

INTRODUCTION

Homage to you, O Vayu!

I will proclaim you

And you alone as the Visible Brahman!

I will proclaim you as the right (rta), I will proclaim you as the true (satya).

May it help me, May it help the teacher:

Yes, may it help me, May it help the teacher:

Om shanti, shanti, shanti (Om peace, peace, peace).

– Taittiriya Upanishad¹

This book is the result of a fifteen-year quest in search of a little-known yet vital yogic practice known as the ten vayus (vī-yūz).

Why they were forgotten is a mystery, but in my experience they forge a living link between the physical and energy body, and provide important directives that are vital in any serious yoga practice.

The Sanskrit word “vayu” means wind, space or air. Vayu is also the name of the Hindu God of the Wind. However, the manifestation of the vayus in the human body, their function, and how they relate to our yoga practice are questions that do not resolve into a simple or single answer.

One way of characterizing the vayus is as special pockets of space in the body, internal atmospheres that, like the outer atmosphere that surrounds our planet, allow for life and intelligence to thrive. There are ten vayus, each of which has a different name and is situated in a different place in the body. The vayus are mentioned in the Patanjali Yoga Sutras and Hatha Yoga texts, and as these are practice-oriented manuals it is logical to presume that they were an organic part of yoga practice in the past.

My curiosity concerning the ten vayus began many years ago when I came across them in a Hatha Yoga text called the *Gheranda Samhita*. The text seemed incomprehensible and yet I was intrigued.

¹ *The Early Upanishads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 291.

The vayus are ten.

Namely, prana, apana, samana, udana and vyana, naga (snake), kurma (turtle), krikara (pepper), devadatta (god-given) and dhananjaya (victorious).²

The text goes on to divide this long list of Sanskrit names into two groups of five. The first group is given the collective name of Pranadi and it belongs to the inner body:

*The prana moves always in the heart,
the apana in the sphere of the anus,
the samana in the area of the navel,
udana in the throat
and the vyana pervades the whole body.*

After the five inner vayus, the five outer vayus, the Nagadi, are explained. They are described not merely by location but also with an associated function:

*The Snake-Nagadi vayus belong to the outer body.
I'll now tell you the seat of these five external vayus.
The 'snake' vayu performs the function of belching or vomiting.
The 'turtle' opens the eyelids.
The 'pepper' causes sneezing.
The 'god-given' does yawning,
and the 'victorious' pervades the whole gross body and does not leave
it even after death.*

The effects of these functions are then described:

*The 'snake' vayu gives rise to consciousness.
The 'turtle' causes vision.*

2 *Gheranda Samhita*, trans. Rai Bahadur Srisa Chandra Vasu (India: Sri Satguru Publications, 1981), V.60-65, p. 46.

*The 'pepper' produces hunger and thirst.
 The 'god-given' produces yawning
 and by 'victorious' sound is produced; this does not leave the body ever.*

There was no explanation concerning how the ten vayus connected to each other or in what context to view them. And yet I felt that this seemingly random list represented a distinct and subtle practice. The vayus still eluded me, yet my overall experience in yoga was that many incomprehensible and seemingly bizarre pieces of information became perfectly clear when viewed within the perspective of practice. And, as the *Gheranda Samhita* is practice-oriented, I thought that there were two plausible explanations for the brevity of instruction. Either the practice was so well known at the time that the author had not bothered to elaborate, or he wished the practice to be kept secret and the brief description was meant as a code for the initiated.

In any case, I was intrigued and returned to muse over the vayus as the years passed, sensing that a treasure map lay open before me.

Since there was not a single textbook that I knew of that presented a comprehensive view of the vayus, I began to reread the classical Hindu and Yoga texts, seeking to glean a broader understanding from the bits and pieces of 'vayu phrases.' I was amazed to realize that the vayus consistently appeared in early texts preceding Hatha Yoga: in stories and legends, in connection with important concepts in yoga and in relation to pranayama practices.

My hope was that by bringing together knowledge from different periods and different traditions in India, the vayu enigma would begin to unravel itself.³ I read and reread the texts and simultaneously began to incorporate the vayus into my personal practice, using the little information that the text provided as a map, and my own body as the terrain.

3 Although the vayus are discussed in Ayurveda, the Ayurvedic understanding of their physiology is different and merits a separate discussion. The present work, therefore, focuses solely on the vayus in the context of the yogic-pranayamic tradition. For general reference, however, I have included a basic description of the Ayurvedic vayus in Appendix 5.

The following book is a description of this ongoing quest. Many times over the years I became frustrated and even despairing. At other times I thought I had understood something of it, only to see once again the partial nature of my experiments. Yet slowly, very slowly, a more complete understanding and practice began to emerge.

I began to experience the body tuning itself through vayu practice towards a gentle yet precise alignment. It was as if the skeletal spine was reinforced by a vertical column of air. This transformed the posture, simplified and deepened the pranayama breathing practices and quieted the mind.

Today I find it difficult to imagine practicing or teaching yoga without this vayu practice.

The present volume comprises two distinct sections. The chapters of Part One introduce the reader to the actual practice of the vayus, outlining their integration into pranayama and asana, while Part Two presents the vayus in a literary and cultural context.

It is my hope that yoga practitioners will integrate the ten vital vayu practices into their daily yoga routine. In so doing, I believe that they will find their practice inspired and transformed.