



The Real Pranayama: Energy Vital- and Not Breath-Control Exercise

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Abstract

The breathing exercises very well-known as “*basic pranayama*” are essentials for the wellness and health. Our breath, what Yoga calls “*prana*” or the vital force of life is a vehicle that moves us into subtle layers of our energy body. With the help of this vital force, we come contact with our core self-establishment, our true nature. The aim of this study is to analyze the role of pranayama in human health, as well as the different types of pranayamas, their methods of actions and objectives. In the West during present time, most of the people believe that *pranayama* is only a respiratory technique. However, for the Hindu doctrine Suddha Dharma Mandalam introduced in South America by Sri Vayera Yogi Dasa, the significance of the word pranayama breath-control is its surface meaning only, the Sanskrit word for it being “*swasabandana*” (mastery of the Energy of Life). *Prana* is a general word to indicate energy, life-force, intellect, spirit and so on; And the approximating exact word to convey its idea is “Consciousness”; Similarly, “*ayama*” does not merely mean restrain and control, but it also means “expand”; So that, its importance is best conveyed by “leading to”. *Pranayama* means “*leading to Consciousness*”. According to Suddha teachings, there are three types of *pranayamas* with different objectives: a) *Prakrita (matter) Pranayama*: it is defined as physiological breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves a breath-control for *puraka:khumbaka:rechaka* stages with different time-proportions among each of them. This practice leads to strengthening the physical body and it is therapeutic for organic diseases; b) *Atmiya (personal Spirit) Pranayama*: It is defined as a mental-spiritual breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves a breath-control for *puraka: khumbaka: rechaka* stages combined with a union thought to *Atman* (personal Spirit) and an adequate mental mantra repetition. This practice is aimed at reaching a conscious contact that allows to experience the excellent qualities of the *Atma-Yoti* or Light of our personal Spirit or Consciousness, which is housed in the etheric chamber of our heart; And c) *Suddha (Universal Spirit) Pranayama*:

it is defined as a mental-spiritual breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves a breath-control for puraka:khumbaka:rechaka stages combined with union thought to *Brahm* (cosmic Spirit) and adequate mental mantra repetition. This practice is aimed at reaching a conscious contact with Pure-Transcendent-Immanent-Power of Supreme Bright of Universal Consciousness which compenetrates all beings giving them life. In physical appearance, we are separated, but in reality, we are united by very subtle forces and ethers until reach the Atma-Sutra or atomic thread, which forms and maintains the unity of all beings. Pranayama improves physical health, calms emotions and mind, and gives internal peace connecting with the eternal spirit lodged in subtle chamber of heart.

Subject Areas

Philosophy

Keywords

Breathing, Prana, Pranayama, Prakrita, Atmiya, Suddha, Consciousness

1. General Background

The breathing pattern of most people is very shallow; we use a very small portion of about 1/11th of our lung capacity! This low-capacity breathing pattern deprives us of proper oxygen for health and well-being. In Yoga, the human life span is also considered in terms of breathing: *yoga says the faster and shallower the breath, the shorter our life. The slower and deeper our breath is, the longer our life.* Hence *pranayama* practices are designed to increase the duration of the breath. As *Swami Sivananda* puts it: “*a yogi measures the span of life by the number of breaths, not by the number of years*”. Breathing is the very first and very last act of life. The act of breathing is so simple, so obvious that we normally take it for granted; but breathing holds the very fabric of life and is the key to our breath and wellness. The breathing exercises, well-known as “*basic pranayama*”, are essentials for the wellness and health. Yogis say that breathing is the connecting force of the body, mind and heart. Thus, one of the most important benefits of *pranayama*, aside from our health, is the expansion of consciousness. Our breath, what Yoga calls “*prana*” or the vital force of life is a vehicle that moves us into subtle layers of our energy body. With the help of this vital force, we come into contact with our core self-establish ourselves in our true nature. Thus, yogic breathing practices are designed to clear the blockage of energy channels in the body and support movement of prana.

