

THE PRACTICE OF THE UNSTRUCK WORD

We're entitled to be happy, even if we deserved to be. It's not realistic to divide studying with the mind from studying the mind, or divide identity formation from identity fixation. What are the other features of a dissolute age? At some point, God showed up, bemused, anxiously awaiting our findings.

Hearing unmanifest sound is a process of acoustic resorption, like listening all the way to the last remaining resonance of a bell that has been rung, and beyond. Hearing to the end of sound, to the end of the energy of sound, and to the end of energy itself, to the unbegun, the point of inception.

Before-the-beginning can be heard, as the *unstruck*. "Unstruck" plays a constitutive role in the arising of phenomena. Bang, noise, nonsense, nothingness. Uncreated consciousness, reflecting on itself, produced a tremor. Nothing palpable. In an absorptive practice, one finds oneself conscious of nothing other than the consciousness witnessing itself, resting in itself.

Tantric meditation is a process of consciousness encountering more and more of its contents. With the gradual cessation of content there is simply recognition (*pratyabhijna*), a non-wavering state known as *nirvikalpa*, free of thought-formulation.

In prosodic *anāhata* practice — prosody as tantra — omnipotent phonemes and impalpable phonic patterning (coiled as the unstruck) play formative roles in Creation. Impossibly. prosody is constitutive of the initial conditions that brought (and bring) the world about.

Consider an idea you may never have. Consider the inconceivable as, nonetheless, existing as such. Filled with wonder. The phenomenal is the ineffable.

The space of the heart is the place of listening. The unstruck is a trembling in the heart, colored lights, sounds without sources. From the *Rigveda* (10.129.04): "*Sages having meditated in their heart (hriday) have discovered by their wisdom the correlation of existence and nonexistence.*" Good start.

Follow the breath to its cessation. Become familiar with dying, as the wisdom of being fully alive. Skepticism strengthens. It's a reliable, even indispensable, guide. If in absolute doubt, know that even the lesser benefits of tuning to interior soteriological sounds — like health, longevity, serenity — are considerable. The unstruck may have been the original introspection into — to the end of — stillness. What is clear: for the sages that have maintained the tradition through time, *anāhata-dhvani* (hearing the ever-present resonance) has been a purely experiential practice—not notional, esoteric, theoretical or theological. Steps are taken toward the *real*, until there are no further steps to take. The steps themselves ultimately fall away. Creation was an asceticism performed on itself, until there was no further effort to make.

The accounts prescribing the unstruck are quite unequivocal. The approach, the quality of the experience, what is heard along way and the ultimate outcome are well-charted. It's doubtless. Be at ease, ease into it, strain nothing. Practice without anticipation, neither wanting nor not-wanting to hear a

particular pitch or type of sound. Listen to whichever sound arises, *like never before* and without the chaffing of content. The cues are clearly within.

PROLEPSIS

South Asian interior-sound practices from different eras specify with remarkable consistency a succession of sounds through which the unstruck manifests. The progression is towards greater and greater subtlety, absorption and omniscience until the sounds themselves cease.

Why would anyone want to become free of coarse-grained experience, to become indistinct, in contradistinction to the pressures of self-esteem and the distinguishing of ourselves solid identities? We're free to choose content-free bliss over mere contentment, provided we face out addictions.

In traditional accounts, the unstruck goal is given variously as *samadhi*, consciousness-as-such, Nada-Brahman, beyond I-Brahman, *videha-mukti*, innermost *ātaman*, contentless consciousness, *turiya-turiya*, non-representational reflexivity, Brahma-Pranava, emptiness, non-propositional awareness and deity union. But there is no name the aim can be given that gives us what it is. Again, only experience counts.

