

The Vayus

Beyond its physicality, hatha yoga is a refined method for managing *prana* in that it distributes the vital life force that animates all levels of being, by either tonifying or building energy (*brahmana*) to a location or locations, or by diminishing, or sedating energy (*langhana*) in an area or areas. Prana is the source energy that moves the physical body and also enables the thinking mind. And as the servant of Kundalini Shakti, it directs and coordinates our senses and perceptions at all levels of our being. By enhancing and directing the flow of prana in *asana* and *vinyasa* practice, we bring balance to the vitalization of the body and mind, while at the same time enhancing our inner awareness, and opening to higher our consciousness.

The Vedas make reference to five movements or functions of prana known as the prana *vayus* (or “winds”). They are: *prana vayu* (not to be confused with the overall master prana), *apana vayu*, *samana vayu*, *udana vayu*, and *vyana vayu*. Each one has a distinct role that integrates into the total energy system. These five larger currents of prana govern different areas of the body and their subsequent activities. By understanding the role of each *prana vayu*, we may gain perspective on how disturbances at the level of the pranic sheath may be involved in illness or imbalance at other koshic levels.

Vayu Area of Body and Function

1. Prana Vayu: Chest/Head.

Within the context of the five divisions of pranic energy, prana vayu refers to all the ways in which energy is taken in. Inhalation or air is perhaps the obvious vehicle for taking in prana. Prana is also drawn from other sources such as food, sunlight, and water. It is also said to be gathered from positive sensory experiences like beauty, healing, comforting and loving touch, pleasant sounds, and appealing smells. As well, it can be obtained from “inspired” and creative ideas and mental impressions. Prana enters through the “mouths” or openings of the special senses (the mouth, nose, ears, eyes, touch). While some sources place the primary location of prana in the chest (lungs and the *anahata chakra*), others add that it also functions at the ajna chakra where we select and attend to objects in our awareness. This selection process can be trained to bring in sense impressions and nutrients useful to us, and to select out those that are not. The Ayurvedic physician Sushruta said prana vayu “makes food/sustenance travel inward.” Because prana is essential for the life of the physical body, it is a crucial support for the other four vayus.

2. Samana Vayu: Navel.

Samana vayu governs digestion and assimilation of incoming energy, matter and experience. It operates in conjunction with *agni*, the digestive fire that transforms the raw materials of what is taken in into something useful to our system. So, it has two main functions, to break down what comes in and to sort it. In a sense then, it has a gatekeeping function, allowing things—energy, raw nutrients, experiences—in that are useful and keeping out what is not. Commonly associated with *manipura chakra*, the stomach and intestines, it also functions in the mind, where ideas are integrated. When samana vayu functions in a balanced way, it supports astute discernment in terms of our reactions and judicious actions.

3. Vyana Vayu: Whole Body Circulation

Vyana vayu causes prana to flow distributing it throughout the entire body. It may expand, contract, flow downward, upward, and to the side. Unlike samana vayu, which draws energy to the navel center, vyana vayu radiates energy outward to the body’s periphery through the various *nadis*. The seat of vyana is *anahata chakra*, instigating movement of blood and breath; but beyond that, it induces movement of all that moves including interstitial fluids, lymph and nervous impulses. It causes sweat. It is a basis for whole body, whole being experiences of unity and totality felt throughout our entire embodied energy field.

4. Udana Vayu: Throat/Head.

Udana Vayu governs the gateway area of the neck and throat which is a small, essential, and subsequently vulnerable passageway in the body. Udana vayu is associated with the *vishuddha chakra* and is regarded as the pathway to regions above it. Beyond the sense of upward flow, Udana vayu is associated as well with sound production as in speaking and other communicative expressions from the heart, will and other inner sources. The throat is a passageway for both upward and downward flow. Energy from higher regions of being can also flow downward as insight and refined guiding awareness. This can revitalize will in the service of higher purpose and vision.

5. Apana Vayu: Pelvis.

Apana vayu governs exhalation as well as downward and outward movement of energy—mostly frequently involving the elimination of waste: defecation, urination, menstruation. Ejaculation and childbirth are also governed by this energy flow. Apana vayu's home is the intestines and *muladhara chakra*. Sometimes the sense of groundedness in the feet and legs are considered part of this energy flow, however these limbs are also governed by vyana vayu.

Putting it All Together to Engender Balance of Energy

You can think of the vayus as relatively large currents like those of the planet's oceans, such as the North Atlantic Drift or the Gulf Stream. The nadis then are smaller more specific currents within and between these larger flows. The chakras within the same areas as the vayus can be considered focal points, vortices or confluences of the nadis within the five prana vayus.

When the more general flow of a vayu is disturbed, the focal points of energy (chakras of root, navel, heart, throat, eyebrow) within its domain will, in turn, be affected. As an ancient Ayurvedic physician observed, when there is disorder among all the vayus and their homes, "it will surely be the undoing of the body." This is one reason it is important to include relaxation and even diaphragmatic breathing in yoga classes and practices: *so all the winds can return to their homes*. One definition of cancer, is that of a condition in which the winds cannot find their way home. (*Raktarbudh*). Leaving students and clients in states of activation and imbalance, does not serve their greater good as is often the case in modern extrapolations of "yoga" for fitness and other non-yogic purposes.

General therapeutic practices to calm the "winds" and allow them to return home.

- Systematic Relaxation
- 31 and 61 Points
- *Bhuta Shuddhi* (with proper preparation)
- *Yoga Nidra* (combining practices to induce the state of *Yoga Nidra*)