The ancient Sanskrit word “*prana*” carries with it a mystical character. It is much more than just air or breathing. Throughout the ancient world, the concept of moving air was wrapped in wonder. Known as *ruah* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek, *spiritus* in Latin and *chi* in Chinese, it was synonymous with life itself. In

the verse from Gospel of John, Jesus explains the nature of pneuma to Nikodemus: “*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so it is every one that is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8). By looking at the Hebrew version of the creation of Adam: “*and the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul*” (Genesis 2:7). Comparatively, the eastern the great Sage Patanjali (~ III century, BC) pointed out: “*breathing practices bring true understanding and knowledge into life by destroying all the impurities of mind*” [1]; *Pranayama* is the fourth of the eight “limbs” mentioned in his famous Yoga Sutras, who presented it as essentially respiratory exercise that is preliminary to concentration as do the earlier Buddhist texts [2]. Yoga teachers, including BKS Iyengar have advised that pranayama should be part of an overall practice that includes the other limbs of Patanjali’s teaching such as asana or postural poses [3]. The Indian tradition of Hatha Yoga makes use of various *pranayama* breathing-style where the 15th century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* text [4], which was written by the sage Svamarama includes several techniques widely used today through Western schools. In the 19th century the celebrated Swami Yogananda, a direct monastic disciple of Ramakrishna, wrote: “the real meaning of pranayama is the gradual cessation of breathing [5]. The actual well-known yoga scholar Andrea Jain (editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religions*) states that pranayama breathing was “marginal in the most widely cited sources” before the 20th century, and that these practices were dramatically unlike the modern ones; she writes that while pranayama in modern yoga as an exercise consists of synchronizing the breath with movements (between asanas), in texts like Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, *pranayama* meant “complete cessation of breathing” [6].

Pranayama cycle (three-phase breath-exercise): Yoga is an ancient Indian practice for bodily, mental and spiritual communication. In the West, it was introduced by Swami Vivekananda (Vedanta School) in the United States in 1893 [7] and by Sri Vayera Yogui Dasa (Suddha Dharma Mandalam) (SDM) [8] [9] in South America Chile in 1920 (Figure 1). In today’s West, standard Yoga usually combines *asana* (posture), *pranayama* (breathing) and *meditation* (mental-spiritual quiet), with 89% of yogis using pranayama and about half (45%) using meditation combined with asana [10]. From the physiological point of view, while asana involves whole body movement consisting of multi-joint stretching and strength-building motions of varying degrees of difficulty [11], pranayama explained by Bhattacharyya (Indian scholar of Sanskrit) requires voluntary control of respiratory muscles and involves different breathing speeds, shortening and elongation of breathing, and breath holding via the known three main stages or phases including: 1) *Puraka* or inhalation, 2) *kumbhaka* or retention, 3) *rechaka* or exhalation (Figure 2). According to Hatha Yogis, each stage has the effect of enhancing physical awareness and enforcing introspection; therefore, as a whole, *pranayama* is integral to the practice of yoga and a key element in the ultimate pursuit of enlightenment.

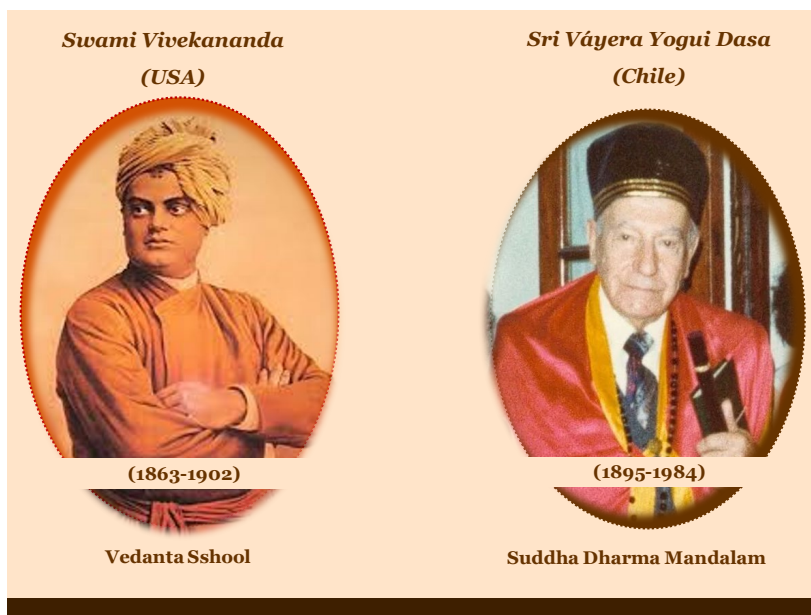


Figure 1. Yoga spiritual leaders in the West.

