

In the May 2002 issue of *Dipika*, the Iyengar Yoga Institute journal, published an interview with Dr. Geeta S. Iyengar on the subject of *prāṇāyāma* by **Lois Steinberg**. Many thanks to Lois for allowing us to share it here.



**LS – *Prāṇāyāma* is not easily taken up by students to practice. Could you describe the importance of a *prāṇāyāma* practice and how to develop it?**

Geeta Iyengar – I understand the problem. I think students feel *prāṇāyāma* is of one type just depending on the breathing process and therefore monotonous. To get interested in the subject is difficult and one really has to go deeper inside whereas with *āsana* it is not necessary for a beginner to go straight away into oneself. That means a beginning is made from outside in. Therefore, a beginner as an extrovert can easily start doing some kind of practice. Whereas for *prāṇāyāma*, one really requires the inward-

going process. Not only does one have to become an extrovert, but one needs intra-vision. *Patañjali* very clearly indicated that *prāṇāyāma* has to come after *āsana* is conquered. In the *āsana* there is a process of going from outside in. Making the body to understand, getting the sensitivity, the feeling of equilibrium, inner alignments, etc. If that understanding comes, then the *prāṇāyāma* begins.

The problem is that when students begin to do *prāṇāyāma*, they can't see an immediate effect of it. So, they feel that there is not feedback from the early stages of practice. Whereas from *āsana* there is an immediate feedback: you feel nice; you feel something good happening in you; some life coming in you, blood getting circulated, feeling freshness of the mind; you feel that dullness is lessening. But in *prāṇāyāma* these things cannot be felt immediately. It takes its own time.

But still, sometime the beginning has to be made. So, if a beginner has to make an attempt towards it, first they have to learn to relax their body, relax their mind as we do in *Śavāsana*. Often, I feel that *Śavāsana* is a kind of threshold between *āsana* and pranayama. Once they begin to feel the relaxation in *Śavāsana*, students come closer to their breath. The mind gets settled inside and the cellular body settles. Then they come into contact with their inner energy. And once they come to know their inner energy and the breath then I think the interest in *prāṇāyāma* will begin to grow like when you put the seed into the soil – the sprouting has to occur at that stage.

At this stage, one becomes better acquainted with that breath. If we just have some ideas in our mind that breathing should be long, it should be very deep, it should be complete, then we run into so many obstacles because of our way of thinking. It doesn't happen. The breath won't be deep; the breath won't be long. To reach toward those idealistic views one has to approach it differently. And if that is understood, then I think one will gain interest into the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. First, a beginner has to learn to do *Śavāsana* properly. And in *Śavāsana*, a beginner has to feel the movement of the breath, the inhalation and exhalation. And then, while exposing that inhalation and exhalation you gain insight into the body's intelligence. A beginner has to feel the lungs, the ribs, the intercostal muscles, the abdomen, the very positioning and the very movement of it. What kind of inner expansion is occurring? How one is creating space

in inhalation. How one is getting quieted in exhalation. How the body is receding. If this kind of dialogue with one's own body and one's own breath happens, I think a beginner will begin to get interested. But if you ask me for specific types of *prāṇāyāma*, then *Ujjāyi* and *Viloma* will be helpful.

“I feel that Savasana is a kind of threshold between asana and pranayama. Once they begin to feel the relaxation in Savasana, students come closer to their breath.”

**LS – In terms of other practical aspects of *prāṇāyāma* practice, some people get confused when to practice it in relation to *āsana*.**

Geeta Iyengar – It depends on how one has progressed in one's practice. I would say a beginner always would prefer to do *prāṇāyāma* after *āsana* practice.

