FROM PRĀṆA TO PRĀṆAYĀMA:
ANCIENT SOURCES, MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

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Introduction

It is not uncommon for religious concepts to change over time, as practitioners gain knowledge of and insight into the subject at hand, or new revelations are made. This can be seen in the Abrahamic traditions with the concept of a Messiah, or the receiving of new prophets or covenants. The Hindu tradition, which pre-dates Western monotheism by centuries, has not been immune to this occurrence. Though what is considered to be authentically “Hindu” in antiquity is very much unsettled due to debates about the Aryan Migration there are fragments of ancient belief and practice that survive today. Whether categorized as Indus Valley Shamanism, Vedic Religion, or the Puranic Tradition, certain elements of these beliefs and practices have persisted in contemporary Hinduism, with elements even making their way into the West.

Prāṇa, the Sanskrit word most commonly translated as “breath”, is an example of a Hindu concept, mostly associated with yoga, which has undergone change through the ages. The concept of “controlling” prāṇa, through the practice known as prāṇāyāma began to appear in ancient texts several thousand years ago. Both practice and theory have continued to evolve up through the introduction and subsequent popularization of yoga in the West. Although the word “prāṇa” is not necessarily a part of yoga instruction today, most students are made aware that restricted breathing techniques are a part of the practice. With this in mind, a recent change in the understanding of this concept becomes not only obvious, but also expected, as a concept rooted in Indian religion is taught to non-Indians for non-religious purposes.

The topic of prāṇa has narrowly been explored by Western academics; those who have chosen to acknowledge it tend to either limit their discussion to the practice of
prāṇāyāma, or often attempt to describe it as a “vital life force”\(^1\), neglecting to shed light on the complex history of and in depth philosophy regarding this concept. What they fail to recognize, or perhaps choose to ignore, is that their very concept of prāṇa often falls in line with that of the modern yogi, that is, the contemporary masters of yoga who compose and publish guidebooks on the practice of yoga and prāṇāyāma for a western audience. Scholars often skip over the vast body of ancient literature that depicts prāṇa in ways other than how they currently identify it, thus remaining bound within their own depictions that lack depth, substance, and clarity. It is essential, however, to explore the evolution of this concept if one is to truly understand what prāṇa is, and what can be done with it, and its place in the modern world, according to practitioners of prāṇāyāma.

The contemporary definition of prāṇa as a vital “energy”\(^2\) or “life force”\(^3\) is a prevailing notion propagated by modern yogis and further backed by western scholars; and, although this understanding of prāṇa can be found in some sources, it is a deviation from how this concept was understood in antiquity. In examining the recorded history of this concept in both theory and practice, by comparing ancient texts to modern guidebooks, it becomes evident that the understanding of this concept has not only changed, but has grown tremendously in detail. The change in the understanding of prāṇa is undoubtedly linked to the fact that virtually all that is known about prāṇa comes from the tradition of prāṇāyāma, an experienced-based practice that allows for fluctuations and personalization in technique. Apart from the Vedas, some of the earliest and most elaborate details of prāṇa are explained in relation to prāṇāyāma, as learned through the first-hand experiences of expert yogis.

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\(^1\) Alter, 36.
\(^2\) Rama, 7.
\(^3\) Alter, 278.
the practice of prāṇāyāma spread, the knowledge of prāṇa grew; as more individuals engage in the methods, more information about how prāṇa works, where it is found, and how it can be controlled continues to come to light. The practice of prāṇāyāma leads to the revealing of prāṇa, not the other way around.

There is an issue, however, with this experienced-based practice and the way in which this special knowledge is obtained. Currently the process of obtaining knowledge of prāṇa comes from experiences gained while undergoing prāṇāyāma; the practice determines the theory. While it is common for religious concepts to begin as doctrine and later develop rituals to maintain or reconnect with it (for example, born-again Christians being baptized later in life as Jesus was), the doctrine of prāṇa, whether or not it originated this way, continues to be based on observations and personal experiences. With the popularization of yoga in the West, and the publication of modern guidebooks on the practice, prāṇāyāma can be now be performed by almost anyone, and this has led to increasingly diverse and individualized conceptions of prāṇa. Aspects of what was once covert and esoteric knowledge, guarded by master ascetics and only shared with their most experienced students have become readily available for anyone and everyone to engage in and contemplate. Information on prāṇa is now more easily accessible, in publications as diverse as the Yoga Journal, to the Huffington Post. There is even a clothing line for active wear aptly named “prAna”, that defines the concept on its website. With information being made so available, it often comes unfiltered and unchecked, leading to the point where definitions and descriptions become cliché and misused.

4 www.prana.com
An example of such misuse can be found in a *Huffington Post* article, authored by Reverend Peter Baldwin Panagore, a Christian pastor. In it, he describes his ventures into yoga, the way in which he has synthesized it with Christianity, and how it has taught him the importance of prayer (which he sees as identical to meditation). He states, “Yoga prayer by its nature connects me, you, any body to the prana, the universal life force energy, or the chi, the vital force in Taoism. Christians call it soul. It's the life force energy in all of us. Soul.”\(^5\)

What Panagore has done here is take a modern definition of *prāṇa* and compared it to a modern definition of the soul in Christianity in an attempt to explain, and perhaps rationalize, his use of yoga. Regardless of the fact that most yoga traditions do not equate the Hindu notion of the individual soul, or *ātman*, with *prāṇa*, nor is connection to *prāṇa* the objective in yoga to begin with, he continues to jumble the definition by further comparing it to the Chinese notion of “*chī*” (*qi*). While similarities between *prāṇa* and *qi* far surpass that between *prāṇa* and the soul in Christianity, there are still significant differences, most of which can be found when looking into the history of the term. Had Panagore known about the Vedic hymn that praises *prāṇa*, so much so that one might suspect that it was understood as a deity, he might not have been so loose with his words.

It is not uncommon today to find the term “*prāṇa*” mishandled, particularly by western practitioners of yoga and *prāṇāyāma*. With yoga instructors, bloggers, and scholars alike being lax in their usage, is it possible that the contemporary understanding of *prāṇa* is changing right before our eyes? Are we altering the very meaning of the term as we either over-embellish its role, as Panagore has, or we casually dismiss it as merely “breath”? If the concept of *prāṇa* continues to be used in a manner that is either negligent or falsely

\(^5\) Panagore, 2012
exaggerated, then the understanding of the concept will become muddled, if not completely lost. Traditionally, one’s direct experiences with prāṇa have lead to the definition and understanding of what this concept is. Now, however, the term faces the danger of being defined by those who have inaccurate or incomplete conceptions (with little regard to the consequences), which could cause the value of the concept to be depleted. As the knowledge of prāṇa grows along with one’s experiences, and as more individuals take part in the practice of prāṇāyāma, one would expect the understanding of prāṇa to resonate the way traditions practitioners have explained it. However, the very opposite has taken place; the definition of prāṇa has become so broad that one can theoretically find prāṇa anywhere, and, as we will see, some modern yogis will claim this very notion.

The next logical question here is: how exactly is this happening? How has this concept become so expansive, yet unspecific? While there may be a multitude of answers, there are four key components that have contributed: 1. *The popularization of yoga in the West*, 2. *The nature of prāṇa*, 3. *The nature of prāṇāyāma*, and 4. *Prāṇāyāma being taught as a science by modern yogis*. The understanding of the concept of prāṇa, as well as the practice of prāṇāyāma have evolved over millennia, with the growth of prāṇāyāma directly influencing the continuous expansion in the definition of prāṇa.

As the following chapters will show, the understanding of prāṇa has never been, nor is it currently, fixed. Hinduism’s relatively open canon has long allowed for new revelations, revisions of old ideas, and updating of previous conceptions. For the most part, changes in the understanding of prāṇa appear to be perfectly acceptable some of the more vocal of those considered to be “insiders” to the tradition. Nonetheless, the changes that occur in the understanding of prāṇa beckon to be examined.
1. The popularization of yoga in the West. With the introduction and popularization of yoga in the United States, drastic changes have taken place in the tradition. In order to survive the new environment, its promoters decided the practice had to detach from its religious roots and become marketed as form of exercise, with a strong emphasis placed on the physical benefits that can be gained through the mastery of āsanas, or postures. Practitioners of this “western yoga” are typically non-Hindus who possess little to no background knowledge of yoga, or the breathing techniques they are taught. Western yoga is further separated from traditional yoga in terms of language, culture, time, place, and, perhaps most importantly, authority of tradition. Traditional yoga was passed down from guru to student in a manner that was personal and direct, with the guru’s authority and expertise supported by his or her lineage. Today, the sense of “tradition” in western yoga is muddled, ambiguous, and often illusory. On the surface, authority appears to arise from the modern yogis, their guidebooks, and perhaps even ones yoga instructor. However, do to lack of direct personal instruction, there is no way to insure authenticity in the techniques that are taught.

2. The nature of prāṇa. As far back as the Vedas, prāṇa has been a difficult concept to describe due to its very nature as something that cannot be seen, but that is nevertheless vital to life. Prāṇa is never understood as being static but instead inherently malleable. As will be explained in a later chapter, prāṇa is often understood as something found in the air that can be harnessed, controlled, and even manipulated by practitioners of prāṇāyāma. With this in mind, it is easy to fathom how numerous conceptions of prāṇa over time could have emerged; it is an invisible force that can be controlled in a number of ways by those trained in the practice. Prāṇa, as will be illustrated later, is not only be used in yoga, but is also be used to heal, to gain siddhis, or powers, and even to control others.
3. The nature of prāṇāyāma. Because the nature of prāṇa is quite abstract, the practice of prāṇāyāma has been open to transform. Traditionally understood as the control and restriction of prāṇa within the body in order to control the mind for meditation, prāṇāyāma in the West has become somewhat of a consumerist practice, tailored to the needs of an individual. Those who wish to perform prāṇāyāma solely for its physical benefits will find that there is potentially much to gain. In the guidebooks that will be examined, modern yogis give directions on how to perform a number of breathing techniques that serve an array of healthful purposes, from strengthening the organs, to lowering blood pressure, to eliminating sinus problems. By controlling the breath, one does control the amount of oxygen that is absorbed and used by the body, which produces results that can be seen and felt by practitioners. This, along with the popularization of yoga in general, has lead to an increase in the number of practitioners, allowing for more individuals to familiarize themselves with the concept of prāṇa.

4. Prāṇāyāma being taught as a science by modern yogis. The most current shift in the understanding of prāṇa is that it is now believed to be energy, both in a scientific sense and as being the very force behind life. The principles behind energy are scientific, and science is the way in which the western culture most commonly validates truth. For the most part, if something can be supported by science or the scientific method, it becomes widely accepted. For this very reason, it is fathomable why modern yogis, who aim to spread their knowledge in the West, would market prāṇāyāma as a science. However, this claim, that the method of prāṇāyāma is scientific, does not hold much weight. Although these yogis may appear to be

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6 Sivananda, 20.
7 Gupta, 29.
8 With a few exceptions, such as evolution, or the Big Bang Theory.
following the scientific method on the surface, the actual workings of *prāṇa* within the body, that is, what these yogis claim *prāṇa* is doing, are not observable by the five physical senses. In fact, *prāṇa*, as it is often understood, does not solely function within the physical body; it supposedly works more often on another realm deemed the “subtle body”, which is (currently, at least) not measurable by western scientists. Nevertheless, this approach of teaching *prāṇyāma* as a science has made it appear more credible, and perhaps has allowed it reach a wider audience. Not only has this possibly aided in the growing popularity of *prāṇyāma* in the West, but also it has also likely altered the understanding of *prāṇa*, as it is molded to fit scientific understanding. As will be presented, modern yogis back their claims of science by adding pictures and diagrams of the physical lungs, ribs, heart and other organs, and charts detailing levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide at different states of breathing, making sure to point out exactly where *prāṇa* is present. Whether or not the practice of *prāṇyāma* is truly scientific is not of central importance here. What is significant is that, in this most current shift in the way *prāṇa* is perceived, one can provide insight into how it may continue to change in the future.

It is important to note here that the subject at hand is not the change in *prāṇa* itself. *Prāṇa*, from a religious or insider’s point of view, has always been what it is (whatever that may be); yet it is the human understanding of it, an individual’s knowledge and comprehension of *prāṇa* that has changed. The focus of this research and subsequent conclusion is how *prāṇa* has been understood, both in antiquity and in the current age, and how this understanding has influenced the teachings of *prāṇyāma* in the past and present.

The following chapters have been arranged to examine primary sources on *prāṇa* in chronological order, compared side-by-side with contemporary interpretations published in
modern-day guidebooks. Over the course of the work, what will emerge is the continual, yet gradual evolution of the concept of prāṇa, along with the teaching of prāṇāyāma. As the concept of prāṇa evolves, the practice of prāṇāyāma shifts; as experts in the tradition continue to harness prāṇa, the more they begin to understand it as a scientific concept, which is how it is currently accepted.

Sources and Materials

The following individuals, whom I have deemed the “modern yogis”, will be used to illustrate the contemporary understanding of prāṇa as they have portrayed the concept in their respective guidebooks on prāṇāyāma. The first is B.K.S. Iyengar, who, in addition to starting his own school of yoga, has authored several books on the subject and has become world renowned for his influence in spreading yoga to the West. His book Light on Prāṇāyāma is used frequently to demonstrate how prāṇāyāma is taught in yoga schools today. Other books used in this manner are: Pranayama: A Conscious way of Breathing by Ranjit Sen Gupta; Science of Breath, by Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine and Alan Hymes; The Science of Pranayama, by Sri Swami Sivananda; Prana and Pranayama, by Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati; and The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath, by Yogi Ramacharaka.