The *Nādabindu-Upaniṣad*, perhaps the earliest text to concentrate on sacrosanct sound, enumerates the succession of sonic phenomena that accompanies *anahata-nada* meditation. To paraphrase:

"Sitting stably in *siddhasana** pose adopting the Vaishnavi-Mudra (eyes open without blinking while focused within), one should always hear the internal sound (*nāda*) in the right ear. This sound, when constantly practiced will drown every external sound (*dhvani*.) After overcoming all objective obstacles by overcoming all internal obstacles, one enters the *turiya* state within 15 days. At first one hears various, loud sounds. Gradually the sounds are heard with greater and greater subtlety. At first the sounds will be like those produced by the ocean (*jaladhi*), clouds (*jimūta*), the kettle-drum (*bherī*) and a waterfall (*nirjhara*). Later, in the middle stage, the sounds will be like those produced by a tabor (*mardala*), a big bell (*ghantā*) and a military drum (*kāhala*). Finally, the sounds will be like a tinkling bell (*kinkinī*), bamboo flute (*vamśa*), harp (*vīnā*) and bees (*bhramara*). When louder sounds such as the kettle-drum are heard, one should distinguish only the sounds that are increasingly subtle. The mind should stay concentrated on these shifts from gross to subtle and subtle to gross and become absorbed in any one of them, indifferent to all else, becoming one with the sound as milk with water, merging with the space of consciousness. Meditating on *nāda* alone, freed from concepts and conditions, one becomes the sound that is unstruck. The mind exists so long as there is sound, but with sound's cessation there is the state called *Unmani* (beyond the dreamless sleep state, no mind, that which underlies all states), the form of the internal sound that is Brahma-Om."

*(*Siddhāsana* is a cross-legged asana with (more typically) the left heel against the perineum and the right foot tucked between the left calf and thigh. This position also acts as body-wide seal, setting up a closed-circuitry for one's internal energy.)

Fifteen hundred years later, these instructions reappear, almost verbatim, in the *Hatha-Yoga Pradipikā* (4,81). (The *Pradipikā* also works with subtle physiology, placing the arising of the sounds at specific centers along the central channel, as the corresponding *prana* pierces the 3 knots (*granthi*) to open the *suśumna*.)

The *Hamsa Upanisad* modifies somewhat the self-arising sound sequence as follows: cini, cini-cini, bell, conch-blast, harp, cymbal, flute, kettle-drum, tabor, and thunder-cloud (*megha*). In general, the sequences are understood as preliminary sounds leading to the pure, primordial, seed vibration from which all things stream. The *Hamsa Upanisad* also mentions that the whole unstruck practice can be a matter of hearing the last sound (thunder) alone.

The *Kaulajñāna-Nirnaya* (ascribed to Matsyendranāth) reduces the sequence to 5 sounds: "When the *jīva* is dissolved, one hears the inner sounds, such as that of a kettle-drum, conch, *mrdanga*, *vīnā* or flute. One should always mediate on this, which is the highest state of all. One becomes imperishable..." (14.85-86). The *Śiva-Samhitā* (5.27) also lists only 5 sounds, though with almost no overlap: "The first sound is like the hum of the honey-intoxicated bee, next that of a flute, then of a harp; after this...one hears the sounds of ringing bells; then sounds like the roar of thunder."

The *Gherand-Samhitā* (5.79-82) expands the sequence to 12 sounds: "The first will be like that of crickets (*jhiñ*), then that of a flute (*vamsī*), then that of thunder, then that of a drum (*jharjhara*), then that of a bee, then that of bells, then those of gongs of bell metal, trumpets (*turī*), kettle-drums, *mrdanga* (double-ended drum), military drums (*anaka*), and *dundubhi* (a kind of kettle-drum... Thus various sounds are cognized by daily practice of *kumbhaka* (breath retention.) Last of all is heard the *anāhata* sound rising from the heart; of this sound there is resonance, in that resonance there is a light. In that light the mind should be immersed."

The sounds from the above *anāhata* sequences are *analogous* to what is heard, drawing on familiar sounds from the representational world. Think of them as suggestive, as *instillations*. There are natural references like cicadas and bees and thunder, but most of the sounds refer to musical instruments, implying that musical instrumentation is a reflection of what yogis hear internally. As musicologist Guy Beck has said: "A serious study of the Indian musical instruments and how they correspond to the sounds heard in deep *Nāda-Yoga* meditation is a desideratum." (From his book *Sonic Theology*, to which I'm indebted for a number of the above textual references.)