**LS – Even if it's a strong *āsana* practice?**

Geeta Iyengar – After a strong *āsana* practice, you give extra time to *Śavāsana* and then the *prāṇāyāma* can begin. It depends on how much time one has set aside for practice. When you say strong *āsana* practice, let us suppose you have two hours to practice. One can divide that time. One and quarter hours, or one and a half hours of *āsana* practice, ten minutes of *Śavāsana* and then twenty minutes of *prāṇāyāma*. After an *āsana* practice the body develops some intelligence, some understanding. Even if they have done some standing poses, some forward bends, or some backward extensions or lateral twistings, some inversions like *Śīrṣāsana* and *Sarvāṅgāsana*. Then with this regular, normal, usual practice, they can certainly do *prāṇāyāma* for half an hour: ten minutes of *Śavāsana*, and then another five or ten minutes of *Ujjāyi* cycles,

watching their breath. By that time the body is relaxed and the nerves are quieted. The impression of the fatigue they had in their *āsana* practice will be removed in *Śavāsana*. Freshness in the body comes up. But intelligence doesn't fade. What I mean by intelligence is, the nerve fibers get stimulated in the *āsana* practice; there is a feeling of exhilaration and then with *āsana*-s such as *Sarvāṅgāsana*., *Halāsana* or *Setubandha sarvāṅgāsana*, the feeling of quietness comes to the nerves. That is a kind of nourishment to the nerves required for *prāṇāyāma* practice. So, if that nourishment comes from the *āsana* practice, then *prāṇāyāma* becomes easier. These *āsana*-s are conducive to take one's attention inwards to feel the body, the breath and the mind. They pacify the ego and bring humbleness.

Sometimes your breath will be just normal and then suddenly you find your exhalation is becoming further, longer. It's becoming somehow deep. So, watch that. Observe that. Sometimes you find your inhalation is becoming deeper than normal. So how can this kind of progress occur in the inhalation and the exhalation? We begin to trace how the inhalation is happening. How the exhalation is happening. A kind of understanding and awareness comes. At that point, the question is not whether what comes is correct or wrong, but it is a question of whether the sensitivity has come, whether you understand that there is some difference between inhalation and exhalation, there are some changes, occurring at a certain stage or not. Even if they begin to watch only that, I think they are gradually beginning to proceed toward the *prāṇāyāma* practice. So, if that nourishment comes from the *āsana* practice, then *pr*. One has to identify and notify what is happening within, with the body, mind and breath.

For well-advanced students, this question doesn't arise. When you have got the feeling of *prāṇāyāma*, then you prefer to give a separate time for it. Because then you cannot just finish in a hurry. Then that student feels from inside that *prāṇāyāma* practice has to be separated from *āsana* practice in order to get the proper effect. Let us say if *prāṇāyāma* is done for forty-five minutes or one hour, then obviously it cannot be joined with the *āsana* practice. Most pupils will not have the time for a long *āsana* practice and then a long *prāṇāyāma* practice. But you as senior pupils want to watch your *prāṇāyāma*. You want to learn something. You want to consolidate what you have

learned. Then you need more time, longer duration. But as a beginner, I may suggest that instead of a full *prāṇāyāma* practice one can just lie down in *Śavāsana* and do some cycles of breath, watching the movement of the chest since it can be felt by one and all.

“Prana is not just the breath but the energy. And breathing is the process by which you apply that energy to find out how deep that energy penetrates and percolates”

**LS – Since we are talking about *prāṇāyāma*, could you talk about the significance of *Hanumān* (Monkey God) to *yoga*?**

Geeta Iyengar – Actually, *Hanumān* is called *Praṇā Dev*. He’s the Lord of *Praṇā*. And it is said that all the five *Praṇā*-s are existing in him with full potency: *Praṇā*, *Apāna*, *Samāna*, *Udāna* and *Vyāna*. That means that Lord *Hanumān* has control over all these five *Praṇā*. And through this control he has certain *Siddhis* (supernatural powers). In the tale of *Rāmāyaṇam*, *Hanumān* really showed these qualities *Hanumān* was also a good musician. He was also a practitioner of *yoga*. And to some extent he was a *Praṇā* to *Rāma*, if *Rāma* was the soul. You see, we say the soul is the inner potency that we have, *Dṛṣṭa*. And this *Dṛṣṭa* has to be served by *Dṛśya* – the (The Seer). That’s what *Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra-s* say. *Rama* is considered to be the *Puruṣha* and *Sita* is the *Prakṛti*. *Hanumān* is the *Prāṇa* because the connection between the *Prakṛti* and the *Puruṣha* is only on the path of *Prāṇa* – the cosmic energy, the cosmic intelligence. *Prāṇa* is not just the breath but the energy. And breathing is the process by which you apply that energy to find out how deep that energy penetrates and percolates, how divine that energy is, how much purification of that energy is possible. How you can really explore that energy. We have hidden energy inside. The energy has to come up. It also serves the *Puruṣha* in different ways. And that is what *Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras*