Scholarly sources used include several books by Georg Feuerstein, who covers the topic of prāṇa quite thoroughly within his works. Others include Mircea Eliade’s Yoga: Immortality and Freedom, Jean Varene’s Yoga and the Hindu Tradition, and Yoga in Modern India by Joseph S. Alter. These scholars were chosen based on their original thoughts and contribution to the understanding of prāṇa, prāṇāyāma, and yoga. Though no single text is complete, they all remain crucial in aiding in the complicated task of
deconstructing the history of the concept of *prāna*, the practice of *prānāyāma*, and how both are perceived and understood today.
Chapter 1- Origins of Prāṇa

Prāṇa in the Vedas

The oldest textual resources suggest that prāṇa was not necessarily understood as a vital cosmic energy, as many modern sources claim. It was worshiped, praised and lauded in hymns as if it were a god, or at the very least a conscious cosmic entity. Yet, many modern interpretations fail to acknowledge that prāṇa was not always understood as controllable force. The way in which prāṇa is depicted in the Vedas changes by the time the Upaniṣads emerge and beyond, with each depiction being characteristic of the text in which it is found, reflecting the gradual change in worldview of the people of the time. Those who lived in the Vedic Period were believed to have little interest in otherworldly issues, such as obtaining mokṣa, or in spiritual awakening. They were, however, concerned with placating the gods through worship and sacrifice in order to obtain this-worldly benefits, such as a successful crop year or an abundance of sons. The Vedas, which are constantly revering these gods, speak of prāṇa as a deity that ought to be appeased for the gain of benefits in this life. Of these texts, the Atharva Veda in particular illustrates how prāṇa was understood by the Brahmin of the time.

The Atharva Veda

Dating back to the Vedic age (1500 BCE) the Atharva Veda is believed to be the youngest of the four Vedas, and contains the most in-depth look as to how the concept of prāṇa was grasped at that time. Containing mostly spells, incantations, and hymns, it lacks instructions
on the ritual sacrifices that make up the bulk of the Vedas' core, yet contains the laud-heavy language characteristic of these texts. One hymn in particular delineates the importance of *prāṇa*, describing it as a conscious agent. In Book eleven, the fourth hymn details *prāṇa* as a supreme entity, one that is praised, even worshipped by the composer. It is glorified to such an extreme that if one did not know otherwise, one would assume *prāṇa* was a supreme deity solely from how it was admired.

The hymn begins “Reverence to Prâna, to whom all this (universe) is subject, who has become the lord of the all, on whom the all is supported!” By this, it is clear that in ancient times *prāṇa* was seen as a powerful force, one on which all life forms depend. The hymn continues to commend *prāṇa*, declaring that all plants live because of it, and therefore all beasts. An important note to make here is that, while *prāṇa* is credited with life-giving properties in the material world, there is little attributed to it that would make it significant to the spirit world. This makes it vastly different from how modern sources conceive *prāṇa*, which is almost exclusively as a substance that regulates the “subtle” realms of the world, and is primarily used for matters of the spirit in controlling the body through the *cakras*.

Lines nine to eleven give the best example of how *prāṇa* was understood, detailing its importance:

Of thy dear form, O Prâna, of thy very dear form, of the healing power that is thine, give unto us, that we may live!
Prâna clothes the creatures, as a father his dear son. Prâna, truly, is the lord of all, of all that breathes, and does not breathe.
Prâna is death, Prâna is fever. The gods worship Prâna. Prâna shall place the truth-speaker in the highest world.

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9 Klostermaier, 20
10 Bloomfield, line 1.
11 More about *Puruṣa*, *Prakṛti*, and Sāṃkhya philosophy in a later section.
12 Bloomfield, lines 9-11.
Prāṇa is something that heals and gives life, something that rules over even that which does not breathe, suggesting its immense power. Claiming that even the gods worshipped it shows that it was regarded as supreme. From this it is clear that dating back to the ancient world, prāṇa was seen as necessary for life to exist; however, it bestowed life, as though it were a gift, as opposed to being a force that is inherit in all life forms as they are.

Many modern sources such as Saraswati, Gupta, and Swami Rami all discuss the origins of prāṇa with ākāśa, the material world or space, yet how they connect the two concepts differs greatly from both each other, and the Vedas. Swami Rama claims, “According to one of the schools of Indian philosophy, the whole universe was projected out of akasha (space) through the energy of prāṇa. akasha is the infinite, all-pervading material of the universe, and prāṇa is the infinite, all-pervading energy of the universe–cosmic energy.”

Gupta, too, explains that every form emerged out of ākāśa, because of prāṇa. Sivananda, on the other hand, claims that ākāśa actually emerges from prāṇa; instead of merely being the force behind it, prāṇa is the source it, “Whatever moves or works or has life, is but an expression or manifestation of Prana. Akasa or ether also is an expression of Prana.” Later, Sivananda continues, “…Prana moves and acts upon Akasa, and brings forth the various forms.” An origin such as this is not at all described in the Atharva Veda, which also does little to delineate the source of this figure, or its tremendous power. The notion that prāṇa pushed the material world into existence does not appear to be evident at this time, nor is the notion that prāṇa exists outside the material world. It is possible that, because only the material world

13 Swami Rama, 72.
14 Gupta, 34.
15 Sivananda, 20.
16 Sivananda, 21.
was of significance, the composers did not discriminate between a world of matter and a world of spirit—there was only the world they lived in, which was the world that they knew, and the realm of the gods, which could not be permeated, but only prodded through song and sacrifice.

It is important to note that \textit{prāṇa} is recognized as being subject to the prayers of humans, as well as making decisions of whether or not to “give” it’s power. The last line of the hymn reads: “O Prāṇa, be not turned away from me, thou shalt not be other than myself! As the embryo of the waters (fire), thee, O Prāṇa, do bind to me, that I may live.”\textsuperscript{17} It is unclear whether or not those who recited this hymn actually thought the hymn itself would bestow more \textit{prāṇa} upon them; however, it is clear that \textit{prāṇa} was seen as something that could connect to the body. Though modern interpretations may claim that this is evidence of the notion that \textit{prāṇa} could be absorbed into the body, it is clearly not the case that one had control over it. Had it been understood that way, there would have been no need to politely ask for it’s presence. Iyengar claims “God is one, but the wise designate Him by various names, and so it is with prāṇa.”\textsuperscript{18} However, acknowledging \textit{prāṇa} as a manifestation of the divine (\textit{Brahman}) today is not the same as praising it as a deity in the ancient world.

Because this understanding text pre-dates yoga being accepted by the Brahmans, it is extremely unlikely that the Vedic composers were performing \textit{prāṇāyāma}. They may have been unaware of the practice of harnessing \textit{prāṇa} from the air by using the breath, as ascetics and outsiders may have been doing at the time, and how contemporary yogis use it today. The Brahmin’s way of communicating with the gods and gaining power was to perform

\textsuperscript{17} Bloomfield, 20
\textsuperscript{18} Iyengar, 12.
rituals and sacrifices, not by utilizing the body and absorbing power or energy. Such metaphysical ideas seem to arise in later texts, such as the Upaniṣads and Āraṇyakas, which were not composed by acting Brahmin priests.

In reference to learning how to control prāṇa, Swami Sivananda teaches, “The Yogi who becomes an expert in the knowledge of this secret, will have no fear from any power, because he has mastery over all the manifestations of powers in the universe.”\textsuperscript{19} However, this sort of control over prāṇa was not fathomable in the time of the Vedas by those who were in control. From the language used, it is evident that prāṇa, rightly translated with a capital “P” in the case of this Veda, was seen as a conscious being. The usage of anthropomorphic language, referring to prāṇa as “lord”, descriptions of it “calling”, “standing”, “sitting”, “turning”, “healing”, and “watering”, all indicate that this passage was about a cognizant and autonomous entity.

\textit{Prāṇa in the Upaniṣads}

The Upaniṣads detail the importance of prāṇa in way that differs greatly from the Vedic scriptures. Because the Upaniṣads were composed centuries later, the mentality of the people, as well as their religious worldview, had shifted. Most were less interested in worldly gains and instead were preoccupied with the concept of liberation from the world and the cycle of samsāra they had come to accept. The Upaniṣads, which are far more philosophical and metaphysical in content compared to the Vedas, reflect this shift in religious goals of the

\textsuperscript{19} Sivananda, 20.
ancient people. *Prāṇa* here is not described as a deity or a conscious entity, but as a force or energy that is inherent in the world, that is mentioned in numerous Upaniṣads in various manners, always stressing its significance. The Kauṭākika Upaniṣads states, “Life is prāṇa, prāṇa is life. So long as prāṇa remains in this body, so long is there life. Through prāṇa, one obtains, even in this world, immortality.” The objective here for obtaining *prāṇa* is not to gain life, but rather to gain everlasting life. Here it is recognized, as it is in the Vedas, as something that is necessary for life; however it is not praised, as it had been previously, it is merely explained.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣads describes *prāṇa* as being chief among the senses, in parables that depict *prāṇa* as a conscious entity (though the anthropomorphic descriptions here may be symbolic and done in order to help others understand the concept, which is common for this set of texts). In a short tale, the vital functions are arguing over who is the greatest, so the creator Prajāpati asks each to depart and see how one can function without them. First speech departed, and the other senses saw that one could live without it. This was followed by the departure of sight, hearing, and mind, all of which were not necessary for life. Then, as *prāṇa* is about to depart, the other sense beg for it to stay, recognizing that it is the greatest among all the senses and that without it no beings could live.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad also describes *prāṇa* as *Brahman* when a “vedic student” is having trouble learning from his austerities. The sacrificial fires to which he tends speaks to him about the nature of *Brahman*, proclaiming: “Brahman is breath. Brahman is joy (ka).

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20 Feuerstein, 133
21 Olivelle, 229-231
22 Olivelle, 223. Chāndogya Upanishad 4.10.4-5
Brahman is space (kha)." This notion, that Brahman makes up most, if not all, things is cultivated and further elaborated during the time the Upaniṣads were composed, and is agreed with by modern sources. Because this particular passage deals more with the concept of Brahman than prāṇa, it should be noted that this passage does not equate the two, but rather further demonstrates the complexity and inclusiveness of Brahman. This could be taken to mean that prāṇa is but one manifestation of Brahman, or implying that prāṇa in terms of “breath” is one of the ways in which an individual could access Brahman. Considering the following lines, that Brahman is also joy and space, the passage is most likely trying to convey understanding that Brahman is found everywhere, in all things, and not trying to connect prāṇa as a key component to Brahman. One modern source takes a different interpretation, however, in proclaiming, “You see, hear, talk, sense, think, feel, will, know, etc., through the help of Prana and therefore the Srutis declare: ‘Prana is Brahman.’” Though this could be attempting to explain prāṇa is merely an aspect of Brahman, this line implies that they are one in the same, that prāṇa holds the same level of predominance as Brahman, which was not the case in the Upaniṣads.

The notion that prāṇa is the same as Brahman cannot be found in the Upaniṣads, and yet other modern sources suggest otherwise when discussing the origins of all creation. Explaining that before creation everything existed within Brahman, “The whole universe lay infinitely contracted in it as mere potency; prana remained completely absorbed in it as if in a union of deep embrace.” Further on, Saraswati claims, after the first vibration of creation, “It is the first movement: the first moment of becoming from being, the first manifestation of

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23 Olivelle, 223. Chāndogya Upanishad 4.10.4-5
24 Sivananda, 23.
25 Saraswati, 10.
prana.” Prāṇa, in this modern source, existed before creation with Brahman, and is the very energy that emerged from the act of creation. This claim takes the understanding the Chāndogya Upaniṣads had about the relationship between prāṇa and Brahman to another level, reinterpreting the connection made, and superseding the Upaniṣadic idea with a new theory of creation.

A number of modern sources claim that prāṇa is often connected to the mind or consciousness (citta), saying, “Consciousness is being, awareness, knowledge; prana is becoming, manifestation through motion…everything is a combination of prana and chitta.” Iyengar claims, “Chitta and prāṇa are in constant association. Where there is chitta there is prāṇa focused, and where prāṇa is there is chitta focused.” Claim such as these are not found in the Upaniṣads, although there is a connection of prāṇa to the mind. A verse in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad attempts to explain the nature of the mind, “…the mind flies off in every direction and, when it cannot find a resting place anywhere else, it alights back upon the breath itself; for the mind, my son, is tied to the breath.” This passage merely makes a connection between the mind and prāṇa, but does not say that they together make up all things, as the modern sources state. By keeping in mind, however, that prānāyāma is very much used in meditative practices, one could easily take this passage from the Upaniṣad, make a connection from mind to consciousness, and reinterpret it to fit in with modern usages. The practice of yoga is very much concerned with controlling the mind, and uses prāṇa, in terms of breath, as one of the means of doing so, in addition to controlling the physical body. From this is it easy to see why a connection of prāṇa to the mind would be

26 Saraswati, 10.
27 Saraswati, 12.
28 Iyengar, 13.
29 Olivelle, 251. Chāndogya Upanishad 6.8.2
important. The fact that prāṇa is not merely breath, however, allows for a much more supernatural connection to the mind (as well as the soul and the Supreme consciousness, as seen earlier).

The Taittiriya Upaniṣad also emphasizes the importance of prāṇa to all living things:

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Lifebreath—gods breathe along with it
    As do men and beasts.
For lifebreath is the life of beings,
    So it’s called “all life.”
A full life they’ll surely live, when they
    Worship brahman as lifebreath.
For lifebreath is the life of beings,
    So it’s called “all life.”
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Stating that the gods breath “along with it” can either mean they themselves control prāṇa in some way, or that they breath in a similar manner to how humans breath, utilizing the substance it in the same fashion. The latter would be more appropriate, since it not only coincides with the Vedic verses, but because if the gods are alive, then they too must be using some sort of life force to retain their very being. It is not uncommon in the Hindu tradition to find the deities taking part in the same practices as humans; by looking into the practice of tapas, or austerities, and even brahmacarya, sexual restraint, this can be seen. All of these are practices that are done by both humans and gods, which not only stress their importance, but also may make the practice appear more credible; if it is good enough for the gods, it is good enough for the people.

It is in the Praśna Upaniṣad where the origin of prāṇa is addressed to an extent, and details the paths it takes throughout the body. According to this Upaniṣad, it arises from the ātman, as a shadow arises from a man:

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30 Olivelle, 301-303. Taittiriyas Upanishad 2.3

As this shadow here, upon a man,
So this mind is stretched upon lifebreath;
And it enters by a path created by the mind.”