SEALING THE SEVEN GATES AND KUMBHAKA HYPOXIA : LIGHTHEADEDNESS

The *Śiva Samhitā* (5.22-26) recommends a more intensive *pratyahara* mudra than the abovementioned *Vaisnavi Mudra*: "Let the practitioners (gently) close the ears with their thumbs, the eyes with index fingers, the nostrils with the middle fingers, and with the remaining four fingers let them press together the upper and lower lips (elbows in line with shoulders). The Yogi, by having thus firmly confined the air... gradually... begins to hear the unstruck sounds (*nādas*)." This is a description of the *Shanmukhi Mudra*. This mudra is used integrally with *kumbhaka* (breath-retention) practices often prescribed for inner sound discernment (see below). While the in-breath is retained, and after the expulsion of the outbreath, the middle fingers of the *Shanmukhi Mudra* gently close the nostrils, completing the sensory seal.

The *Vijnānabhairava* (7th c. CE), one of 5 primary tantras of Trika Philosophy also recommends the *Shanmukhi Mudra* (verse 36): By stopping the openings (of the senses) with the weapon (*astra*) in the form of

the hands, by which are blocked the eyes (and other openings in the face) and thus by breaking open (the knot in the center of the eye-brows) the bindu is perceived which (on the development of one-pointedness) gradually disappears (in the space of consciousness, *cidākāśa*.) Then (in the center point of the space consciousness, the yogi is established in the highest state (*paramā sthiti*h.)

From the *Hatha-Yoga-Praḍīpikā* (4.64–67): "I will now describe the practice of *Anāhata-Nāda* (*nāḍopāśana*) as propounded by Gorakhnāth. Of these, the hearing of the *Anāhata-Nāda* is the only one, the chief, in my opinion....The Yogi should hear the sound inside his right ear, with collected mind. The ears, the eyes, the nose, and the mouth should be closed, and then the clear sound is heard in the passage of the *Suṣumnā* which has been cleansed of all its impurities."

The correlated practices of *pratyahara* and *kumbhaka* — sensory withdrawal and breath abstinence — are the prime means for fine-tuning interior sound receptivity. It's in between on and off, intake and outbreath, in the *turiya* state, beyond the serene state of deep breathing, that *anāhata* can optimally be heard. "Let the Yogi practice *Pūraka* (inhalation) and *Kumbhaka*, closing the ears by the hands... Thus various sounds are cognised by daily practice of this *Kumbhaka*. Last of all is heard the *Anāhata* sound rising from the heart; of this sound there is a resonance, in that resonance there is a Light. In that Light the mind should be immersed." (*Gheranda-Samhitā* 78-82.)

From the *Yoga-Śikhopanisad* (127-128) "After giving up the *Recaka* (exhalation) and the *Puraka*, one should take one's firm stand by holding the breath. Various kinds of sounds are produced."

The *Yoga Tattva Upaniśad* (142) describes the effect of *kumbhaka* as a lamp inside a pot that does not flicker because no breeze can reach it.

The *Gorakṣaśataka*, a root Hathayoga text, speaks not of breath 'control' but breath *conquest* and freedom from existence (*bhavamukti*). "He is without doubt liberated whose breath goes neither in nor out, neither in the left nostril nor the right and neither up nor down." The *Gorakṣaśataka*'s extreme *kumbhaka* instruction is interwoven with activation the Goddess Sarasvati (*sarasvatīcāḷana*), who is correlated with both the central *suṣumna* channel and *kundalini*. This has special relevance for prosody as Sarasvati is defined as "she who contains sound." And behind Sarasvati is 'Vak,' the mother of all in the *Vedas*. (In effect, the impulse to speak is goddess-stirred kundalini, from the bottom chakra up. In this sense, each word that arises in us is revelatory, regardless of the signification it bears.)