say – in the *Vibhūti pādah* – that you can get control over the different channels of energy. They are connected with the five elements and unless the *Prāṇa* unites these five elements, the nectar from the five elements won't come up. Each element has got its own strength, its own energy. When *Prāṇa* gets united, this energy comes upward. That is how *Hanumān* served *Rama* and *Sita*, *Puruṣha* and *Prakṛti*, through his energy, through his own potency.

**LS – Pranayama has saved my life, twice. When I couldn't do anything else, I had pranayama.**

Geeta Iyengar – It heals. Because you get some control over these senses of perception, the organs of action and through those, the body, of course. *Prāṇāyāma* strengthens the nervous system. You begin to feel how the nerves are carrying the energy. Even if people do not know anything, if they begin from *Śavāsana* and in that *Śavāsana* watch their breath, it will enact that healing process.

We have so many varieties of *prāṇāyāma*. There is *Anuloma prāṇāyāma*, *Pratiloma prāṇāyāma*, or *Viloma prāṇāyāma*, and whichever you take they all have stages. What are these stages? *Prāṇāyāma* develops from stage I gradually. It's like a flower blooming. The first cycle will not come at once. It will remain in a seed form somewhere. *Guruji* begins from that seed form in stage I and stage II. Then the flower blooms completely at higher stages. That means the stages of *prāṇāyāma* gradually develop to that level and you begin to understand what's happening. It is a very safe process. You would be surprised that *Guruji* doesn't introduce *Bandha*-s (locks) until a certain stage. He goes very slowly. Then, as you proceed, the *Bandha*-s begin to come to you. You feel it yourself. And from that you develop.

**LS – Yes this state happened. How did it happen?**

Geeta Iyengar – For example, simple *Jālandharabandha*. You do a few cycles of *Ujjāyi*; a time comes when the head begins to go down. There is a period where the head doesn't come down. You don't get a proper position. The throat has to sort of create the

space; it doesn't come with a chin lock. So first the chin-locking process is physical. But then when you find something is happening in the inner walls of the throat. Also, your head is getting quieted. Your brain cells are getting quieted. Your senses of perception are getting quieted. Then the head comes down further. The more you become humble and quiet, the better *Jālandharabandha* comes. That means the natural way of *Jālandharabandha* is occurring. But the pain elements – the neck pain, muscular pain or strain come later, after ten, twelve, or fifteen cycles. That means you have crossed your limit. You may come to a boundary line where the neck is paining. But *Guruji* says not to go right up to where the neck pain comes in *Jalandhara Bandha*. If you are not getting the chin-lock use a bandage. So, you are so safe, you are not holding your throat tight. You are not jamming anything inside. Because he has given those safety measures, I don't think anybody should feel afraid to practice *prāṇāyāma*.

The improvement in the techniques as one begins to understand the depth of *prāṇāyāma* is quite different to that of the understanding of a beginner. A beginner has to stick to a program or a format very strictly. He/she may do *Ujjāyi* or *Viloma* cycles, but has to stick to that practice. With this regimented program one gradually begins to get sensitivity. The breath cycles may go mechanically, but the mechanical breathing cycles tell you, "Oh! This is not the way. Let me slow down and observe." This is sensitivity. You begin to learn what needs to be unlearned. The unlearning process further leads you to say what has to be learned. This is the way to educate oneself.