Later yogic interpretations of this passage would take this “path created by the mind” to be the control of prāṇa within the body through channels (nadīs), which is said to be done through mental abilities and visualizations during yogic meditation. This passage goes on to explain the various areas in which prāṇa can permeate, and the numerous routes it takes throughout the physical body.

Prāṇa commands other breaths (all of which are various forms of prāṇa) to work in various parts of the body. This Upaniṣad claims that he who understands prāṇa will become immortal, though does not explain why this is so. It is possible that when they say “understand”, what is meant it he who understands how to use it, as opposed to a mere comprehension of the description. If prāṇa is the very thing that keeps someone alive, then it is implied that figuring out how to always retain it could be the key to immortality. Modern yogis who have mastered prāṇāyāma claim to live incredibly long lives compared to ordinary people, and they credit this to their ability to harness prāṇa from the environment and keep it within their body.

Olivelle’s translation of the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad often interprets prāṇa as “vital functions”; however, in one instance, prāṇa as “breath” is used, when Yājñavalkya is asked

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31 Olivelle, 465. Praśna Upanishad 3.3.
32 Ibid., Praśna Upanishad 3.12.
33 Though his translations are not static, and are often relative to the context of the piece.
to explain the “the self (ātman) that is within all.”™ He answers: “Who breathes out with the out-breath—he is the self of yours that is within all. Who breathes in with the in-breath—he is the self of yours that is within all... The self within all is the self of yours.”™ Though this explanation was not immediately satisfactory to the inquiring student, the comparison of the sameness of all who breathe to the sameness of all ātman gives an interesting insight as to how prāṇa was conceived of at this time, and how it was not.

It is not uncommon for modern sources to claim that prāṇa and the soul, or ātman, are one in the same: “According to the Upaniṣads, prāṇa is the principle of life and consciousness. It is equated with the real Self (Ātmā).”™ Though prāṇa and the ātman are connected at times, as can be seen in the Upaniṣads mentioned previously, they are not equated, and certainly not depicted as being the same within these texts. If this idea had been around at the time of the Upaniṣads, certainly the composers would have explained it in such a way, and the aforementioned story would have been an opportune moment to do so. However, not all modern sources take claim to this notion, as Ramacharaka explains, “Prāṇa must not be confounded with the Ego—that bit of Divine Spirit in every soul... Prāṇa is merely a form of energy used by the Ego in its material manifestation.”™

Though they are not described as being the same, prāṇa is at one point depicted as a part of the ātman: “These are what constitutes the self (ātman)—it consists of speech, it consists of mind, and it consists of breath.”™ In this way, prāṇa is not the ātman itself, but seen as a way in which one can discover the self. These three aspects are then described as

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34 Olivelle, 83.
35 Olivelle, 83, BU 3.4
36 Iyengar, 12.
37 Ramacharaka, 9.
38 Olivelle, 55, BU 1.5.3.
being different forms of knowledge; what one knows is reflected in speech, what one seeks to know is reflected in the mind, and what one does not know is reflected in prāṇa; “Whatever someone does not know is a form of breath, for breath is what he does not know. By becoming that, breath helps him.”39 This vague explanation gives a mysterious veil to how prāṇa was possibly perceived. It could be implied that this passage alludes to the unknown nature of prāṇa, that it, like many other phenomena in the world, is mysterious, ambiguous, and yet essential. Shortly before this prose, the following story is given: The ātman was all that existed at the beginning of the world, and it wished for a wife and to produce offspring. The wife of the ātman then became speech, and it’s offspring were prāṇa, with the ātman itself being the mind.40 These three are then seen as being interconnected, though separate parts of the ātman. However, there is no claim that they are the same in these texts.

39 Olivelle, 55, BU 1.5.8.
40 Olivelle, 55.
Chapter 2- From Prāṇa to Prāṇāyāma

It is in the development of the yoga traditions that the biggest change in the concept of prāṇa can be seen. Yoga, being the practical application of the Sāṃkhya philosophy, internalizes the Vedic conception of prāṇa, giving it a very different application from that of the past. As will become clear, the development of the yoga traditions will turn the concept of prāṇa into an integral part of its practice in the form of prāṇāyāma. At some point in time, the concept of prāṇa changes, from an external force that had to be prayed to, to an inward energy that one could have complete personal control over, once given the proper training. Much like the development of yoga itself, prāṇa and prāṇāyāma continue to transform according to the time, place, and context of the practitioners.

Yoga and Asceticism in the Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley civilization was an advanced and sophisticated society that existed roughly 4000 years ago in a region that is currently within modern day Pakistan. Various sites have been excavated that show a society that had planned cities, communal bathes and few weapons. A civilization such as this, which lived in relative comfort, prosperity and was not at war, had time for the development of philosophical and esoteric ideas within their religious traditions. Some scholars believe that this society not only had gods, as is evident in their artwork, but also yogis. Whether or not these yogis were ascetics is unclear, though yoga and asceticism tended to go hand-in-hand in the ancient world.

41 Klostermaier, 11.
Proto-Śiva and the Priest King

Yoga as recognizable practiced can be traced back as far as the Indus Valley Civilization, which thrived during the Bronze Age, approximately 3000 BCE. Archeologists have uncovered across various sites in the Indus Valley, namely those of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, clay seals that depict what appears to be a yogi. The image is of a human or human-like individual, sitting in a position that the yoga tradition refers to as gorakshāsana, with the bottoms of the feet pressed together and hands resting on the knees. This figure not only reminiscent of a yogi, but actually resembles the very Lord of Yoga, the Hindu god Śiva. Because of this resemblance, scholars have deemed this image “proto-Śiva”, suggesting that the god Śiva evolved out of this figure. Other similarities to Śiva include the fact that the image is wearing horns of some sort, most likely from a bull; in contemporary Hinduism, Śiva rides a bull as his vāhana, or vehicle. Some sources claim this image also has an erect phallus. Though difficult to determine, if this were present it would be another connection to Śiva, who is often represented in the form of a lingam, which Śaivites today use to worship and perform rituals.

Exactly what this figure is may never be known, especially considering that the Harappan script, which is presented on the seals and many other artifacts, has yet to be deciphered. Other sources refer to this figure as the three-faced male god, because of the two other faces on either side of the head. It is entirely possible that this is indeed an image of a deity; multiple heads and faces are not uncommon in artistic depictions of Hindu gods. Yet, whether or not this image is a deity, what is clear is that he is sitting in a yoga posture (not likely a coincidence, since this posture is very uncomfortable except to those who have been

42 Agrawal, 223
trained to do it). This shows that some sort of āsanas were, at one point, performed in the Indus Valley, and done so by prominent people or even gods, which is why someone took the time to create these images.

If this figure is, in fact, an early form of Śiva, then perhaps other gods in the Hindu pantheon date back to this time. They may have been adopted, evolved from previous beliefs or myths, or, for all we know, be exactly the same as they are now. It is entirely possible that this figure depicts a god who was a master yogi, and was worshipped by the people, who proudly displayed him on these seals. Another figure can be found of a man in a dancing pose, much like the way Śiva is often depicted today (he is not only the Lord of Yoga, but also the Lord of Dance). “All these features indicate that the elements of the latter-day Hindu god Śiva were already there in the Harappan culture.”

Another Indus Valley image that should be examined is that of the “priest-king”. The priest king is a statue of a man who, with eyes half closed and a serene look on his face, appears to be in meditation. It would be difficult to describe this figure as an ascetic, as he is dressed in a decorated garment of some sort, with an emblem on his head. However, his meditative stance, along with the seals of the yogi, show that meditation and āsanas were indeed present in the Indus Valley civilizations. Both of these are integral elements of yoga, and though the yoga system as it is known today may not have developed until centuries later, its roots can certainly be traced back to the Indus Valley.

_Shamans_

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43 Agrawal, 324
44 Bhagat, 98
Scholars have speculated that the ascetic, and asceticism as lifestyle, either came out of or was heavily influenced by the Shaman. Often referred to as mere “medicine men”, Shamans, who were just as often women, were those who could communicate with the spirit world. With the use of magic and supernatural abilities, the Shaman could enter into a trance, where their bodies would remain on earth but their consciousness would be transported to a different realm. To induce this trance, the Shaman would undergo a number of practices that continued on into the ascetic tradition, and eventually yoga, including: breath control, physical exercises, and abstinence.\textsuperscript{45} Patañjali refers to these practices as \emph{prāṇāyāma}, \emph{āsanas}, and \emph{brahmacharya}, in the \textit{Yoga Sutras}. Other practices Shamans would endure include fasting, removal from society and living in solitude, use of narcotics to induce trances, and self-torture,\textsuperscript{46} all of which are not uncommon in various forms of asceticism and yoga, even today.

So called “primitive” communities and religions often had a designated Shaman that, aside from healings and giving prophecies, could communicate with spirits; though what these spirits were (gods, ancestors, demons, etc.) varied culture to culture. These individuals may take up their role as a Shaman as an occasional task, performing only during rituals and when needed. However, once society grows, along with the demand of the Shamans powers, they may have to commit to the job full-time. In doing so, removing oneself from society becomes natural, since they are technically no longer considered to be a regular member of the community, shifting interest to be less acquainted with the cares of this world, and spending their time absorbed in a different cognitive state. If needed, members of the

\textsuperscript{45} Bhagat, 69  
\textsuperscript{46} Bhagat, 69
community could venture out to see these individuals, who undoubtedly made a profit off of their abilities.

Shamans, in most cases, did their practices for the community. Ascetics, on the other hand, often did their practices for themselves, for individual gain. The importance of the Shaman begins to decline as more organized religion emerges, along with a more organized society. This can be seen in the case of Vedic religion becoming more dominant, even among Dravidian peoples, who soon abandoned the Shaman for the priest. The belief that a Shaman could communicate with spirits was overshadowed by the belief that a priest could communicate with the gods, in the form of ritual. Priests, in the Vedic period, lived very different lives compared to the Shamans. They were at the top of the social hierarchy, making them important figures in not only religion, but in politics as well.

Vedic Brahmin priests soon became the unofficial rulers of Vedic society. They were the keepers of knowledge, in the form of the Sanskrit Vedas and the rituals. Because they controlled the rituals, they controlled all that happened in their world. Rituals were performed to please the gods, gods whose decisions could be swayed by the sacrificing of a cow and reciting of some mantras. In this sense, the Brahmin not only controlled the ritual, they controlled the gods. Their work in many cases was done for the sake of the community, but could also be done for personal gain. Shamans were chosen based on a person’s abilities, and could in most cases be anyone. Priesthood, however, was handed down from father to son, thus keeping the power, both spiritual and political, within the family, furthering their desire to keep the caste system, or social hierarchy, in place.

The Vrātya Brotherhoods
Although the origins of yoga, and therefore prāṇyāma are uncertain, scholars have not been without speculation. Feuerstein claims that they can both be traced, with some degree of certainty, to a group deemed the Vṛātya Brotherhood.\textsuperscript{47} Feuerstein investigates these mysterious groups, claiming that they were “instrumental in the transmission of Yoga-like knowledge …”\textsuperscript{48}, and may have been the inventors (or, at least, forerunners) of prāṇyāma. Their influence, according to him, cannot go unnoted, as it is possible that they also contributed to Upanishadic thought due to their relationship with the Kshatriya caste, with the solitary Vṛātya being the original “warrior” according to the Atharva-Veda. Feuerstein even goes as far as to say that the Vedantic notion of non-dualism could have been inspired by this brotherhood.\textsuperscript{49}

Not much is known about those who made up the Vṛātya Brotherhoods, yet scholars have speculated as to their practices and influence by using Vedic sources. The Atharva-Veda specifically speaks of groups of men, and occasionally a solitary practitioner, who wandered around Northeastern India, particularly in Bihar (Magadha in the ancient world, which Feuerstein notes is also the birthplace of Jainism, Buddhism and the Tantric traditions). These men spoke the language of the Vedas and were likely from the same background as the Aryans, possibly being among the first group of Aryans to emerge in India.\textsuperscript{50} Sources indicate that these groups, consisting of 33 men each, were originally

\textsuperscript{47} “Vṛātya” can mean both “group” and “vow”, both of which apply, as it was often a number of people who were band together by a vow.
\textsuperscript{48} Feuerstein, 111. (Technology)
\textsuperscript{49} Feuerstein, 112. (Technology)
\textsuperscript{50} Currently ideas such as the Aryan Invasion Theory and the Aryan Migration Theory are still being challenged, along with a newer theory that the Aryan people were actually indigenous. However, the origins of these people are not vital to the topic at hand.
considered to be heretical by the orthodox Brahmins, and were not seen as being suitable for anything except human sacrifice (purushamedha). Though Doniger describes them as “outlaws”\textsuperscript{51} in her translations, the Vrātya eventually become influential enough that the Brahmin created a special ritual, the vrātyastoma in which they can be purified and accepted as members of society.\textsuperscript{52}

Described as “mysterious ecstacies”\textsuperscript{53} by Eliade, these persons apparently were easy to pick out, “…they wore turbans, dressed in black, and had two ramskins, one white, one black, slung over their shoulders; as insignia they had a sharp-pointed stick, an ornament worn around the neck (niśka), and an unstrung bow (jyāhtoḍa).”\textsuperscript{54} Eliade claims that their rituals often included the restriction of breath, as a form of tapas, or austerity. Literally referring to the “heat” of a ritual fire, tapas then becomes internalized in the hands of the non-orthodox (that is, those who are not Brahmin, and therefore not allowed to take part in sacred rituals). Observing the ritual fires performed by the priests, ascetics, such as the Vrātya, sought to create a ritual fire within them, by the use of breath. The heat generated within the body by various breathing techniques served as the ritual fire, no longer being controlled by the Brahmin priest, but by individuals striving for personal spiritual achievement.\textsuperscript{55} Although absolute, irrefutable proof may never be uncovered, it is possible that the origins of prāṇāyāma can be traced back as far as the time the Vedas were composed.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Doniger, 21, footnote 39.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Feuerstein, 112. (Technology)
\item \textsuperscript{53} Eliade, 337.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Eliade, 103-104.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Eliade, 108-109.
\end{itemize}
The Atharva-Veda is speckled with bits of insight as to who these Vrātya were, what knowledge they obtained, and how the Vedic composers viewed them. The evidence that they were the forerunners for the practice of prāṇāyāma can be found in Book XV. 15-17, with the descriptions of various breaths, grouped in sevens:

Of that Vṛātya.