Breath retention after inhalation is called *antara-kumbhaka*; breath retention after exhalation is called *bhaya-kumbhaka*. The *Gorakṣaśataka* (in the above paragraph) is describing the 3rd type of breath retention, *kevela-kumbhaka*. *Kevela-kumbhaka* is complete retention. The Atharvavedic *Śāṇḍilya Upaniśad* describes *kevela kumbhaka* as breath-retention that is not "coupled" with exhalation or inhalation. It is "alone". It lists the ability to hear inner sounds distinctly as one of the benefits of absolute retention, along with becoming serene, clear-eyed and free of all diseases. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipikā* (2:73-74) states that for yogis who have attained *kevela-kumbhaka* "nothing in the three worlds is difficult for them to attain." In the *Shiva Samhita* (3:59) yogis who are able to perform complete retention for three hours "become so light that they are able to balance on their thumbs."

The 13th century *Dattātreyaśāstra* (the first Hatha-Yoga manual) states that "yoga is the reward of being born," and distinguishes *kevala kumbhaka* as the most advanced technique of breath-control, allowing practitioners to hold their breath for as long as they wish and granting extraordinary powers, such as clairaudience, traveling long distances in an instant and the ability to become infinitesimal. (Writers beware: the *Dattātreyaśāstra* also insists on shunning those who attain their ends through words alone ... listed alongside other obstacles like wasting one's life digging for buried treasure.)

Stilling the breath stills the mind. Stopping the breath stops the mind. Yet, complete retention is something more. It's not 'breath' that is being held but *prana*. *Prana* is being held and activated within the central *suṣumna* channel by separating it from the explicit signaling of inhalation and exhalation. *Prana* is its own resource and refreshment. *Kevala* is absorption to the point of the practitioner not even being aware that breathing has stopped ... completely absorbed in the process of interior breathing, in an object of devotion, in the trip taken. Poisons (*kleshas*) can't survive in the *kevala* atmosphere. *Kevala-kumbhaka* is known to treat a wide variety of diseases (if not all) ... but, again, health and personal powers are the sideshow, liberating love the goal.

The *kevala* state and unstruck *inhearing* are direct correlates.

The scientific term for *kumbhaka* is *intermittent hypoxia* (oxygen deficiency). *Kumbhaka* is positive hypoxia. Breath-holding and the so-called *diving reflex* work in the same way, producing similar effects. As demonstrated through the diving reflex: upon facial contact with cold water the human heart slows down. (Seals can go from 125 beats per minute to as low as 10 when diving.) Positive hypoxia leads to various adaptive responses and multifold benefits, beginning with a shift to parasympathetic dominance and vagal activation. Respiration is optimized by preferentially distributing stored oxygen to the vital organs, particularly the heart and brain. Slowing the breath slows the heart. If breath rate is decreased, tidal volume must be increased to maintain respiratory homeostasis, inducing deeper breaths, greater oxygen absorption into the bloodstream as air is retained longer within the lungs, and as less oxygen is needed in a state of semi-dormancy. As heart rate cycles with breathing, cardiorespiratory sync sets in. Hemoglobin levels increase, Nitric Oxide Synthase is induced, inflammatory responses are lowered, risk of stroke or heart attack can decrease by dilating blood vessels, bone density may increase, immunity strengthen, depression disappear, and so on.

With or without *kumbhaka*, breathing is not breathing per se. Breathing is an astonishment—a sacrifice, or *sacrament*, if you prefer. In-breath brings the *infinite* into *individual*, exhalation is offering up one's whole being. In-breath is consumed in the fire of exhalation, oblation after oblation.

In Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* there are 8 stages or *limbs*. *Pratyahara* is the fifth limb, the fulcrum between the exterior/bodily-oriented disciplines (ethical conduct, postures and breathing methods) and the interior-oriented *samyama* (the simultaneous 3-fold practice of concentration (*dhāranā*), devotional meditation (*dhyāna*) and *samādhi* (absorption, union)). *Pratyahara* is the gateway from sense perceptions to interior recognitions. In that breathing is an interchange with the environment, stopping the breath is inherently a *pratyahara* practice. *Kevala kumbhaka* is a changeover from exterior to interior breathing — not a full stoppage of breath, but fullness of breathing in its own right. Jaideva Singh's *Vijnābhairava* (verse 27) explicitly states that *kevala* is the non-difference between *prāna* and *apāna* (inhalation and exhalation) at which point energy (*Śakti*) is known as "ceased" (*śāntā*). This *kevala* state can also be arrived at the-other-way-around, through the cessation of all thought-constructs.

