

The Importance Of The Breath

The air we breathe is the only element our body cannot do without for even the shortest time. We can, if necessary, survive without food for as long as a month, without water for many days. But deprive the body of oxygen and we die within minutes. Cut off the supply of oxygen to the brain, and vital tissues are permanently destroyed. Thousands of years ago the Hindi had come to understand the importance of breath so thoroughly that we find the following legend told in one of their oldest scriptures, the Bri-hadaranyaka Upanishad: "The senses, quarreling amongst themselves one day as to who was the best, went to Brahma and said, 'Who is the richest of us - tell us!' And Brahma replied, 'He by whose departure the body seems worst, he is the richest.' And they determined to find out. "First the eye departed, and having been absent a year it came back, asking, 'How have you been able to live without me?' They replied, 'Like blind people, not seeing with the eye, but breathing with the breath, speaking with the tongue, hearing with the ear, knowing with the mind, generating with the seed. Thus have we lived.' And the eye returned to its place. "Next the ear departed, and at the end of a year it came back, asking the same question. And they replied, 'Like deaf people have we lived, not hearing with the ear, but breathing with the breath, speaking with the tongue, seeing with the eye, knowing with the mind, generating with the seed.' And the ear returned to its place. "Next it was the turn of the mind, and after it had been gone a year, and returned, they said, 'We have lived like fools without you, but we have lived.' And to the seed, after it had been gone a year, they said, 'We have lived like impotent people, but we have lived.' And the mind and the seed each returned to his place. "And now it was the turn of the breath. And on the point of departing it tore up the other senses, as a great excellent horse of the Sindhu country might tear up the pegs to which he is tethered. Then all the other senses called out to him, 'Sir, do not leave us! We shall not be able to live without thee!" Is it not surprising that this ancient parable coincides with scientific truth? The first step toward re-orienting and improving the functioning of your mind and body is learning to utilize - really utilize - the air you breathe. The Yogis were the first to discover the importance of this and so actually devised an exact science of breathing. They called it prana-yama, from the Sanskrit word prana, meaning breath, and yama, its cessation. They also explored pranayama from every point of view - the practical and physiological and also the mystical - for to them breathing was much more than just one of the necessary body processes.

About the Author

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