There are seven vital airs, seven downward breaths, seven diffused breaths.

His first vital breath, called Upward, is this Agni.
His second vital breath, called Mature, is that Ṛđitya.
His third vital breath, called Approached, is that Moon.
His fourth vital breath, called Pervading is this Pavamāṇa.
His fifth vital breath, called Source, are these Waters.
His sixth vital breath, called Dear, are these domestic animals.
His seventh vital breath, called Unlimited, are these creatures.56

It is difficult to comprehend exactly how these hymns were intended to be understood.

Feuerstein claims that “Its composer moved in a different frame of reality, that of mythopoeic thought rather than abstract reasoning.”57 It is entirely possible, and in fact very likely, that the composer’s language is a reflection of a mystical state of mind58, one that could only be understood by others who have come into contact with these individuals.

Vṛātya Brotherhood in the Vedas

Evidence of the Vṛātya Brotherhood being the pioneers of prāṇāyāma can be seen by once again examining the Atharva Veda. Griffith describes them as the “Aryan Non-conformist”

57 Feuerstein, 113-114 (Technology)
58 Perhaps induced by ritual chanting or the ingestion of soma.
in his translations, which is understandable given the descriptions of these individuals. Hymn III describes one in particular standing erect for an entire year—a practice not uncommon among ascetics—before they presented him with a couch to lie upon. “The hosts of Gods were his attendants, solemn vows his messengers, and all creatures his worshippers. All creatures become the worshippers of him who possesses this knowledge.” The Vrātya were portrayed as being worshipped at this time, by both creatures and gods alike. Several occurrences in this particular book allude to the Vrātya being worshipped or being seen as god-like in some manner, and emphasize their expertise on the breath.

Hymn XV goes into detail about the various breaths that these Vrātya appear to have knowledge of: “His first diffused breath is this Earth. His second diffused breath is that Firmament. His third diffused breath is that Heaven. His fourth diffused breath are those Constellations. His fifth diffused breath are the Seasons.” This continues for the description of three sets of seven breaths, with the breaths themselves being describes as different aspects of space, phases of the moon, and nature. The mythopoetic language, as Feuerstein previously noted, makes deciphering these hymns a complicated task, but what can be gathered is this: a people who made up a group called the Vrātya were influential enough to have Vedic composers dedicate an entire collection of hymns to them, where they were described as uniquely influential and in possession of a special practice that is done with the breath. Although there are no absolute certainties within this type of work, it is a safe assumption that these Vrātya were among the first to put the concept of prāṇa into practice.

The Yoga Upanishads

60 Ibid., XVII, Lines 1-5.
The Early Upanishads show evidence of yoga being performed as one of many practices by ascetics. It is in the Yoga Upanishads, specifically, that the systemization of yoga can be seen, along with the many varieties it adopts. Though the exact dating of these texts is unknown, it is possible some were composed before, and some much after the better-known Yoga Sutras of Patañjali. The Yoga Upanishads show that there were variations in the practice of yoga, and that much of it depended on one’s own guru and how they saw fit to teach union with the divine, leading to liberation from rebirth. The various texts show different systems, ranging from six to fifteen limbs, yet all of which reflect similar steps. Some of these Upanishads emphasize the importance of mantra, an element Patañjali leaves out, yet remains an important practice throughout the Hindu traditions.

The various Yoga Upanishads describe a myriad of yoga systems, complete with instructions ranging from vague to profoundly detailed. Within each of them, prāṇāyāma is always cited as one of the limbs, or steps, required to achieve the goal of yoga. The earliest of these Upanishads merely mention that prāṇāyāma should be practiced, however, the later ones give incredible specifications as to how it should be done. Along with prāṇāyāma, the importance of clearing and purifying the nādis, tunnels or channels that run through the subtle body, is emphasized. Prāṇāyāma always appears around the middle of the systems, coming after the ethics and disciplines, but before the aspects of concentration. This may be due to the belief that breath control helps to control the mind, and therefore once it is mastered, then concentration can be achieved. It works as a link between outward actions and inward meditation.

The Yoga Upanishads are, at times, very technical when it comes to the practice of prāṇāyāma. Some give detailed information as to how long to hold certain breaths, and
where one should hold it within the body (in the navel, in the chest, etc.) Many suggest practicing while focusing the eyes on the tip of the nose and counting the breaths in *matras*, or meters. Diseases and illness, along with normal bodily functions such as urinating and defecating were said and believed to be extraordinarily reduced with the practice and mastery of *prāṇāyāma*. 61

Yoga was traditionally not learned from a book, but from a Guru, who taught the student face-to-face, which could be why specific instructions on how to perform *prāṇāyāma* were not cited: it was because one ought to learn that from an experienced master. However, over time these teachings were written down, and more details began to be inserted. One Yoga Upanishad, called the Sandilyopanishad, is incredibly specific in its instructions, recommending practicing up to eighty breaths, four times a day if one wishes to purify the *nādis*, allowing the *prāṇa* to flow freely throughout the subtle body. 62 Ideally the yogi should do this facing north or eastwards, in an *āsana* that they have become comfortable in (*padmāsana* is recommended), and continue this for forty-three days to three months. 63

According to the Yoga Upanishads, the normal ratio of inhalation, retention, and exhalation is usually around 1:4:2, but this must be changed in *prāṇāyāma*. Different ratios in breathing was believed to produce different results; for example, some were used for health benefits, revitalizing the organs, clearing the body of toxins, relax muscles, lowering blood pressure, getting rid of nausea, etc. Other techniques can be done to calm the mind, while some reportedly could create confidence or an exhilarating feeling, and, because of the “powers” that can allegedly be obtained, one can perform healings on oneself or others (even

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61 Ayyangar, 106-107
62 Ayyangar, 464-465
63 Ayyangar, 461
from a distance). It will lead to the calming of the mind, which will allow one to meditate and ideally reach Samadhi, the highest limb of yoga, which, depending on one’s translation, can be equanimity, integration, or ecstasy.

Though it is clear that prāṇāyāma was important to practice, the texts fail to explain why. Aside from purifying the nādis, the necessity of controlling the breath is merely stated and not explained in the amount of detail one might expect. A possible explanation of this is could be that most people at the time just knew why it was important, and it did not need to be explained. If prāna were still revered, as it was in the Vedas and other Upanishads, then the practitioners would need no explanations; its importance would have been obvious.

Looking into the Yoga Upanishads illuminated the variety of techniques that were prescribed. Some are more technical, describing step-by-step instructions, while others are more philosophical, stressing the importance of these practices and they knowledge one will gain from them. What is clear in all of them, however, is that the goal of yoga in these Upanishads and at this time, was moksha, liberation from the cycle of rebirth; nearly all the Yoga Upanishads end by stating that once these techniques are perfected, rebirth and worldly existence will be no more; or, they say claim what will remain after this life, that only atman will remain, only puruṣa will remain, that which transcends will remain, the non-differentiated “One” will remain.

The first Yoga Upanishad, called the Amrita-Nadopanishad, only describes six limbs in its system. The first three of Patañjali’s limbs do not appear here, but what does appear is

64 Ayyengar, 107
Tarka, which is an emphasis on scriptural study and rational thinking. This kind of yoga leaves out the ethics and disciplines that later yoga systems prescribe, and includes more focus on intellectual aspects. Samadhi in this Upanishad is translated as “reached when one can look upon oneself and see them as divine.” It also claims that after practicing for six months, one shall attain what is called Kaivalya, or one-ness. At this point one will be able to differentiate between different energies, being able to see energies in the air as different colors.

Next, there is the Tejo-Bindupanishad, which contains the highest amount of limbs in all the yoga systems: fifteen. This system is much more technical and specifically includes renunciation, possible because it was geared more towards ascetics. The limbs go as followed:


From this Upanishad, it is evident that all conditions must be perfect in order to perform this kind of yoga. One must be in the right place, at the right time, for the proper amount of time, in the proper state of mind. Also important to note is the third limb of this system: renunciation. Yoga was performed by ascetics, and this Upanishad makes it clear that one must give up possessions in order to perform yoga. Other yoga systems are not as specific as

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65 Ayyangar, 12
66 Ayyangar, 16
67 Ayyanger, 30-33
this Upanishad, and Patañjali even excludes a number of these limbs, making his system slightly more relaxed.

This Upanishad also stresses the importance of the mantra “I am the Brahman”, which is held to be incredibly powerful. This mantra is believed to achieve many things, saying: it is the mantra of the ātman, it destroys “sins” of the body, of incarnation, it destroys the bond of death, the knowledge of duality, the bond of the mind, diseases, grief. It bestows delight of a kind which cannot be thought of, bestows the bliss of knowledge. 68 This Upanishad recommends that one give up all other mantras, practicing this one alone.

Another important Yoga system can be found in the Tri-Sikhi-Brahmanopanishad. At this point the Yoga Upanishads appear more like the system of Patañjali. This one, however, describes ten Yamas, and ten Niyamas, though Patañjali only stressed five each. Many of the Yoga Upanishads claimed that there were ten restraints and ten practices that should be done, and the things they included, which Patañjali does not, include: temperance in food, compassion, fortitude, belief in the existence of Brahman, silent prayer, and munificence. 69 This Upanishad also goes into detail describing how to do different āsanas; other Yoga Upanishads, though they say āsanas should be done, neglect to describe how. Once again, this is possibly because an experienced teacher originally taught the system, and trying to learn it on one’s own is not only difficult, but can even be dangerous.

The Tri-Sikhi-Brahmanopanishad is also one of the few Upanishads that gives detailed instructions on hand placement in prānāyāma, along with which nādis should be used, and the ratios of breath. This Upanishad also describes the effects of the practice,

68 Ayyangar, 48-50
69 Ayyangar, 97-98
saying it should make one be able to go without food and water for long periods, it will free one from disease and fatigue, and even lead to the understanding of the ātman. By controlling this function and thus the vital energy, (which should take about three years) the other limbs of this system, which include concentration, are said to come naturally.\textsuperscript{70}

The last Yoga Upanishad is strikingly similar to Patañjali’s \textit{Yoga Sutras}. The Yoga-Tattvopanishad, which described the exact eight limbs of Patañjali, also speaks of different forms of yoga that emerge, such as Hatha Yoga, Mantra Yoga, and even Laya Yoga. This Upanishad also emphasizes the importance of purifying the nādis, or energy channels that run throughout the body, which is done through the practice of \textit{prāṇāyāma}. Siddhis, or powers that can be gained through the practice of yoga, appear in this Upanishad, describing incredible achievements such as clairvoyance, vanishing from sight, transforming into any desired form, and traveling at warp speed. It is even said that advanced yogis contain so much power that smearing their urine or feces on any metal will turn it into gold!\textsuperscript{71}

Each of the Yoga Upanishads contains the limb of \textit{prāṇāyāma} loosely translated as breath-control. Exactly where it is placed in each system varies, but it always occurs before dhāranā, and tends to be in the middle of the system. Like the āsanas, some of the systems give specific directions on how to perform \textit{prāṇāyāma}, but most do not, leaving that task to the Guru. What is detailed are usually the three parts of a breath: cessation, expiration, and inspiration of air. It is believed that practicing \textit{prāṇāyāma} will correct “the misdeeds of the organs”, purifying and vitalizing the entire body.\textsuperscript{72}

\textit{Patañjali and the Yoga Sutras}

\textsuperscript{70} Ayyengar, 106-109
\textsuperscript{71} Ayyangar, 313
\textsuperscript{72} Ayyangar, 10-11
The *Yoga Sutras*, compiled by Patañjali around 200 BCE, is the most famous and renowned system of yoga. It is Patañjali’s description of prāṇāyāma that becomes the standard taught by yogis and yoga instructors in the West today, despite the brevity of his instruction. Though it is likely that Patañjali himself did not create the system he teaches, he gathered what he knew about yoga, possibly from various Upanishads, writings, and through teachings he underwent, and put them together in this eight-limbed system that was spread amongst ascetics. He took the yamas and niyamas that appear in the Yoga Upanishads and shortened them, but kept the main ideas of having an ethical grounding and retaining certain disciplines and restraints. His system is as follows:

1. Yama (5 Restraints)
2. Niyama (5 Practices)
3. Āsanas (Postures)
4. Prāṇāyama (Breath Control)
5. Pratyahara (Withdrawal of the Senses)
6. Dhāraṇā (Concentration)
7. Dhyana (Meditation)
8. Samadhi (Equanimity/Integration/Ecstasy)

Patañjali’s system is simple enough to be spread by word of mouth, but specific enough to get the job done. The goal of yoga, according to Patañjali is “citta-vritti-nirodha”, that is, depending on the translation, to quiet the fluctuations of the mind or to control the waves of the mind. Essentially, this means that yoga is a tool to help one meditate. Meditation can then lead to spiritual liberation, or surrender to god, depending on the goal of that individual.

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73 Bhagat, 48
74 Klostermaier, 118
The different limbs of yoga, including *prāṇāyāma*, aid in connecting the physical body to what is called the subtle body, and then further help to control the mind. Once the mind can be controlled, not only can various *siddhis* be acquired, but also the ātman can then be explored.

It is clear at this time that *prāṇa* is no longer understood as a deity, or an autonomous agent as it once was in the Vedic Period. By the time of Patañjali, from the way in which *prāṇa* is discussed, it is clearly understood as a particular kind of breath that can be controlled. With proper instruction and usage of the system, controlling this breath, and therefore controlling the mind, are tasks that appear to be manageable. In the past, grand and vigorous rituals had to be performed in order to control *prāṇa*; but with Patañjali’s system, as well as others, the attempt to control *prāṇa* is then internalized. This is not to say that this feat, that is, controlling the breath of life, has been made easy by these systems, but it is the systemization of them that makes it accessible, that makes the very practice of *prāṇāyāma* bearable to those willing to endure the long and difficult path of yoga.