Ultimately, absorption in the increasing subtlety of interior sound is a complete *pratyahara* in itself. "When one fixes full attention on this sound, being free from fear, there is absorption (*layla*) ... When the mind of the Yogi is exceedingly engaged in this sound the Yogi forgets all external things and is absorbed in this sound (*nāda*)." (*Śiva-Samhitā*, 5.27.) And as the sound ceases (*nādānta*), the breath is also absorbed, at once a *kevela kumbhaka* practice. The *Upaniśads* call this state of absorption *turiya*. *Turiya* is the fourth state, beyond and between wakefulness (differentiated objectivity), dreaming (exclusive subjectivity) and dreamless sleep. Kashmir Śaivism adds a fifth state, *turyatita: Aham*, eternal omniscience, being in bliss. Various *Upaniśads* redouble the term as *turiya-turiya*. Abhinavagupta adds yet another state, *anuttara*. The climaxing of the word for reality as both apotheosis and underlying basis as plain as the nose on our faces, will never cease.

It's not the end of the sounding that is the pulsating light of consciousness, but the *absorption* in the ending.

AIR THAT IS AWARE: BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR BREATHING

"Sea turtles can stay underwater for up to seven hours. Tangled in a fishing net, struggling to get free, stressed, they drown in a matter of minutes."

"All that exists in the three worlds rests in the control of prana. As a mother protects her children, O prana, protect us and give us splendor and wisdom." — *Prashna Upanishad* 2.13

Is it a full breath if it doesn't reach each alveolus? Is it a full breath if the oxygen is not cared for, followed through to the hemoglobin, followed through to its perfusion into every cell in the body, to the final phase of respiration, the end of the electron transport chain in the mitochondrial matrix where that same atmospheric oxygen molecule bonds with an electron and proton to form water, liberating free energy for the generation of ATP, our intracellular energy currency. Thus we breathe because oxygen is electronegative, with this tiniest, last minute part to play in the transformation of energy necessary for fueling the organic. We breathe because the series of inconceivably intricate biomolecular rearrangements involved in life-giving gas interchange with our environment is *glorious*.

And then there is exhalation — allowing us to relax, speak, sing, yawn, cool our brains, perceive flavors and return the favor of replenishment to our photosynthetic friends.

In order to breathe fully, B.K.S. Iyengar recommends breathing only through the nose. "The nose is for breathing, the mouth is for eating." This assures a slower, deeper, warmer rate of physiological respiration — not gasping, or gulping down and blowing out our precious air, or barely breathing.

Respiratory rate is commensurate with lifespan. Giant land tortoises take 3 or 4 breaths per minute and live as long as 250 years. From the yogic perspective, each person is given an allotment of breaths equaling their longevity. 15 breaths per minute is quite average ... 2 seconds to inhale, 2 seconds to exhale...one day equaling 21,600 breaths. Given the entire volume of the lungs, this rate is rather rapid. It can only represent shallow, upper-chest breathing (and perhaps equally shallow speaking). By simply shifting to 4-

second inhalations and exhalations, cutting the daily rate in half to 10,800 cycles, for each day lived a person would gain 1/2 day! For every second of *kumbhaka* one second is added to lifespan.

Patanjali said the purpose of *pranayama* is not the improvement of breathing but the gradual *cessation* of breathing!

For prosody as well, *pranayama* is a means to an end, with health and longevity as integral by-products. In particular, *pranayama* is a stable support for attunement to subtle, self-arising, interior sounds. If I were to teach a creative writing course, along with required reading I'd require the practice of lowering one's respiratory rate to 6 breaths per minute. Without the benefit of this parasympathetic shift, how can one hear anything at all, either internally or externally ... much less that which one deeply needs to hear and pronounce in order to be guided through causation without wasting precious time? When relaxed, receptivity heightens. Spontaneity replaces impulsivity.