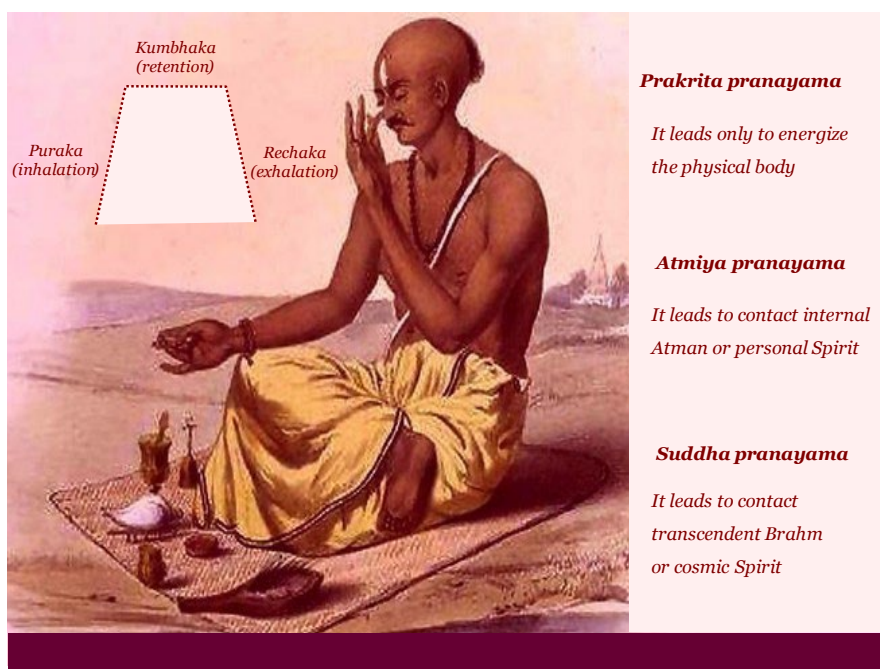


Figure 2. Types and objectives of pranayamas.

2. Basic Pranayama & Healthy: Scientific Evidences

According to McCall, yoga research has been conducted in the context of various health conditions, such as stress/anxiety, pain, depression, cardiovascular diseases, blood pressure/hypertension, respiratory conditions, cancer and diabetes [12]. Moreover, the role of yoga has slowly expanded from complementary and alternative medicine to performance enhancement [13]. While *asana* is used more often in general exercise regimens, pranayama, which is typically used in standard

yoga practice, is not widely used in fitness and sports. Several *pranayama*-breathing studies by diaphragmatic stretching have reported improvements in thoracic and abdominal cavity expansion, lumbar flexibility, body stability, balance and expiratory muscle activity [14]-[16]. Respiratory muscles, especially inspiratory muscle strength, play a significant role in muscle endurance [17]. Other studies have suggested the effects of inspiratory muscle pressure on high-intensity exercises [18] [19] and their effects on the change of perception of respiratory exertion during exercise [20]. Improving respiratory muscle strength delays muscle fatigue and improves blood flow to peripheral muscles, thereby decreasing the sense of breathlessness [21] [22]. Thus, practicing *pranayama* over an extended period could potentially enhance respiratory circulation and contribute to adequate motor control [23] as well as bring about further positive changes in physical function. A previous literature review concluded that a minimum of 10 weeks, with *pranayama* practiced at least twice a week, was needed to observe changes in pulmonary function [15]. In addition, it has been reported that changes in respiratory function take longer in younger than in older people [24] [25].

Among common chronic diseases, certainly hypertension is one of the major health problems globally. One-fourth of the world's adult population is suffering from hypertension, which is predicted to increase to 29% by 2025 [26]. The World Health Statistics 2012 report depicted that 23% of men/women more than 25 years of age suffer from hypertension. Physical inactivity is an important risk factor for cardiovascular disease, and less active people have 30% - 50% higher risk of developing hypertension [27]. It is found that 54% of stroke and 47% of ischemic heart disease worldwide occur due to hypertension. According to the American College of Sport medicine, even the reduction of 2 mmHg systolic and diastolic blood pressure (BP) reduces the risk of stroke by 14% and 17% and risk of coronary artery disease by 9% and 6%, respectively [28]. In addition to aerobic exercise, another lifestyle modification which is helpful in reducing BP is yoga through mind-body exercise including *asanas* and *pranayamas* [29]. Interestingly, the maximum awareness of aerobic exercise and yoga come through doctors (65%), followed by self (26%) and social (8%). On the other hand, the awareness and practice of aerobic exercise and yoga was the highest in the age group of 51 - 70 years old, which increased prevalence of hypertension that may be associated with age-related changes. Increasing age is one of the important risk factors linked with hypertension due to atherosclerotic changes in the blood vessels, especially during stress [30]. In conclusion, this concern can be prevailed over by education and awareness programs, seminars, or community visits, which will impart the knowledge of the role of exercise and yoga techniques, such as *pranayamas*, with their benefits for hypertension or health to individuals.