Patañjali’s Yoga system also includes *tapas*, or austerities, as a way of achieving union with the divine. He, however, along with other advocates, rejected the extreme forms of *tapas* that some ascetics were doing. Self-mortification at this time was seen as a kind of *tapas*, but not one that everyone should do. To Patañjali and others, *tapas* should be seen more as self-training than harming, and though it may be difficult and even painful, it should not destroy the body.75 *Tapas* as heat, in the case of yoga, actually can be physical; doing certain postures and breathing techniques can cause the body to heat up. Heat and fire, in the Indian traditions, has always been and remains to be a means of purification.

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75 Bhagat, 26-27
The fourth limb of Patañjali’s system, prānāyāma, is a crucial practice that can easily be overlooked. Ascetics in the ancient world knew the importance of breath-control, much of which had to do with the nature of prāna itself. Yogis, who were ascetics, understood that prāna, as energy, exists within the air, and could actually be controlled within the body. Therefore prāṇāyāma is not just controlling breath; it is controlling the very energy that sustains life.

By controlling this vital life force, yogis could control the energy that makes up the subtle body, that is, the body made of pure energy that exists within the physical body. By performing various breathing techniques, master yogis were able to better understand the subtle body and how it worked. They concluded that it was full of energy channels, called nādis, which carried prāna and other energies throughout the subtle body. These channels often coalesced in spots called chakras, or energy centers that are situated along the spine. From the practice of breath control these yogis were able to uncover an entire anatomy of a subtle energy body that they believe exists within the physical body. This astounding find will make prāṇāyāma one of the most important aspects of the yoga system, which will eventually be used in other forms of yoga to do an assortment of things, from obtaining siddhis, to regulating one’s heartbeat, to reaching moksha.

Hatha Yoga Pradīpīka

Likely composed between 1350-1550 CE, the Hatha Yoga Pradīpīka is a significant source on the development of the practice of prānāyāma. This text, composed by the yogi Svātmārāma, has influenced a number of the modern sources of yogic practice, including

76 Alter, 21.
Iyengar, Saraswati, and Śivananda. These sources often refer to and quote the *Pradīpīka*’s instructions on *prāṇāyāma*, as well as āsanas, dietary instructions, *mudrās*, and even philosophies, adding commentaries and elaborating on instructions in how certain techniques ought to be performed. Where the *Pradīpīka* is vague, leaving room for a personal guru to give instruction, Iyengar, Saraswati, and Śivananda fill in the necessary directions, giving guidance through their books. This is the first point where modern sources stray from the very teachings of the text they are attempting to advocate.

Early on in the *Pradīpīka* yogis are encouraged to keep their practices a secret, stating that those who wish to be successful in yoga should not reveal their methods, “Concealed it is fruitful, revealed ineffective.” Digambarji’s commentary explains, “Talking about them defeats the Yogi’s aim, which should not be seeking reputation but achieving self-development.” The very notion of modern yogis writing and publishing books on yoga and *prāṇāyāma* strongly contradicts one of the first directions given in the *Pradīpīka*. Not only are these men revealing such secrets, they are doing so in great detail, targeting a non-Hindu audience, and, perhaps most importantly, are gaining wealth and reputation because of these publications.

Despite using the *Pradīpīka* as an important resource and aid to their own teachings, it is not uncommon for modern sources to pick and choose what sections to use and what to ignore, based on the reception of an American audience. One practice in particular, which was crucial to Svātmārāma, is, for the most part, ignored by both Iyengar and Saraswati. These are known as the six purification practices (*shatkarma*), necessary to be completed.

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77 Digambarji, 5.
78 Digambarji, 5.
before one begins the practice of prāṇāyāma. According to Svātmārāma, these six practices are meant to purify the physical body, putting it in the ideal condition to then purify the subtle body. These practices include dhauti, the process of swallowing a piece of cloth several feet long, and drawing it back out repeatedly, as well as the practice of basti, where one rectally inserts a hollow bamboo tube, and sits into a bath to allow water to enter in and out, cleansing the colon. Svātmārāma advocates these practices, among others, claiming that they will cure and prevent diseases, as well as make the process of prāṇāyāma run much smoother. Needless to say, procedures of this nature are not likely to be popular amongst a Western audience, whom may find these practices intimidating, if not abhorrent. Both Iyengar and Saraswati appear to be well versed in the Pradīpīka, leading one to conclude that they intentionally refrained from including these methods of purification because it would not appeal to their target audience. They are not alone in avoiding practices such as these, either; it is entirely possible that yoga would not have experienced as much success in the West had it not been modified from its ascetic roots, making it more accessible to those unfamiliar with the tradition. Yoga schools in the United States that advocate these means of purification are rare, though they do exist. However, most teachers of prāṇāyāma, including Iyengar and Saraswati, have chosen to emphasize the cleansing nature of prāṇāyāma itself, completely foregoing directions of cleansing prior to the practice. Iyengar merely states, “One does not enter a temple with a dirty body or mind. Before entering the temple of his own body, the yogi observes the rules of cleanliness.” Other than this brief and nondescript mention, which appears to address yogis as opposed to general practitioners, bodily

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79 Digambarji, 45.
80 Digambarji, 47.
81 Digambarji, 51.
82 Yoga Abode Magazine, “Shat karma” though they require the assistance of a trained instructor.
83 Iyengar, 55.
purification is ignored, and instruction of prānāyāma begins. Saraswati does mention shatkarma on few occasions, but never in detail, neglecting to give instruction. It is merely mentioned in passing, that it is something that is done within the yoga process.84

Much like the practices of shatkarma, modern sources also forgo some other undesirable feats that the Pradīpīka recommends in terms of mudrās. One such practice, called khecari mudrā, uses the tongue to assist in various breathing techniques. However, this technique requires a tongue so long that it can “touch the middle of the eyebrows.”85 This is done by gradually making small incisions in the frenum located on the underside of the tongue until the tongue is able to extend as far as one needs. Svātmārāma advises practitioners to rub rock salt on the incision and keep it frequently moving, so as not to let the incision heal.86 Once completely freed (which takes about six months) the tongue can then be inserted into the nasopharyngeal cavity to perform certain mudrās accompanying prānāyāma, one of which is said to allow the practitioner to have control over the emission of semen, preventing premature death.87 Considering the possible liability, as well as stigma against yoga, it is easy to see why a practice like this would be ignored by modern sources. Despite promises of longevity, asking one to personally mutilate their body, and continue to do so over a long period of time, would not be well-received by the American audience.

In most instances, Iyengar quotes the Pradīpīka in terms of instructions, despite the fact that they may be contradictory. In one chapter in particular, where he address possible obstacles a student may face, he recommends both Patañjali’s method of “feeling at one with

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84 Saraswati, 224.
85 Digambarji, 85.
86 Digambarji, 86.
87 Digambarji, 88-89.
all”88, along with Svātmārāma’s advise on cultivating “a feeling of detachment, of being in the world but not of it,”89 as means of overcoming these unnamed obstacles. Difference in advise between the Yoga Sutras and the Pradīpīka can be expected, as these texts were composed over a millennia apart by two different experts each speaking from their own experiences. Yet, Iyengar’s homage to both masters is likely to result in confusion for the reader.

The confusion continues when it comes to the topic of a guru. Because of the nature of a widely published manual being used as a guide, the need for a personal guru in the instruction and aid of these practices becomes unclear. Traditionally, a guru was absolutely essential; in fact, these practices were only passed on orally from student to teacher, shaped to fit that specific student and that particular relationship. Iyengar’s knowledge of the importance of a guru, along with his general instruction in teaching yoga and prāṇāyāma through a guidebook, heavily implies that he sees himself as a guru to all who may obtain his books or attend classes taught in his name, despite never having met, much less personally guided, the majority of these “students”. He devotes an entire chapter in Light on Prāṇāyāma to the guru/disciple relationship, quoting the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gītā on the dedication of the guru and the devotion of the disciple. Despite elaborating on this, however, the discussion ends there. Iyengar drops the subject, continuing on to the practice of prāṇāyāma, without directing readers to a guru or disclosing the reason behind including such information. Saraswati, too, acknowledges the importance of a guru to the practice, “The guru and the sadhaka’s devotion to him are indispensable when the prāṇāyāma practice

88 Iyengar, 47.
89 Iyengar, 47.
is taken to the level of sadhana.”90 He continues on to stress the necessity of a guru in order for the practitioner to ensure their techniques are accurate, safe, and helpful to “one’s spiritual growth”.91 Like Iyengar, the topic is then left behind, leaving the reader unclear on the role of the author as a guru, or whether or not they should seek one out. The reader, then, is left with a guru in the form of a guidebook—a guru that is impersonal, undemanding, and, most importantly, convenient. One could even argue that Iyengar and Saraswati actually are keeping the traditional guru/disciple relationship alive, gearing their teachings to the American student. In the past, gurus would have to customize their teachings accordingly depending on the student, their personality, and level of advancement, knowledge, and abilities. Perhaps a guidebook, despite revealing the many secrets and tricks of the trade to a vast audience, is the way in which these two gurus have found it necessary to teach American students. It is entirely possible that they found Americans to be unwilling to have regular meetings with, consult, and give their upmost devotion to a human yogi. A book rather than a human teacher makes sense for this target audience, whose interest may be fleeting, who are only willing to learn at their own pace, and who are likely to see this practice as a leisurely activity, as opposed to a way of life. The Pradīpīka itself was not intended to be a full-spectrum guidebook; a guru was necessary to accompany the text. Rather than accusing them of ignoring a crucial part of the yoga tradition, perhaps this is Iyengar and Saraswati knowing their audience, seeing all those who share an interest in yoga as “disciples”, and trying to teach in a way that they believe this audience would be most receptive.

Much like Iyengar, Saraswati’s use of the Pradīpīka is often in the form of direct quotes along with added commentary and expanded explanations. Though most references

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90 Saraswati, 221.
91 Saraswati, 222.
are standard, aiding in the explanation of his form of practice, some are used in unclear ways. For example, Saraswati touches on the topic of levitation by the mastery of prāṇāyāma. He claims that, through control of the prāṇa that runs through the body, gravity will cease to have any affect on the individual. Saraswati then connects this relationship to gravity to one’s relationship with death, namely that once one can overcome gravity, one can overcome their fear of death. At this point, Saraswati slips in a quote from the Pradīptika in which the gods are said to practice prāṇāyāma because it will destroy the fear of death. After, he returns to discussing the siddhis acquired through prāṇāyāma. Out-of-place references are not uncommon in Saraswati’s book; he also quotes a section in the Pradīptika about eradicating diseases when he is discussing the importance of having an individual guru. Though one can only speculate as to why Saraswati had chosen to include the information he did, certain aspects appear to only be placed to derive credibility from a historical and reputable source.

Lastly, what needs to be addressed is exactly what the Pradīptika has to say about prāṇa. Its instructions on prāṇāyāma, while detailed and extensive, are also vastly esoteric and are often left lacking when it comes to any theory on how it actually works. There is no set definition of prāṇa, leading one to conclude that practitioners at this time were already familiar with it, or, more likely, that a guru informed them of the nature and usage of this concept. Notions of prāṇa being used to control the mind (citta), ātman, and subtle body are discussed throughout the Pradīptika, though exactly how is not expressed. This is where the modern sources fill in with exceptional detail. Iyengar devoted entire chapters to the definitions of both prāṇa and prāṇāyāma, as well as a chapter on how they work within the physical respiratory system, and the subtle body. Saraswati is similar, along with Gupta and

92 Saraswati, 135.
Ramacharaka, devoting large sections of their text to the explanation of what *prāna* is, and how *prānāyāma* works in the body.

*Śiva Samhitā and Gheraṇḍa Samhitā*

Over a thousand years lay between the *Śiva Samhitā, Gheraṇḍa Samhitā*, and Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, and though both cover many of the basic themes in the teachings of yoga, the *Śiva Samhitā* provides much more philosophical and metaphysical insight, similar to the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpīka*. Many modern sources on yoga fail to acknowledge this piece of work, despite (or, perhaps, because of) its complicated detail, religious significance and esoteric attitude. Allegedly bestowed from Lord Śiva himself, these teachings are said to be “secret”, only to be taught to “…the most devoted and great souls in all three worlds.”

Before going into specifics on the yoga system, the author discusses key metaphysical ideas that one ought to understand before beginning the regiment. This includes karma, *māyā*, the nature of the *ātman*, and the immense greatness of Śiva. Once these topics are covered, the text then goes into the teachings of yoga, starting with an elaborate description of the microcosm that is the human body. The body is detailed in correspondence with the elements, astral bodies, and the subtle body, all of which are constantly referenced throughout the work. These texts also contain the first appearance of *cakras* within the collection of sources examined here.

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93 Ghosh, 6.
Ghosh’s translations and commentaries of both the Śiva Samhitā and the Gheraṇḍa Samhitā (composed between 1650-1750 CE\(^{94}\)) give powerful insight as to the purpose and usage of these texts. It becomes obvious that these texts were not meant for a novice, and indeed required guidance from an expert, as well as commitment to the entire duration of the yoga process. He states,

“Contrary to popular belief, however, yoga is not a mere keep-fit device. Āsanas and prāṇāyāma are no doubt a good means for achieving a perfect physiological condition. But these surely are not the be-all and end-all of Yoga. As a matter of fact these, when practiced without the ground being prepared by the other two “limbs of Yoga,” viz. yama and niyama, may well deprive one of the full benefits expected of them. Also, in some cases—prāṇāyāma, for instance— the absence of yama enjoined in the practice of continence can even result in positive harm.”\(^{95}\)

Prāṇa is the first aspect of the yoga system that is discussed. It is advised that once one finds a sufficient guru, they should begin the practice of prāṇāyāma, with the text giving specific instructions on how one should conduct their breathing.\(^{96}\) It is said “By means of prāṇāyāmā (breath control) the wise yogi is then able to destroy positively all his karma acquired in previous lives as well as those that have now accrued (in this life).\(^{97}\) Like the Pradīpīka, a simple and direct definition of prāṇa is lacking, however it is described in a number of ways. According to the text, there are a large number of “airs” that appear in the body, each having a different name depending on where it utilized. They are as follows\(^{98}\):

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<th>In-Flowing Airs</th>
<th>Out-Flowing Airs</th>
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\(^{94}\) Alter, 21.  
\(^{95}\) Ghosh, xiii.  
\(^{96}\) Ghosh, 36.  
\(^{97}\) Ghosh, 41.  
\(^{98}\) Ghosh, 33.
Each “air” has a specific function and correlation to the physical body, as well as the subtle body in relation to the nādis, but not much more information is given. The same goes with the concept of cakras, or various centers of the body where the nādis tend to meet. They are mentioned, their importance expressed and their locations specified, but exactly how these centers function is left virtually untouched. The only explanation as to how these cakras work is given in reference to the Moolādhāra cakra, located at the base of the spine. This cakra is believed to be vital, as it where the kundalini (described here as “Serpent Power”\(^{99}\)) can be found. It is said that when this, usually dormant, power is aroused, it will travel upward, penetrating each cakra.\(^{100}\) Perhaps because explanations such as these are not satisfying, particularly to the Western imagination, modern sources then take these vague notions and expand them, detailing the exact movement of prāṇa throughout the cakras, though rarely giving credit to texts such as the Śiva Samhitā.