This is why the *ṛṣis* referred to speaking as *seeing*, and to the words one is speaking as *hearing*, or "speaking the breath."

The word *prana* can't be reduced to *breath*, and *pranayama* can't be reduced to methods of physiological ventilation or even bodywide cellular respiration. Accordingly, air isn't merely a mixture of gasses. Although *prana* involves breathing in air, *prana* can also be understood as omnipresent energy, or the energy of consciousness itself (*devatma Śakti*) that manifests as the creativity we call "creation." It's not a homogeneous, lifeless power source like electricity, but an animating awareness that interacts consequentially with each individualized form. We breathe creation, and it's our interaction with this gift that creates our character.

In broad strokes, holistically, in terms of the "*yama*" (the code of conduct—one's vows, if you will) of *pranayama*, unless the interaction between our vital bodies and *prana* is spiritually or altruistically directed, life plays itself out either by indulging in or being subjugated by power and pleasure.

There are five *pranas*, also called *vayus* or winds. *Prana vayu*, is a force that moves forward and inward, governing the *intake* of air, food and sensory and mental impression and our drives. *Apana vayu*, is a downward-moving force of *elimination* ... of excrement, fluids, exhaled carbon dioxide, as well as the elimination of the *kleshas* and *samskaras*, the poisons and scars of negative sensory, emotional and mental experience; an all-inclusive immunological system. *Udana vayu* is an upward-moving force governing growth and qualitative *transformations* of our vital being. It's the positive energy of standing, speaking, being focused, determined and wholehearted as we evolve. *Samana vayu* is a balancing force that moves from the periphery to the navel (pranic center), governing *digestion* of food, absorption of oxygen and the integration and significance of our experiences. *Vyana vayu* is an outward-moving force, from navel to periphery, aiding *circulation* on all levels; nutrients, fluids, gases, emotions, thoughts and *prana* itself.

Again, is it a full breath if all the *pranas* are not felt, integrally, as vibratory, balancing influences keeping us well and bringing our lives to fruition with each breath?

Pranayama is most often referred to as *breath control*. Again, "*yama*" is far more complex than restraint of a bioprocess or forbearance under unease. The first "limb" of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is in fact called "*Yamas*." The *Yamas* are a list of ethical codes for living in the world ... disciplines, perhaps, but more on the order of

commitments or *vows* (as mentioned above). In this regard, *pranayama* can be defined as *taking responsibility for breathing*, knowing that it's impossible (dysfunctional) to isolate any one *vayu* from all the others. Although *prana vayu's* physiological breathing is the body's primary pranic activity from which the other *vayus* arise, by taking a breath we're also taking responsibility for our total intake, digestion, circulation, elimination and transformation of substances, sensations, emotions and mental states. We become aware through the awareness of air, our awareness of *its* intelligence. Vibrationally, the tone of the mind (*chitta spanda*) follows the tone of the *prana* (*prana spanda*). And any breakdown in the interconnectivity of the *vayus* can produce "subtle" repercussions such as depression, imbalance, insatiability, fear, disconnection, distractedness, conceit, cynicism, and so on.

Breathe once per minute, live 1500 years! A functioning blissful hibernation. (Instead of walking in one's sleep, acting in one's bliss.)

Lama Tsultrim Allione's preferred definition of *prana* is the "motility factor." I've been preferring, simply, "life" itself: *prana* as the difference or defining factor determining whether there is life or not.

Deeper yet: *prana* is not only air that is aware, but a process of breathing in benevolence—the unique preciousness of the conditions for life. *Prana* as the Arabic *rūh al-qudus*, the spirit of holiness — a divine communication with the imparting of life. Breathing, then, is the sacrifice of sacred, integral air taken in by our senses which are then ignited by our awareness of the air that is aware of the sacrifice.

It is a full breath if it is this.