3. Suddha Pranayama (Triple Action: Breathing, Thought, Singing)

In the West during present time most of the people believe that *pranayama* is only

a respiratory technique. However, for the Hindu doctrine Suddha Dharma Mandalam, the significance of word pranayama breath-control is its surface meaning only, the exact Sanskrit word for it being “*swasabandana*” (mastery of the Energy of Life). Quite obviously, *pranayama* must mean something deeper. It is so. *Prana* is a general word to indicate energy, life force, intellect, spirit and so on; And the approximating exact word to convey its idea is “Consciousness”; Similarly, “*ayama*” does not merely mean restrain and control, but it also means “expand”; So that, its importance is best conveyed by “leading to”. *Pranayama* thus comes to mean “*leading to Consciousness*”. Of course, the consciousness is led not towards anything else but God [31]. According to Suddha teachings, there are three types of *pranayamas* (Figure 2) with different objectives described below:

1) *Prakrita (matter) Pranayama*: it is defined as only physiological breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves breath-control for puraka:khumbaka:rechaka stages with different time-proportions among each of them. This practice leads to strengthening the physical body and it is therapeutic for different organic diseases as shown previously in the second part of this article. While its role in Yoga is recognized its force is, however, minimized and even dismissed as of no aid to the contacting of the Divine, but permitting its practice actively for the achievements of bodily and mental vigour only. This statement is substantiated with what *Swami Sivananda* of Rishikesh (Himalayas) has written in his book on the *Science of Pranayama*, wherein in reply to the poser “Is *pranayama* necessary for getting *darshan* of the Lord”, the Sage emphatically states NO. So then, it follows that this *pranayama* though an “anga” of Yoga is useless, if the goal is held as “contacting the Divine” since it does not serve this purpose at all [32]. Modern Yogis turn around and declare, breath-control is intended as preliminary action to lead the Consciousness Godward ultimately, and hence *pranayama* is breath-control. Though the act of substituting “container for the contained”, and of meaning one thing and stating another, may be euphemistically admirable in other spheres of knowledge, it has no place in an exact science like Yoga. Thus, *Prakrita-pranayama* consequently has no place in a scheme which has for its object God-realization as such, exclusively and unconditionally. Furthermore, this *Prakrita pranayama* involves only a *rhythmic breathing* (Figure 3A).

If someone wants to increase the physical power and higher resistance to diseases, then practice this *pranayama* or respiratory exercise, maintaining the adequate times and intensity for inspiration, retention and exhalation, which should be well executed and directed by a competent Instructor

2) *Atmiya (personal Spirit) Pranayama*: it is defined as a mental-spiritual breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves a breath-control for puraka:khumbaka:rechaka stages combined with a union thought to *Atman* (personal Spirit) and an adequate mental mantra repetition. This practice is aimed at reaching a conscious contact that allows to experience the excellent qualities of the *Atma-Yoti* or Light of our personal Spirit or Consciousness, which is housed in the etheric chamber of our heart. This system requires mastery of the senses of