\(^{99}\) Ghosh, 25.
\(^{100}\) Ghosh, 56.
Though it may seem as if the Śiva Samhitā gives such detailed instructions so that one may be able to perform prāṇāyāma on their own, it does not hesitate to give warning to those who attempt the practice without guidance. Much like the Pradīpīka, the importance of a guru cannot be ignored; one must only obtain this information from a guru, along with “a thousand blessings from him,”101 as acting without one would “prove fruitless.”102 Similar teachings, such as the purification practices, are included, along with a few variations like the practice of vamana-dhauti, which consists of drinking as much water as possible, and then forcing oneself to regurgitate right away.103 Other practices include inserting a stalk or twig into the esophagus to remove phlegm and bile, and staring intently at an object without blinking to induce watering of the eyes.104 Once again, these are not included in most modern sources on prāṇāyāma, as they may prove daunting to an American audience.

The Gheraṇḍa Samhitā, which contains the six-fold system of Sage Gheraṇḍa, gives many similar, if not identical, directions as the Śiva Samhitā, but does contain a number of unique techniques when it comes to the practice of prāṇāyāma. Gheraṇḍa teaches that not only is the practice of prāṇāyāma pivotal, where “man becomes equal to a god”105, but it is necessary to do it in the right conditions. He details the place, ideally a hut in a peaceful but not isolated area, the time, spring or autumn, and the diet, which is prohibits food that are hot, sour, salty, etc., as well as places a limit on how much one can consume.106 Though modern sources such as Iyengar touch upon the subject of food, they lack the detail of the Gheraṇḍa Samhitā in terms of specific food items. However, both do mention milk and

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101 Ghosh, 55.
102 Ghosh, 34.
103 Ghosh, 129.
104 Ghosh, 128-131.
105 Ghosh, 165.
106 Ghosh, 166-169.
clarified butter as perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged to be taken daily. However, there are also differences in their teachings as well; for example, where Gheraṇḍa states that fasting should only be done if it does not distress the body, Iyengar completely rejects it, “Avoid fasting…food is Brahman. It is to be respected, not derided or abused.”

Despite the vast similarities between the Śiva Samhitā and the Gheraṇḍa Samhitā, many modern sources on prāṇāyāma have chosen to omit this text from their references. Regardless, these texts, along with the Hatha Yoga Pradīptika, show that the concept of prāṇa had continue to develop long after Patañjali composed the Yoga Sutras. Not only did the concept change, it became far more complex with the addition of the nāḍis, cakras, and other aspects of the subtle body. Through an examination of these texts, it becomes apparent that prāṇa was no longer thought of an autonomous agent, as it had been in the time of the Vedas, nor was merely a mysterious conception of breath, as it was in the Upaniṣads. Here, prāṇa is still breath, but one that can be controlled, so much so that one can have magnificent spiritual accomplishments. The development of prāṇāyāma has allowed for the understanding of prāṇa in the yoga tradition to grow tremendously, primarily because it allowed, and continues to allow, for individual exploration. The understanding of prāṇa from a Hindu perspective continued to evolve as students learned the techniques of prāṇāyāma from their gurus, mastered it themselves, and then began to teach it to their own disciples. The texts composed in this time period allowed for certain techniques to become widespread and standardized to a degree, though often leaving room for variation and guidance from a yogi. As will be explored in the following chapter, the concept of prāṇa will continue to evolve until this day, as a result of it’s introduction to the West. Prāṇa will not only be seen

107 Ghosh, 170-171. Iyengar, 44.
108 Iyengar, 44-45.
as breath, but as a vital energy, and prāṇāyāma will not only be understood as a practice taken on by yogis, but as a science that the Western world has only begun to discover.
Chapter 3- Science of Breath

Now that the concept of prāṇa, as well as the practice of prāṇāyāma in antiquity has been covered, a new task lies ahead: understanding prāṇāyāma in the modern age. Though prāṇa itself has gone unchanged according to the tradition, it is the understanding, the knowledge, and the familiarity of prāṇa that continues to evolve as each new yogi embarks on their journey of spiritual fulfillment. In many ways, tracing the continual development in the understanding of prāṇa has become easier in the modern age, with more and more masters blogging on public forums, such as the Huffington Post, and using the internet as a means of communicating, and publishing books to mass audiences. Yet, in some ways it has also become more difficult, due to the fact that the sources of this new information, and the information itself, may not have any discernable foundation or be connected to any “authentic” practice; that is, this new flood of information may not be backed by any time-tested tradition or classical texts. Any one with Internet access could simply create a webpage, call himself or herself a yogi, quote a few lines from the Upaniṣads, and claim to obtain some sacred knowledge without ever even undergoing the practice of prāṇāyāma.

With this in mind, sorting “misinformation” is difficult, and the average reader is not likely to do background research on each author of a blog article that happens to mention prāṇa. Furthermore, arguments over authenticity would be fruitless, since the subject at hand is not one that can be proven or disproven by our contemporary scientific means.

Regardless, in the search to understand the development of this concept, modern adaptations play just as important a role as ancient accounts, and allows one to understand the way in which prāṇāyāma has developed in the West. In fact, perhaps the biggest transformations in this practice have occurred in the modern age; once yoga left the ashrams
and the harsh Indian wilderness, and entered into American gymnasiuums and recreational centers, the practice it has evolved into is hardly recognizable as the yoga of the past. Yoga itself has transformed and now stands to be a recreational activity, with \textit{prānāyāma} tailing behind. Modern yogis attempt a scientific viewpoint of both yoga and \textit{prānāyāma} that falls in line with a western worldview, furthering the claim that the concept of \textit{prāna} has been reinterpreted throughout history.

In this final chapter, the contemporary understanding of \textit{prāna} will be explored, along with the modern-day teachings of the practice of \textit{prānāyāma}. \textit{Prāna} will be examined both in the light of current “insiders” who continue to practice \textit{prānāyāma} for religious purposes, and by modern yogis who aim to market \textit{prānāyāma} as a science to the western world. As Alter explains in his own attempts to understand the complexities of the yoga traditions, “the classical literature is no more or less authentic and authoritative than putative sage-lost-to-the-world in the Himalayas.”\textsuperscript{109} In other words, from the academic perspective being applied, a modern yogi is no less authentic to the tradition than the ancient text examined earlier. Both historical and modern adaptations must be taken into consideration and held to the same standard if one is to gain a complete comprehension of this concept and practice.

\textit{Prāṇa: the modern understanding}

By far, the most common definition of \textit{prāṇa} today refers to it as not only breath, but as a “vital energy”. Modern sources take careful consideration in specifying that \textit{prāṇa} is not merely air, or even the process of breathing, but something much more significant, as it has been understood in the past. However, their definitions go into much further detail than any

\textsuperscript{109} Alter, 25.
sources in antiquity, possibly due to the fact that they are addressing an audience completely unfamiliar with the concept. As seen previously, sources such as the Upaniṣads, the Hatha Yoga Pradīpīka, and others, prāṇa is not specifically defined. It is spoken of as though the reader would already have a considerable understanding of the concept, which is likely considering that master yogis composed them, and they were addressed to those already involved in the practice. Modern yogis, however, have to take a few steps back, starting with the basics in introducing the concept.

Upon his first use of the term “prāṇa”, Iyengar explains the challenges in its very definition, “It is as difficult to explain Prāṇa as it is to explain God. It is the energy permeating the universe at all levels.” In a way, Iyengar is exactly right: it is difficult to explain prāṇa, because its definition has changed throughout time. As each new yogi experiences prāṇa, by using it in various ways, it is believed they uncover new aspects of how it works; and while prāṇa itself is held to be unchanging, it is perfectly acceptable to update the current definition, much like a scientist would in uncovering new data. Prānāyāma is an experience-based practice; therefore any new insight that would provide better accuracy is welcome. If a practitioner notices a decline in prāṇa when performing in a place with recycled air, an airplane or air-conditioned building for example, then sharing that information, and the notion that levels of prāṇa can vary depending on location, becomes helpful to other practitioners. The workings of prāṇa are no longer a guarded secret; in fact, it’s characteristics are much discussed in an attempt to spread the knowledge of this concept, as opposed to keeping it safeguarded for the protection of the unknowing practitioner, as it has been in the past. With this in mind, the contemporary understanding of

110 Iyengar, 12.
111 Saraswati, 15.
prāṇa is vast, extending to an array of objects, both living and not living, both physical and metaphysical.

Breath, as one can imagine, is the most obvious definition of prāṇa, and the one that has surpassed place and time. Because prāṇa exists within the air, and is cultivated by the body through the physical act of breathing, as modern yogis today understand, defining prāṇa as simply “breath” makes it far easier to understand for those unfamiliar with the term. However, modern yogis would quickly move on to add that prāṇa extends beyond the breath; as Iyengar puts it, “It is physical, mental, intellectual, sexual, spiritual and cosmic energy.”  

Saraswati claims that, “Aircrafts, trains and cars move because of prāṇa; laser beams and radio waves travel because of prāṇa.” Feuerstein puts it into new perspective by suggesting it is “Life in general…the breath as the external manifestation of the life force.” Though prāṇa may be breath physically, it is something quite different in another realm; that is, metaphysically it is the very force behind all life, what makes a compilation of flesh and bones into a conscious being. It is an “energy”, meaning it not only enables beings to have the ability to live, it is also the very force behind every aspect of living itself; physical movement, the ability to think, speak, grown, learn, procreate, even the ability to have religious experiences are all possible because of this pranic force. Saraswati explains further, “Prāṇa is ever present in every aspect in creation… If there were no prāṇa, there would be no existence.”

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112 Iyengar, 12.
113 Saraswati, 10.
114 Feuerstein, 458. (Tradition)
115 Saraswati, 9.
Prāṇāyāma as Religion

Modern yogis, though it may not be their primary goal to proselytize, often intentionally include religious elements at some point in their guidebooks. In many cases, such as that of Iyengar and Saraswati, the religious elements are included early on, where the belief in the supernatural is assumed of the reader. It is possible that these religious tones cannot be avoided, as they are integral to the tradition and, without them, leave many questions. These religious elements include a presupposed belief in: cakras, nādis, kuṇḍalinī, and, of course, prāṇa.

Though Iyengar does not teach prāṇāyāma completely devoid of its religious roots, they become lost in the mechanics of the physiology behind the practice. The first line of Light on Prāṇāyāma acknowledges a “timeless, primeval absolute One,”116 and he spends much of the first page explaining his take on the nature of man and his quest for God and religion. He gives credit to the Sāṃkhya tradition, covers the other limbs of yoga, and explains concepts such as karma, ātman, moksha, and Brahma. It is clear that he does not attempt to teach prāṇāyāma in a vacuum, and he wants his readers to have the enough background knowledge of the tradition that is necessary for them to understand it in theory and practice.

There is, however, a divide in language when Iyengar is discussing and directing the religious aspects, and when he is giving instructions on the actual practice of prāṇāyāma. In the former, he keeps an indirect tone, referring to yogis and sādhaka (aspirants) whenever there are religious connotations in the teachings, or when directing one to read certain

116 Iyengar, 3.
scriptures. His lack of second-person prose in this sense makes any instruction regarding religion appear distant, even dated, and not necessarily meant for the reader to follow. It is not until the specific directions of prāṇāyāma begin that he switches language to the second person, making it clear that those directions are indeed intended for the reader, who ought to follow them step-by-step. Though it cannot be made certain whether or not this shift in language was intentional, it certainly creates a difference in how the material is received.

The real religious significance of Iyengar’s book can be found in the penultimate chapter of Light on Prāṇāyāma. This chapter, which focuses on dhyāna, illuminates many of Iyengar’s philosophies, thoughts, and teachings in relation to “the discovery of the Self.” It is in this chapter on dhyāna, or meditation, that one is encouraged to make a connection to a deity; after all, one of the many goals of yoga in the first place is to connect to the Absolute. Here, Iyengar attempts to explain that the wonders of meditation are too much for words, that is must be experienced first hand if one is to understand: “The nectar of infinity must be tasted, the abundant grace of the Lord within must be experienced.” From this it is clear that religious tones, specifically belief in a deity, are in a way essential to the practice from Iyengar’s point of view. At no point in this text is the subject of agnosticism, atheism, or even the question of belief addressed, implying that, once again, faith in a deity is assumed for the practice.

Though currently members of Transcendental Meditation claim their practice is non-religious in nature, the publications by founder Maharishi Mahesh Yogi suggest otherwise. It is not uncommon in his writings to come across ideas of what he calls the “individual being”

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117 Iyengar, 224.
118 Iyengar, 223.
119 Iyengar, 225.
and the “cosmic Being”—concepts that are readily familiar to those who study or adhere to Indian philosophy as the ātman and Brahman. In his book he claims “Prāṇa is the vibratory nature of the Being which transforms the unmanifested ocean of Being into the manifested life stream of individual beings.”\textsuperscript{120} From this is it clear that Maharishi adheres to Advaita philosophy, and is merely re-wording the conception that all living beings come out of one eternal Entity. What is interesting, however, is his understanding of prāṇa. Not only does he declare that prāṇa itself is responsible for making individuals out of the cosmic Being, he seems to suggest that prāṇa has the ability to change form and function, and plays a key role in connecting the individual with the cosmic Being.

