

The Mystery of Breath

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Breath seems to be the sign of the beginning and the end of life. With the first breath that is drawn the body is said to be alive, and when the breath departs, the body is spoken of as dead. It is for this reason that the Yogis have called breath prana, meaning the very life. Besides this, all slight changes that take place in man's body come from an alteration in the mechanism of breath. That is why physicians in all ages have observed the signs of a person's condition in different illnesses from the beat of his pulse, which is caused by the breath.

Mental changes are also caused by breath. For instance, there are people with whom it is better not to talk when they first rise from sleep; they are excitable and irritable at that time. Again there are others who listen better at that moment than at any other time. Some people coming home from their work or their office in the evening are irritable and difficult; if one lets them rest for an hour or so they gradually change. All this shows that the condition of the breath changes the mental condition of that moment. Immediately after concentration upon work the rhythm of the breath is very rapid and exercises its influence on the mind. After a while this rhythm changes and becomes normal; so the condition of the mind changes also. In sleep some people work up the rhythm of breath and the condition of mind becomes unsettled and disturbed, but as a rule sleep helps the breath to be normal and its influence produces tranquility of mind.

It can be seen how various emotions, passions and sentiments change the rhythm of breath. Sometimes breath goes out of man's control in emotions such as anger, passion or fear; he then has no control over his words or actions. When man loses control over himself, the first thing he loses is control over breath.

It is the basis of this philosophy that by gaining control of breath man can gain control over himself; the one who controls his breath is the ruler over his mind and body. How few really know how to breathe aright and what are the methods of keeping the channels of the breath clear and in order! Breath, uncontrolled, is dangerous.

In mystical terms the two different directions of the breath have been called by different names, and have been considered to be like the sun and the moon, representing the positive and negative aspects of the power and influence of breath. How few really know how many times in the day and night the breath changes its direction, and how it works through different parts of mind and body producing different effects and results. How often man's ignorance of the science of breath makes him act or think or speak against its influence - which is like swimming against the tide. We often notice in life that at one time success is achieved by the least little effort, and at another the greatest effort produces nothing but failure. Shiva, the great Lord of the Yogis, said, "He who has the knowledge of breath knows the secret of the whole universe".

What we generally know as breath is that little inhaling and exhaling which we feel through the nostrils. We think that is breath and attach little importance to it,

while in reality breath is a life-current running through the innermost part of man's being towards the surface. It would be no exaggeration, according to the mystical point of view, to say that breath connects heaven and earth. It is the mystery of breath which shows the mystic that life is not the material part of man's being, but consists of the part of his being which is unseen. Breath is the bridge between soul and body keeping the two connected, and the medium of their action and reaction upon each other.

In the Quran it is said, "We have made man to be king of Our creation", which in other words means that man himself is the dominion as well as the king of that dominion: that dominion being man's body and mind, and the king being his spirit, his soul. As a horse can be controlled and directed by getting the rein in hands, so life can be controlled and directed by gaining control over breath. Every school of mystics has, as its most important and sacred teaching in the way of attainment, the control and understanding of the mystery of breath. Modern science has discovered the importance of physical culture and correct breathing, and for all diseases of the lungs there is no greater or more beneficial remedy than sending the patient to a place suitable for breathing freely. Psychologists will some day come to realize that for all illnesses and disorders of the mind the way of breathing also is the best remedy.

For the mystic breath is not only a science, but the knowledge of breath is mysticism, and mysticism to the thinker is both science and religion. The mystery of breath is not a thing that can be comprehended by the brain only. The principles of mysticism rise from the heart of man. They are learned by intuition and proved by reason. This is not only faith, though it is born of faith: it is faith with proof.

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It is useless to discuss the peace of the world. What is necessary just now is to create peace in ourselves that we ourselves become examples of love, harmony and peace. That is the only way of saving ourselves and the world. Let man try to become more considerate of others; let him ask himself, "Of what use am I in the world? Am I born for a certain purpose?", and then try to train himself to self-control by the mystery of breath, the best means for accomplishing that purpose.