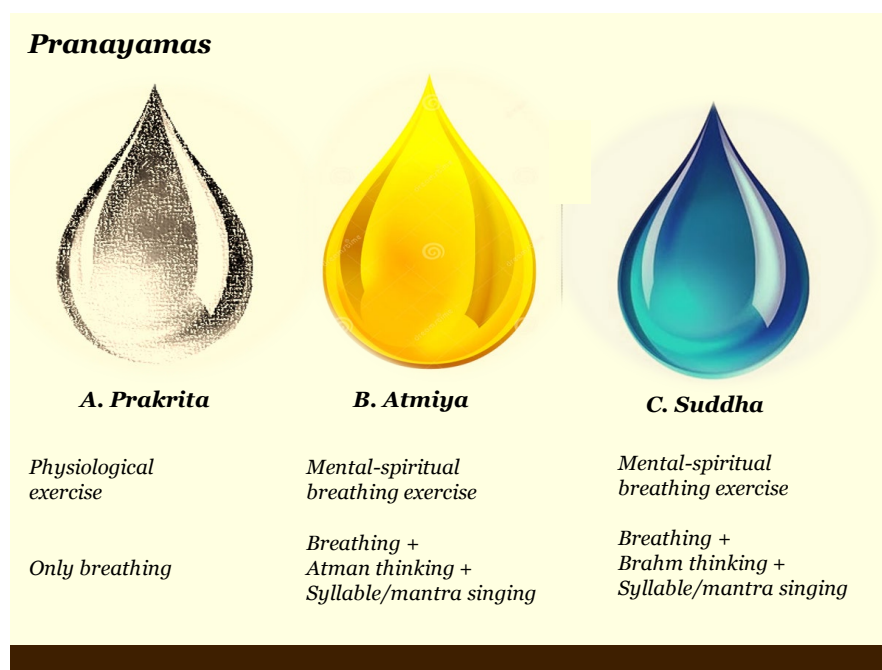


Figure 3. Actions of Pranayamas. A: Prakrita (matter); B: Atmiya (Atma); C: Siddha: (Brahm).

the mind and it is practiced by those called “*Gnanis*” (Sage of knowledge) who have devoted themselves to *Atmavichara* enquiry into Atman, as being free from and independent of Prakriti (Matter). To them, the word is “*mitya*” – false or No True – and governed by “*maya*” – illusion or transitory true, hence, to be rejected. In other words, the contact with the Atman or personal Spirit is the “pure eternal Essence” and the real goal of their aspirations. Atma (Spirit) and Prakriti (Matter) are unrelated and opposed to each other and that to realize Atma has to be suppressed. These two are ever in unison, mutually interacting and influencing each other and that under no condition whatsoever, one remains without the other in the Word-Process are truths which these people have yet to learn. *Atmiya pranayama* includes following triple action: *Rhythmic breathing + Atma thought + syllable/mantra singing* (Figure 3B). In relation to this practice, the famous text called *Aparokshanubhuti* of Sri Sankaracharya and one of the highest Upanishads, says: The comprehension of “*I Am an eternal Spirit*” is the real Puraka (inhalation), the maintenance of this idea in mind is the real Kumbhaka (retention), and the elimination of any separativity’s idea from the mind is the real Rechaka (exhalation); this is genuine pranayama of *true Illuminatis* [33]. The disciple should think that Spirit shines with all divine powers into the heart (*Suddham Atma Khyamalam, Siddha Nānatapomayam*). To succeed in Atmiya Pranayama, the aspirant should master the senses of the mind, vegetarian and frugal food, will and purity, the desire to achieve spiritual vision and the wisdom contained in the Atman’s light.

3) *Siddha (Universal Spirit) Pranayama*: it is defined as mental-spiritual breathing rhythmic exercise, which involves a breath-control for puraka:kumbaka:

rechaka stages combined with union thought to *Brahm* (cosmic Spirit) and adequate mental mantra repetition. This practice is aimed at reaching a conscious contact with *The Absolute* or Pure-Transcendent-Immanent-Power of Supreme Bright of Universal Consciousness, which compenetrates all beings by giving them life. The variety of Suddha pranayama is free from the “octopus” of the two previous kinds. Wherein the play of opposites is the rule, and not easily got over, the act of taking sides quickly yields results. We have the Materialists who act denying the Spiritual-Principle, and the Spiritualists bent on emasculating the ever-present and necessary material vehicles and their legitimate operations in life. It is important to transcend the influence of opposites by which the placements of various parts are understandingly equated to the Whole. It is obvious to do so, the mind has got to be educated on a proper basis. We must remember that Everything is Brahm, everything is of the Nature of Brahm (*Sarvam tatkalvidam Brahm*), Everything is Necessity, which reveals the standpoint of synthesis. Atman is not Brahm, since Brahm is triune—*Atma, Shakti and Prakriti*—each of these occupying a distinct and unique place in the scheme of the Wholeness, interacting on each other mutually. Atma abides in this World-Processes as the Representative of Brahm, and its realization as a first step, though important is not a completeness in itself. The Senses are weaned away gradually from the attractive and repulsive nature of objects by degrees, until at last, their effects are neutralized by the perception of True in them, getting thus sublimated. Such a study and objective practice which are subjective are prerequisites that conduce to success in *Suddha (pure) Pranayama*. Practice of *Suddha or Brahmic pranayama* involves a triple action: *Rhythmic breathing + Brahm thought + syllable/mantra singing* (Figure 3C).