“When the…cosmic Being, by virtue of the prāṇa which is Its own nature, vibrates into manifested streams of life, the prāṇa assumes the role of breathing and maintains the individual life stream and keeps it connected at its basis with the cosmic life of the absolute.”\textsuperscript{121} It appears that Maharishi’s understanding of prāṇa is that it in itself is not breath, but merely “assumes the role of breathing”, with breathing being the way in which prāṇa functions within the body. This, however, implies that prāṇa then actually serves a different purpose, one that is not immediately connected with breathing, but one that so happens to be able to function within the breathing process. Maharishi continues, “At every rise of breath, the cosmic prāṇa receives the identity of individual life force, and, at every fall of the breath, the stream of individual life contacts the cosmic being so that between the fall and the rise of breath the state of the individual life is in communion with the cosmic

\textsuperscript{120} Mahesh, 105.
\textsuperscript{121} Mahesh, 105.
Despite the stance of TM, Maharishi clearly understood prāṇa and prāṇāyāma to be religious in nature, and does not attempt to shield this fact.

Saraswati, too, does not try to hide the roots of prāṇa, often going into great detail on the connection to Brahman, the ātman, and consciousness. It is Saraswati who gives the most detailed descriptions of the vital sheaths, the layers that make up the subtle body, and even makes references to the “spirit realm,” which is achievable if one can use prāṇa to penetrate through each layer. Saraswati does not shy away from associating prāṇa with religion, however it is not always made obvious. In his description of prāṇa, particularly of where it originates, he briefly tells a creation story featuring “Para Brahman”, an “unmanifest consciousness” that, through it’s movements, created all of life along with prāṇa, “It is the first movement: the first moment of becoming from being, the first manifestation of prāṇa.” Not only does prāṇa stem from Para Brahman in Saraswati’s story, but also the connection to Hindu mythology is made strong throughout the book. He continues on to quote an assortment of antiquated texts, including the Upaniṣads, the Hatha Yoga Pradīpīka, and the Bhagavad Gītā, all while connecting prāṇa to these ancient sources, showing that he does not aim to hide the religious history of this practice. As with Iyengar, however, there is no specific

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122 Mahesh, 107.
124 Saraswati, 65.
125 Saraswati, 202.
126 Saraswati, 127.
127 Saraswati, 10.
mention of faith or belief, the implying that these authors are under the assumption that the audience will believe it as true. This assumption is not only risky, but it makes broad generalizations about the audience, suggesting that they willing to believe in the subtle body and all that comes with it with little practical evidence.

It is conceivable, though, that the modern yogis do not intend to push solely doctrine without cause; at no point do they claim that one must believe in the subtle body or other metaphysical aspects of the tradition in order for prāṇāyāma to work. However, they appear confident that once the practitioner tries the various techniques and sees their worth, the belief will follow. This harkens back to how the yogis of the ancient world came to know prāṇa in the first place: practice first, belief or doctrine will follow. Perhaps the modern yogis do not stress belief, as they assume it will come naturally as a result of the practice. They offer proof of religion, without the need for belief.

Prāṇāyāma as Science

One may be tempted to ask, why would these masters of prāṇāyāma want to market prāṇāyāma as a science? Though no one can be absolutely certain as to their motivations, speculation comes easy given the circumstances. The practice of prāṇāyāma, along with yoga, has religious roots, but many Americans are not interested in faith-based practices, they are interested in practices that are experiential (an example would be the rise in Protestantism/Pentecostalism), and that will show physical evidence of working. Prāṇāyāma and yoga do this: there are physical benefits that can be seen through practice, and it is entirely experiential, that is, the evidence can be felt, through the mind or the body. Modern
teachers do not require faith, however that option is usually available if one should wish to go that route.

In examining Iyengar’s approach to teaching prāṇāyāma to a western audience, it becomes quite obvious that he understands prāṇāyāma as a science, as do many other modern yogis, which can be explained through the physiological systems of the body. Though he quotes ancient scriptures in his discussion of prāṇa, he quickly turns to modern, and much more scientific, explanations and definitions, even stating that techniques learned in prāṇāyāma will have “subtle chemical changes take place in the sādhaka’s body.”128 Over a dozen depictions of various parts of human anatomy, including the lungs, diaphragm, ribs, and air passages are displayed within his book, along with brief descriptions as to how these systems work. This section in particular suggests that the practice of prāṇāyāma is a natural way of “correcting” the way in which most breath today, which Iyengar claims is improper and even harmful to one’s health.129 By carrying out the practices he recommends, one is lead to believe that many health issues can be avoided or resolved, leading to a healthful physical life. In the very next section, however, Iyengar quickly changes from concern of physical health, to concern for spiritual advancement.

It is evident by his language that Saraswati understands his teachings of prāṇāyāma to be a scientific approach. Referring to “ions”130 and “molecules”131 throughout the text, he claims the transformation of the body “must be considered in terms of science, not in terms of belief or faith.”132 Saraswati appears convinced that the yogic tradition will shed new light

128 Iyengar, 14.
129 Iyengar, 31.
130 Saraswati, 15.
131 Ibid., 127.
132 Ibid., 127.
on modern scientific thought and bring new advancements, however there are little displays of evidence in scientific terms. He, along with Iyengar, Gupta, and Rama, all give physiological accounts of the breath, along with diagrams and illustrations of the physical body. They understand that these make the practice of prāṇāyāma more understandable to a western reader, and perhaps give way to the assumption that what they are teaching is a science.

Science or Pseudoscience?

Now that it is evident that modern yogis attempt to display prāṇāyāma as a science, the next logical question is: why? What purpose does this serve, how is this beneficial to both the instructors and the audience, and what impact does this have on the practice of prāṇāyāma itself? The short and most direct plausible answer is: the audience. It is presented as a science to appeal to the audience, serves as a way to make it more comprehensible the audience, and ultimately is altered so that the practice is possible for the audience. Modern yogis are composing these guidebooks for a western, primarily American, audience, and in doing so have conformed their language and teachings to appeal to these individuals. Each of the modern yogis being examined in this work have their roots in India, and studied under various masters of yoga in a way deemed as “traditional” by our standards. In turn, they are now taking these teachings and are attempting to present them to an entirely different set of people: the average western layperson. This is not an easy task, as the western audience tends to be fickle, critical, and particular, with a propensity to jump from one trend to the next in no time at all. More importantly, this is an audience that requires verification, some sort of confirmation or “proof” that the product in question is effective, beneficial, and not extremely difficult or exclusive. Furthermore, the way in which the West defines “truth” is
through science, therefore, something such as a product or a practice must hold up to the laws of nature and be scientifically verifiable in order to ensure any credibility. It should be noted, however, that “science” in this sense refers to traditional sciences, that can be tested with observable results.

The modern yogis knew that if they intended for their works to be successful in the West, they would have to adapt their language and instruction to appeal to a western audience, an audience of consumers. This has lead to prāṇāyāma, and yoga itself, to become a consumerist practice. Likewise, as with many other products and practices gaining popularity in the West, the audience wants scientific verification that it works, backing by credible sources like doctors, nutritionists, and scientists. Furthermore, it must directly benefit the practitioner in such a way that they will see or feel quick results. Yoga has been extremely successful in the US, primarily because it gives practitioners results, either by aiding in their exercise regime, or giving them an all around feeling of wellbeing, without being overly difficult or asking one to conform to a set of beliefs. Yoga in the West has detached from its religious roots, and is now primarily understood as an activity one can participate in, regardless of religion, status, lifestyle, or background. One cannot deny the success of yoga in the US despite it being a foreign and imported practice; it has become a household name with some estimated 20 million practitioners and growing with each generation.\(^{133}\) However, with this growth comes change, yoga itself has shifted, and so has prāṇāyāma. Today one can easily find a yoga class suited to their particular individual needs: yoga for children, for the elderly, for pregnant women; methods that may not be “traditional” by any means as children and pregnant women were not the usual yogi in the ancient world.

\(^{133}\) Yoga Journal, 2012.
Nevertheless, classes that cater to those in various walks of life are common, as people find great appeal in customization.

Customized forms of yoga and prānāyāma are desirable to an audience that expects a practice to conform to them. With this in mind, it is easy to see how yoga has succeeded, as there are countless postures and breathing techniques that can be done to strengthen, heal, alleviate pain, and relax the body as well as the mind, but does not set to impose a set of values upon the practitioner, leaving only the physical aspect to shine. These are the kinds of physical benefits that the western audience finds appealing, which is a major contributing factor to yoga’s success. Physical health and fitness remain an enormous consumer market in the US, with the practice of yoga latching on as a form of cardiovascular exercise (as opposed to a form of strength training). With these key components of yoga’s success in mind, that is, being customizable, low-impact, and physically beneficial while lacking an imposed set of beliefs, modern yogis presented a new consumer-friendly form of prānāyāma to the West.

Prānāyāma, now repackaged to appeal to a vastly different market, contains many recognizable traits of its history, but lacks many aspects that made it a necessary practice for those aiming to achieve higher spiritual goals. Many of the physical purification practices, which were said to be a prerequisite in the past, are no longer essential for the average American yoga practitioner. This is not surprising, as the dhauti covered in the previous chapter would not only be off-putting to these practitioners, but also potentially dangerous to endure without the presence of a physician, resulting in little, if any, participants in that particular exercise.
Furthermore, though modern yogis discuss the subtle body, along with all its intricate workings, a belief in this is not required; one can gather this by the way in which modern yogis present the scientific aspects of pranayama. The very fact that modern yogis present diagrams, charts, and illustrations of the respiratory system shows that they aim to validate their practice through a means that does not require belief. Instead, modern yogis use the tools of anatomy\textsuperscript{134}, biology\textsuperscript{135}, and, to a degree, chemistry\textsuperscript{136}, to present their case and confirm the efficacy of pranayama. With validity presented with a backing that appears scientific, the average western practitioner may just take this information at face value, allowing for this practice to pass as a “science”, despite that it is not.

Attempting to portray pranayama as a science is one area where the modern yogis fall short, resulting in the practice emerging as more of a pseudo science when one investigates their claims. To be considered a “science” by a western standpoint, a particular series of observation and experimentation must be followed, in a process known as the scientific method. This method includes the following procedure: proposing a question, conducting background research, formulating a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis by means of experimentation, and finally drawing a conclusion that either validates the hypothesis or requires an alteration of the hypothesis.\textsuperscript{137} This method, which is used from science experiments ranging from grade school to collegiate laboratories, provides a framework that allows a procedure to be replicated yielding the same results, given that each element remains the same. These results are observable to the five senses and can systematically be

\textsuperscript{134} Gupta, 8-14.
\textsuperscript{135} Rama, 46-57.
\textsuperscript{136} Gupta, 2-6.
\textsuperscript{137} Science Buddies, 2006.
reproduced while remaining observable at each step. This is precisely where modern yogis fall short: their methodology is scientific, but it is not entirely observable to the five senses.

This is not to say that yoga and *prānāyāma* have little to offer; in fact, they are being widely explored in ways that are not easily observable, with positive results. Psychology and Mental Health sciences are now looking into practices such as yoga and meditation to uncover their effects on an individual’s mental state. Practitioners of yoga have long proclaimed mental clarity, reduced stress levels and an overall feeling of wellbeing. Now, these claims are being tested, as can be seen in a study published by the National Center of Biotechnology Information, which concluded that yoga provided a decrease in anxiety and increase in positive mood as opposed to other forms of exercise, such as walking.\(^\text{138}\) Similar studies are continuing at universities and medical facilities and will likely influence the future of mental health sciences. Although the “proof” offered here is highly subjective, as opposed to the kinds of proof one would gather from other forms of science, it nevertheless exposes an area in which yoga and *prānāyāma* could be used effectively in a scientific manner.

At this point it is best to look at *prānāyāma* as being performed for two set goals: the religious and the physical. These goals may not be exclusive to each practitioner, but for the sake of clarity they will be examined separately here. For those whose goals are religious in nature, meaning they perform *prānāyāma* as a part of regiment meant to obtain *samādhi* or some other metaphysical experience, than the practice of *prānāyāma* in this case cannot be considered a science, as the results, or the conclusion, are not measurable by outside

\(^\text{138}\) “Effects of Yoga Versus Walking on Mood, Anxiety, and Brain GABA Levels: A Randomized Controlled MRS Study.” 2010
observers and perceptible by the five senses. In this case, the practitioner is the only agent who knows the results, and even if they are to report the results, this very fact makes the conclusion far from objective. This, then, is problematic, as science cannot verify the conclusion, therefore leading this particular practice of prāṇāyāma to be unscientific.

The next scenario, which places the practitioner in a more secular setting, has the individual practicing prāṇāyāma for the physical benefits. This particular scene can be more difficult to determine, as many aspects of prāṇāyāma are physically observable. One can measure the amount of oxygen in the air, along with the capacity of air in the lungs, allowing for observations of the relationship between oxygen and the brain. It is also understood by most that there is a correlation between the pace of breath and heart rate, which is often influenced by emotions; often when an individual is panic or stressed they are told to “take a deep breath”. Regardless, prāṇāyāma, performed solely to benefit the body, could be deemed a science if modern yogis we to present it with confirmation by doctors and scientists, and backed by research conducted by those in the same field. However, they do not do this, modern yogis do not seek out confirmation from professionals, but rather use the knowledge of their tradition to explain the results. The workings of the subtle body, the nādis, the cakras, and the kundalini are the reason behind the physical benefits according to these guidebooks, and understandably so, as prāṇa itself is believe to work on the subtle realm. Nevertheless, these aspects of the subtle anatomy are, once again, not observable to the five senses, and cannot be measured by the scientific community as this time. Even if the practice of prāṇāyāma does provide one with anticipated results, the explanations behind them cannot be verified. At this point in time, the scientific community would attempt to link the results to a physical and observable cause.
Prāṇāyāma currently cannot be considered a science because modern yogis are attempting to use provable results, but with an improvable explanation that has its foundation in religion. Alter attributes this attempt to fuse science and yogic knowledge on a loose and ambiguous understanding of the scientific method, claiming that any and all attempts to study yoga scientifically remains pseudoscience.\textsuperscript{139} He accurately states that attempts to combine science with other forms of knowledge (in this case transcendent knowledge of an Ultimate Truth) have created a “hybrid trajectory of knowledge that is neither subjective or objective, physical or metaphysical.”\textsuperscript{140} Though he was referring to yoga specifically, this also highlights the very root of the problem of portraying prāṇāyāma as science. Simply put: prāṇāyāma cannot be considered a science because those who understand it best have not successfully disconnected the practice from metaphysics and religion.

