, where it is associated with the movement of breath through *vayu* and *maruts* (i.e. whirlpools), energy, and consciousness within the body.

Bhojarāja, in his eleventh-century commentary on the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, defines *udghāta* as ‘the wind striking the head when it has been propelled upwards from its source in the navel’. Analyzing *udghāta* in *Śaiva* texts, *Vasudeva* writes: ‘To summarize, *udghāta* appears to be the yogic term for the sensation of a spontaneous upward surge of vital energy brought on in the early stages of self-induced asphyxiation.’ An *udghāta* (or a series of *udghātas*) can pierce the *granthi* (‘Knot’; energetic knot or a blockage in the body that must be pierced using the breath) along the central channel or *Kuṇḍalinī Marg* and is thereby withdrawn from the

influence of the sense organs’, with mind and breath (Mallinson 2017, 176).

Breath being pierced in the *Brahma Granthi* region, the central channel will, rise and fall, contract and expand, or move forward and backward, causing the *prāṇā* to expand in the *prāṇāmaya kosha*, simultaneously integrating with *pratyahara* and *dharana*. This recalls the ‘fourth [breath]’ of *Pātañjalayogasāstra* 2.51, in which there is casting aside of external and internal objects, which in turn destroys the *karmic* ‘covering of the light’ (*prakāśāvaraṇa*, 2.52) and makes one fit for the practice of fixation (*dhāraṇā*, 2.53). This is achieved by *prayatna-vishesha* or special care in exhalation, so that the mind remains concentrated on the *dharaniye deshe* where *dharana* is applied.

Tapping Prāṇā through Yoga Sūtra Philosophy

Prāṇā consists of vital breath, fluids, blood essence, sensation, emotions, mind, etc., coursing through the body in innumerable channels called *srotas*. They are, *Prāṇāvaha*, *Annavaha*, *Swedavaha*, *Purishavaha*, *Mutravaha*, *Rasavaha*, etc... Apart from these women have *Shukravaha*, *Artavaha* and *Stanyavaha srotas*. When *Prāṇā* is awakened, it moves in pulses through the fourteen *nadis* which are, *Alambusha*, *Kuhu*, *Vishvodhara*, *Sarasvati*, etc; and some gross networks of tubular vessels called *sira*, and some subtle called *dhamani*; with hundred and eight *marma* points from where *Prāṇā* enters and leaves the body. The micro-movements of *Prāṇā* can be further subdivided into smaller energetic parts which are currents or impulses called **Vayus**, such as *Prāṇā*, *Apana*, *Samana*, *Udana*, and *Vyana*. The five *upa-prāṇā*, *Naga*, *Kurma*, *Krikkara*, *Devadatta*, and *Dhananjaya*, are governed by the five *Vayus* and deals with reflexive actions such as, belching, hiccups, yawning, etc.

The arousal of *Kundalini* is similar to releasing energy from an atom, which is similar to the:

1. fission method – which is *prāṇāyāmaa* techniques with *bandhas*, and *mudras*
2. fusion method which is a purely meditative method and *jnana yoga* type.

Below mentioned is the fission method in standing posture (*stithprathana asan*), as mentioned in the *Yoga Sutra* Book 2:46 to 52:

1. Integrated strength to be acquired through the body's three springs (foundation - legs, torso – centerline, and sphere - arms). By relaxing, rooting and understanding the opposite forces, *pra-yatnashaithilyatma pra-yatna a-stheyah*, building elastic strength and explosive qualities in the three springs.
2. Breath should be in subconscious stage or no breath zone after the breath is in solo retention that is *kevala-kumbhaka*. Abandoning *rechaka* and *puraka*, an easy and relaxed retention of air is *prāṇāyāmaa....sa vai kevala-kumbhakah*. Slowing the breath – the viscosity of blood gets increased, helps in purification of nerve impulses and stimulates the *Kundalini* to action.
3. Balance the polarity of tension and relaxation by interpreting the two opposites *Shiv* and *Shakti*, with the help of *bandhas* in a very subtle mannerism (controlling the primary pulse of life – reflexive action or *upa-prāṇā* through movement of the diaphragm), similar to contraction and expansion happening simultaneously. This is done by *sahita-kumbhaka* meaning performing exhalation and inhalation simultaneously (*arechyapurya yat kuryat sa vai sahita-kumbhakah* as mentioned in *Skanda Purana*), by stretching the fasciae tissues.
4. Maintaining this position both external and internal stillness, one stimulates impulses coming in spurts similar to pulsation. A practitioner experiences the sensation of *Kundalini Marg* being stretched to the floor of the earth, and the other end stretched towards the ceiling or heaven. When this happens, mind is ready for concentration and wisdom dawns on you, as mentioned in *Yoga Sutra*, book 2:53. Simultaneously one experiences tingles and bubbles associated with increased *prāṇic* flow, heat, and bliss. This phenomenon is an effect of the nervous system and opiate receptors. There is some indication that the tingly feeling of *prāṇā* may be associated with an increased amount of nitric oxide generated by Nitric Oxide Synthases (NOS) nerves.
5. Then this pulsation will create a cylinder of the body, as though the whole body is encompassed or protected like a shield, leading to the

inert potential of the body which can manifest in physical reality.