Pranayama as such is the technical name given to that practice which is entirely subjective, since leading the Consciousness Godward is a mental act. Consciousness has its dominant seat in Manas (Mind-emotion plane). Manas, by its nature is usually outward turned towards objects, and the Senses are their gateways to carry the impressions made by objects. To divert the course of Manas from objects towards God, *pranayama* is the first act, prior to meditation (Dhyana) which is an act of continuity. Certain external conditions are absolutely necessary while in the period of practice viz solitariness (away from crowd) avoidance of overfeeding, austerity, quietude and a frequent recalling at all times in the Manas of Brahmic beatitudes. Three essential features go to make up a complete *pranayama*. They are the mental acts of (i) reducing the Many into the *One-Immanent-Divine-Essence*, (ii) of retaining the idea of Wholeness in which the One and the Many abide as always necessary auxiliaries, (iii) and of dismissing all those hindrances that prevent the retention of this unique fact of knowledge. Manas, the eleventh Sense, the vehicle of meditation, though it receives its impressions thorough the Senses, is not exclusively conditioned by them, since it has its own independent movements of likes and dislikes. Various capacities are acquired through the practice of pranayama of which four pertains to Puraka (inhalation) being: Attractive friendliness,

ability to receive and unite, the abandoning of distractive ideations and the state of wantlessness. Similarly, a second set of fourfold capacities accrued through Kumbhaka (retention) include: State of mental stillness or quietude, state oneness in Brahm, the feeling of firmness of character and the state of equipoise.

The purpose of this sublime pranayama is to lead to contact with Divinity in oneself and in the infinite cosmos. In physical appearance we are separated, but in reality, we are united by very subtle forces and ethers until we reach the *Atma-Sutra* or atomic thread, which forms and maintains the order and unity of all things and beings. If we meditate deeply on Unity (Bhavana), it is possible to feel Unity with the Absolute. Through this elevated sacred spiritual practice, the human being can reach the direct knowledge of the Unity of Everything and feel his own soul as expanded in the vastness. The individual Atman connected with the universal Brahm, then the imagination is made that the Divine Power or *Brahma Shakti* underlying the suns, moons, lands, trees, birds, animals, angels and Gods, is mentally attracted to the depths of us. The attraction of this Shakti should be as long as possible for the disciple. It must be thought that it is like a magnet of powerful attraction and that it continuously attracts each time the Power which is accumulated in its interior. The transcendently Conscious Spirit of the God (Brahm) is in every place, through his competing and transcendent power with all his Divine powers. In relation to the Suddha pranayama practice, the Suddha Master Vayera Yogi Dasa explained this topic as follows: Puraka or inhalation, includes the mental attraction of *Brahma Shakti* or Divine Power as long time as possible; the second stage Kumbhaka includes the mental-retention of the Divine Power it accumulates into the subtle heart of the disciple; the last Rechaka phase includes the mental-expansion of the Energy from our heart compenetrating all the things and beings, unifying and infusing them great Peace, Divine Love and Transcendental Glory.

The goal of Yoga in the Gita has been declared as Brahmic contact which includes Divine contact too. A contacting of the Divine obviously requires a knowledge of it intellectually and we find this knowledge in the Gita of SDM—“*Gñana-Shatka*” is supplied firstly; Then the “*Bhakti-Shatka*” follows, which Bhakti or devotion to Lord is generally as a result of the aforesaid knowledge. Thereafter, an endeavour to realize God being stimulated the “*Karma-Shatka*” that follows teaches the mode and the manner of it. Each one of these three having yoga in its womb, is known as Gñana-yoga, Bhakti-yoga and Karma-yoga, the suffix yoga being used advisedly to connote this significance and not indiscriminately as we find it used currently in respect of these three. This is because Yoga as such and to realize which Karma, Bhakti and Gñana take their orderly course as auxiliaries, we find in the “*Yoga-Shatka*” of the SDM Gita that this feature is taught, which topic has recently been reported by us (Munoz C *et al.*, 2020). It is to this Yoga of the Gita that the name of Raja-Yoga is given, which is also known as Suddha-yoga. Based on the present background, it is possible to mention that the triple action of breathing-thought-mantra for *Atmiya or Suddha Pranayamas* represent the key for contacting

the Self-Divine through spiritual practice of *Raja-Yoga*, while the unique action of breathing for *Prakrita Pranayama* represents the key for strengthening the physical body through the physical exercise of *Hatha-Yoga*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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