Their reasoning behind this cannot be confirmed, as only the modern yogis fully understand their own intent in composing their works, however, one can speculate as to why they may have kept the metaphysical aspects of this practice. An obvious first guess would be that they uphold a certain level of commitment to the doctrine which they follow, and that by using the notion of the subtle body to explain the workings of prāṇāyāma, they are able to maintain parts of their tradition that would otherwise be lost on a foreign audience. From the viewpoint of an insider, mystical knowledge is proof in and of itself; it does not need physical verification, truth is proof. However, this does not hold up to the observer, as the results are not objective and the explanation is not measurable. There are parallels that remain between science and prāṇāyāma, namely that they both use applied methods to facilitate results (a scientists does experiments in a laboratory, while the yogi conducts

\textsuperscript{139} Alter, 38.
\textsuperscript{140} Alter, 36.
experiments within his body), which implies that the yogi’s methodology can be seen as a science. As stated before, the practice of prāṇāyāma leads to the knowledge of prāṇa; the practice influences the doctrine, much like in a laboratory, the experiments influence the theory.

One may be tempted to ask at this point: other than appealing to a western audience, is there any other reason modern yogis would attempt to portray prāṇāyāma as a science? This endeavor appears to be a way to not only make yoga and prāṇāyāma more acceptable and understood in the West, but also an attempt to bridge the gap between science and religion. Despite the fact that Eastern religions are often accepting of scientific claims, the religions that dominate the United States, primarily Christianity, are not always on the same page. The notion of taking literal world for absolute truth leaves little room for scientific advancement, if the word in question is that of the Bible. Not only has this traditionally caused a discord between the Catholic Church and the scientific community, but it has also caused a divide between modern biblical literalists (among others) and the rest of the western world. Modern yogis are offering a way to reconcile religion and science, making them not opposing but complimentary, by offering a religious practice that appears to have real bodily effects that benefit the practitioner both physically and, if they choose to, spiritually. Reinterpreting the practice of prāṇāyāma does not appear to be seen as detrimental to the tradition, given its long history of reinterpretation.

To project how the western world would react if prāṇāyāma were in fact validated as a true science, it must be made clear exactly how it is validated. In this instance, it remains that the proposed goal of yoga, samādhi, cannot be verified, as it is a subjective state. However, the scientific validation of the subtle body can be more easily conceived, and
would be enough to confirm the claims made by modern yogis. What would become of \textit{prānāyāma} if the subtle body were to be known as a modern scientific discovery? It is possible that the public would then see the yoga tradition as true in the religious sense, but it can also have negative repercussions for those who adhere to the faith. Science affirming the ancient knowledge of yogis could reduce the practice to a mere physical exercise, explaining away any esoteric phenomena as the brains reaction to the techniques, leaving little to be understood in a mystical sense. Nevertheless, modern yogis are making this attempt in their guidebooks that are directed to a western audience, and could influence how the West understands Hinduism itself, along with yoga.

An endeavor such as this, if successful, would not only validate the claims of yogis that have spanned thousands of years, but it would also have a significant effect on how Hinduism is viewed in the US. On the one hand, it could bring a peace in the divide between science and religion, prompting the two communities to be more open minded, particularly in with this foreign belief system. Those who adhere to the Abrahamic faiths may be accepting of the practice as a health regiment. On the other hand, the consequences could actually push the two communities further apart if, for example, a fundamentalist Christian community took a stand against it. Christian literalists, such as creationists, already have a disapproving view of the contemporary scientific community and their claims. If the practice of \textit{prānāyāma} becomes validated by science, causing an expansion in Hindu converts and apologetics, other religious communities that hold their faith to be the only truth will undoubtedly find cause for concern, possibly feeling as though they need to defend their own tradition to prevent a loss in numbers and to preserve their customs.
This is not to say that prānāyāma will not be considered a science in the future, advancements are being made every day as scientists, doctors, and biologists learn more and more about both the human body and the aspects of the world that are not easily seen. It seems as though science is often disproving claims made by religion, and a switch would be a fascinating change of pace, prompting an entirely new field of research. However, until the subtle body is further explored and can be understood in scientific terms, any evidence of prānāyāma efficacy will remain without cause, being chalked up to superstition or the metaphysical workings of the supernatural. Either way, it does not pass as science at this time, and will remain within the two categories that have absorbed yoga: as either an aid to the religious pursuit of the yogic tradition, or as a form of exercise indented to bring physical benefits for health and wellbeing.
Conclusion

Tracing the transition of a religious concept throughout time and place is a complex and fascinating series to observe. While it is not without its difficulties, the study of prāṇa and prāṇāyāma from an academic standpoint gives way to much perspective on religious studies as a whole, how concepts evolve over time, and how audiences respond to ideas that transcend culture, particularly in times of easy access to mass information. As has been outlined, the spread of information about yoga and prāṇā to the West has not only lead to an impressive rise in practitioners of yoga, but has also lead to new, contemporary understandings of the many terms and other aspects that accompany the practice. For example, yoga is arguably now more associated with exercise than spiritual advancement, whereas the understanding of prāṇa, though often simplified to “lifeforce” or “breath”, remains a complicated subject that, due to its very nature as an unseeable force, continues to change with time and place.

Because of the very nature of prāṇa and prāṇāyāma, its understanding has been allowed to evolve, change, and be manipulated. As stated throughout first chapter, prāṇa as it was known in antiquity took on a very different form, nearly appearing as a conscious entity praised in Vedic hymns. The composers of these hymns understood prāṇā to be undoubtedly important, and the anthropomorphizing of the concept allowed them to express their appreciation and yearning for that which they believed was responsible for their very lives. It is not until the time of the Upaniṣads that the understanding of prāṇa takes on a more complex, yet more comprehensive form. There was no sudden grand revelation that changed the meaning of prāṇa, but rather a long and gradual development of understanding by the yogis and ascetics of the time, that lead to the expansion of knowledge of prāṇa, as well as
the practice of *prāṇāyāma* through the use of *prāṇāyāma* itself, along with yoga. It is at this time in Upaniṣadic writings that *prāṇa* takes on the title of “lifebreath” and is compared and related to the concepts of the ātman and Brahman. In these writings, the mystery of *prāṇa* remains unsolved, but it is clear that the composers had enough clarity on the subject to attempt to spread and preserve the knowledge for others.

One cannot learn about *prāṇa* and *prāṇāyāma* devoid of yoga, as yoga is the primary means by which *prāṇa* is accessed. Chapter three takes a look into the history of yoga, shamans, and early ascetics in an effort to trace the history of *prāṇāyāma* as a practice. It is here that detailed instructions on the physical aspects of the practice of *prāṇāyāma* come to light in texts such as the Upaniṣads, Yoga Upaniṣads, and the *Yoga Sutra* of Patañjali. Specific instructions on breath retention, inhalation and exhalation, as well as a varied combination of ratios in order to achieve precise results are given in these texts. Also included are numerous targets unrelated to the practitioners ultimate goal of spiritual advancement, many of which include physiological benefits including, but not limited to: lowering or regulating blood pressure, relaxing the muscles, and eliminating ailments.

As the understanding of *prāṇa* becomes more comprehensive the usage of *prāṇāyāma* becomes increasingly inclusive. Yogis learn, through their own trial and error, how to utilize *prāṇa* within the body through what is known as the subtle body. Their encounters with this previously unknown realm that lay between their mortal physical body and eternal ātman allowed them to compile an anatomy of pure energy that they believe can be controlled through the practice of *prāṇāyāma*. With this new knowledge, they apply *prāṇāyāma* to the physical world, using it to conquer not only the body, but also the mind. The practices associated with *prāṇāyāma*, including dietary restrictions, purification practices, as well as
physical location, are all included in these texts, showing that the practice has become more commonplace, as well as complex.

It is the texts presented here in the third Chapter that heavily influence the modern yogis as well as the guidebooks they have composed. Iyengar, Saraswati, Gupta, and Ramacharaka all take many of their teachings directly from these texts, while modernizing the language and often assuaging some of the more intense aspects, such as the invasive purification techniques or the strict ascetic lifestyle. It is, however, these slight modifications that give way to great changes later in how prāṇāyāma is taught and practiced, namely without many of the associated practices that were once required. Though modern yogis acknowledge the importance of purification or the guidance of a personal guru, many continue on to teach without any means or intention of enforcing these rules through their works. They essentially leave it up to the reader to either choose what aspects of the practice to follow, and what to ignore at their own convenience. Not only is this drastically dissimilar from the prāṇāyāma of antiquity, but it also allows for even more unguided personalization, and with that, change in the practice itself.

Change, or more specifically, the permitting of change and development in the practice of prāṇāyāma is precisely what is needed to make this custom appealing to the West. Allowing for customization, a non-strict regiment, detachment from religious affiliation, as well as the promise of physical and healthful benefits has turned the practice of prāṇāyāma, as well as yoga, into an attractive commodity to the average, health-conscious American. Marketing yoga and prāṇāyāma as a product had done well to increase its popularity, but this was not enough for some modern yogis, who decided to take it upon themselves to show the world
that these practices truly are beneficial, and they attempted to prove this with scientific evidence.

Modern yogis often hold that the practice of yoga and prāṇāyāma fit nicely in with the advancements of biology, anatomy, and the medical field of the West. In fact, many have come to claim that prāṇāyāma is a “science” in itself, as the utilization of prāṇa is seen as the manipulating of energy within the body. These experts in yoga, including Iyengar, Saraswati, and Rama all attempt to portray prāṇāyāma as a science, by explaining the physiological process of breathing techniques with scientific language. Diagrams, charts, and illustrations of the respiratory system, along with detailed information of the inner workings of the lungs, diaphragm, and how oxygen works within the body are all used in accompaniment to the mechanisms of the subtle body. This attempt, however, to represent prāṇāyāma as a legitimate science falls short due to the simple circumstance of modern science being unable to prove the existence of prāṇa in the first place. This lack of foundation causes the “science” behind the subtle body to crumble, despite the lengthy attempts of the authors. It is often their standing, however, that though modern science cannot fully acknowledge the legitimacy of prāṇāyāma at this time, they are convinced the advance of science in the future will verify their claims.

The Introduction Chapter of this work discussed both the difficulty and importance of studying the change of religious concepts over time and place, how the concepts develop, are spread, and the ways in which they can be allowed to evolve. In the case of prāṇa, a concept that cannot be verified and, due to its very nature, is difficult to pinpoint and describe, the change has been due to the following factors:
1. *The popularization of yoga in the West.* Bringing the concept of *prāna*, as well as the practice of *prāṇāyāma* to the spotlight as an accompaniment to yoga is responsible for the concepts many modern interpretations. Western practitioners with little to no knowledge of the history of the practice are often free to interpret terms and customs as they see fit, resulting in a broad understanding of the practice as a whole.

2. *The nature of prāṇa itself.* As an unseeable yet powerful force, *prāṇa* has a long history of vague definitions, though all concur that it is nonetheless a vital part of life. Common definitions include: “breath”, “life-breath”, “life-force”, and “vital energy”. This is not surprising, as *prāṇa* has undergone observation for millennia by countless yogis and ascetics, each working off their masters and passing their knowledge to their students for further study in the future. This tradition of passing expertise from guru to disciple developed the long tradition of utilizing *prāṇa* through *prāṇāyāma*.

3. *The nature of prāṇāyāma itself.* If the way in which *prāṇa* is understood is primarily through *prāṇāyāma*, and the definition of *prāṇa* itself has evolved, it is understandable that the practice of *prāṇāyāma* itself would be subject to change. The abstract and malleable nature of *prāṇa* give way to the *prāṇāyāma* being used for more than just spiritual advancement, but for physical and mental benefits. Usage in this way has allowed the practice to become popularized alongside yoga in the West, while also detaching from its roots as a religious practice.

4. *Prāṇāyāma being taught as a science by modern yogis.* The most recent cause for change in the understanding of *prāṇa* is the attempt of modern yogis to portray *prāṇāyāma* as a science with *prāṇa* itself as a form of life-giving energy. Though it fails to do so, this attempt thoughtfully lays out exactly how a religious concept could
proceed in being scientifically verified. These modern yogis took their deep, complex understanding of the subject at hand, and applied to scientifically accurate biological information about the human respiratory system, making connections between the knowledge they had and the information they gathered. While their endeavor has not yet been successful, their attempt at creating a bridge between science and religion cannot go unappreciated, and will perhaps be the newest way in which yoga and prāṇāyāma will continue to evolve.

The last point made calls out directly to the future of religious studies. Scientific advancement has put numerous religious concepts under a skeptical light, causing many to adhere to fact over faith, or at the very least, acknowledge the conflict of the two. In an effort to preserve tradition and custom, practitioners and advocates for the world’s religions will need to find a new way to validate their teachings in order to keeping future generations from passing them off as mere myths of the past. The modern yogis that have been examined here have attempted to prove that their traditions of prāṇāyāma are more than ancient superstition, alchemy, or magic; they are trying to show the world that the customs they sincerely believe to be true and beneficial to body, mind, and spirit are verifiable by today’s standards of science. They have not been the first to attempt scientific verification of a religious concept, nor will they be the last, however, their portrayal has shed new light on the study of religious concepts in antiquity and how they will be studied in the future.
Bibliography