After awakening of *Kundalini*, there is a catatonic deathlike state called *Nirodha* meaning before the arising of ignorance and volitional impulse.' [Dixon, *Biology*, p.42]. *Nirodha* is a very high non-meditative meditative state, there is no time sense, it's a delta or meta-delta level of meditation, where heartbeat and metabolism are slow and practically cease burning very little energy, and body temperature drops below normal. It is said that *Nirodha* is a precursor to Ego Death. '*Nigredo*' in Western alchemy is the death-like withdrawal of the soul from the body (Dixon 2017, 43). While training one goes through below mentioned three stages:

1. The first stage, the body perspires,
2. The second stage, there are tremors in the body and it will shake violently,
3. Thirdly there will be a blissful feeling that is the time the *prāṇā*, has started coursing around the body.

After harnessing the power of *prāṇā*, one can be in the state of *samyama* i.e. union of *Dharana*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi*. The aim of *samyama* is not only to get the knowledge of the object of meditation but total control over the object, e.g. *samyama* on *nabhichakra* gives knowledge of the physical body, *Yoga Sutra* book 3:29, *samyama* on throat one becomes free from hunger and thirst, *Yoga Sutra* book 3:30, etc.

Conclusion

In today's day and age, individuals have forgotten life-giving, life-affirming, constructive breathing patterns. This is due to several factors, the saddest one being that, the basic fundamental of breathing techniques as taught by the grandparents and ancestors are taken as quackery. It's disheartening to know that today western scientific investigations are pointing out the same nuances of breathing and breath control which the ancient scriptures have already stated. These were written without constant per reviews, updates or the current atmosphere of scientific change/additions/deletions that follow scientific research. They also remain

relevant without needing any changes for so many centuries. In the current generation, since breathing properly is not taught or disregarded, the breath is governed by emotions, unhealthy lifestyles, stress, and wrong information through the undocor media, quick fixes, which leads to mental health issues, stress and low vitality in the body.

Breath-work is intended to contain the body appropriately, and foster the body's ability to express that containment naturally by giving strength and resilience to the functional human form. When the body is tired and energy reserves run low then appropriate breathing patterns pertaining to the conditions of the environment and the concerned lifestyle of that individual can be corrected or uplifted. With *prāṇāyāma*, one moves with more agility and less effort, becoming more energetic, and by spending some time of becoming conscious of the breath, one can reduce stress and control the overexcited hormonal imbalances.

Hiranyagarbha is the source of *Prāṇā*, where *atmada* and *balada* evolves. It is the vital force, the energy behind body, mind, emotion, and spirit. It connects the *sthula-sarira* (*physical body*) with *sukhma-sarira* (*subtle-body*) and the bond is *prāṇā*. To tap into its resources, one needs to do *tapas*, *swadhya*, and *Ishwar pranidhana*. These trainings were the benchmark of the *Kshatriya* warriors during the *Vedic* period. Transforming in time, Buddhism maintained certain techniques for the development and maintenance of the body, mind, and spirit rather than for use in battle. Some of the skill sets of *Vajramushti* were used as tools to enhance an individual's body, mind, and spirit, which are seen in the Shaolin Temple practices, propagated by *Bodhidharma* in China.

Kshatriya training developed discipline at physical, mental, psychological, emotional, and spiritual levels, which is missing in the current scenario. It is imperative to understand that mental health simply cannot exist without physical health; since the body, mind, emotions, breath, and spirit are all deeply inter-connected and their separations only encourages compartmentalization, that hampers individual growth and fragments communities. The only pathway is going back to ancient philosophy that views a wholesome integration of mind-body-spirit triumvirate and applying that knowledge to today's situation, thus leading to a better future generation.

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²In Jnanalakshana perception, the object is not directly presented to the sense-organs, but it is revived in memory due to the past cognitions of the object and it is perceived through representation. E.g. Sandalwood smells and looks fragrance or ice feels and looks cold.

³ For recent studies on specific encounters between Buddhists and Nathas, see Ehrhard (1994), pp. 25, 32, nn. 6–9; Templeman (1997); van der Kuijp (forthcoming), Walter (1992), and Walter (1996). On Nathas more generally see Briggs (1938), Dasgupta (1969), pp. 191–255, and most recently White (1996).
