

**‘The mind can be the soul’s best friend, or make one’s life a hell.’**

Extracted from the Bhagavad-Gita, the sacred book of Hindu philosophy, this piece of wisdom rings very true in our lives today. Our mind and its balance is the root to our happiness. If we take a moment to listen to our minds, we will realise that it is constantly chattering. Even as you are reading this article, your mind is not on it 100% but involved with what you still have to do today, your partner, children, job and so on. The mind and its thinking never stops. But if we take time out to quieten the mind and become more aware of our thoughts, easing them into positive ones, this will make a profound difference to our lives. Balancing the mind will also in turn balance out the physical body and can help with any physical ailments we may have. Actually many physical ailments have their root in our minds and are the cause of constant worry or stress.

According to the ancient principles of Ayurveda there is a major force which governs our mind and therefore our body. Ayurveda is the ancient holistic healing system of India which encompasses all aspects of life in order to heal and balance the mind, body and spirit. The major force which runs throughout this discipline is vayu, or the vital function of life. The great sage, Acharya Charaka, likened vayu to God, so great is its importance to the world.

Vayu can be translated from the Sanskrit to mean ‘movement’. In the universe vayu is present in the flow of rivers, burning of fire, rain, movement of the planets and stars, the formation of clouds, the growth of plants and the climate to name just a few instances. An imbalanced vayu in the world leads to fierce winds, earthquakes, natural disasters, and climatic changes.

In the individual, vayu is the binding force behind the dhatus, the structural form of the body; it stimulates the agni, the digestive fire; it expels the waste products of the body; it is responsible for the sense organs and for the happiness and energy of the person. An imbalanced vayu can lead to a reduction in strength; it decreases the ability of the sense organs, depresses the mind leading to sorrow and fear, and causes general weakness of the body.

Vayu is present in five forms in the body; these are called Prana, Udana, Samana, Vyana and Apana. When the five vayus are in a normal state they perform their functions properly and this leads to a healthy mind and body. When the vayus become imbalanced and misplaced, this leads to a diseased body and mind.

The five vayus govern physical as well as psychological functions:

- Prana Vayu – The location of prana vayu is the chest, head, throat, tongue, mouth and nose. Its functions are associated with the sense organs, the mind and intellect. On a psychological level if prana vayu is imbalanced, the person becomes misguided, misdirected and craves insatiable desires.

- Udana Vayu – This vayu is located in the throat, chest and umbilicus. Its functions are speech, positive mental strength, energy, joy and enthusiasm. If this vayu becomes imbalanced, it leads to the person being overly proud and arrogant.
- Samana Vayu – The location of samana vayu is with agni, the digestive fire. It is the vayu which stimulates the functions of the agni and helps in digestion. It also leads to the contentment of the mind. On the mental level, if this vayu is imbalanced it leads to attachment, greed and possessiveness.
- Vyana Vayu – This vayu moves all over the body. Its functions are all physical movements, circulation and independence of the mind. In an out of balance situation, isolation, hatred and alienation are caused.
- Apana Vayu – The location of apana vayu is in the bladder, umbilicus, thighs, anus and colon. Its functions are eliminating urine and stool, the ejaculation of semen, menstruation and child-birth. On a mental level it also eliminates negative thoughts and emotions. But when in an imbalanced state it can lead to depression, fear, suppression and mental weakness.

As the importance of vayu in the mind and body has been shown, it can be seen how vital it is for the vayu to be well-balanced. In the body vayu is known as vata or prana and there are a number of ways in which this can be balanced. There are three main ways in which vata can be balanced.

- Changing the quality of food taken.
- Purvakarma therapies of oleation (oil therapies).
- Undertaking a regime of yoga and pranayama (breathing techniques).

The qualities of vayu or vata are dry, cold, light, and active. This means that the quality of food we intake should be less of the same qualities else there will be an increase or vitiation of vata. So for an imbalanced vata less dry, cold and light foods should be eaten. Food and drink taken should always be warm. Salads, dry and frozen foods should be avoided.

Purvakarma therapies in the form of oil therapies should be regularly taken in a person where the vata has become imbalanced. The main oil therapy in Ayurveda is Abhyanga, or the full body oil application. Warm oil is applied to the body and downward strokes given. The qualities of the oil are unctuous and warm so the opposite of dry and cold. These qualities along with the downward strokes, which move the vata away from the mind and towards the feet therefore grounding the person, effectively balance the vata. In fact the oil therapies are so effective that the person can feel the benefits of the decrease in vata after the first treatment. Other oil therapies, especially the ones to the head such as Shirobhyanga (oil application of the head) and Shiro-dhara (pouring of oil on the head) can also benefit a vata imbalanced person and lead to a calming of the vayu and therefore a calmer state of the mind.

The third main way in which vata can be balanced is by undertaking a regime of yoga and pranayama. Yoga is also an ancient science with its origins in Hindu philosophy, and so the teachings of Ayurveda and Yoga go hand in hand. Yoga asanas or postures work deeply with the

breath of the person thus directly with the prana or vital life-force of the person. Each posture has a certain breathing to go into or come out of the posture, and so help the person become aware of their breath and also control the way they are breathing. By deep breathing we are automatically relaxing the body and balancing our prana or the vata which has become vitiated. Yoga asanas are the first step to be taken and after a while when the individual is aware of their breath and its importance, pranayama or breathing techniques can be learnt and followed throughout life.

A simple breathing technique is deep breathing with a longer exhalation than inhalation. This is excellent to relax the body and great to do before any stressful situations, such as job interviews or exams.

Sit as relaxed as possible and start to listen to the breath. Then inhale to a count of five and exhale to a longer count of ten. Do not worry if your exhalation seems too short to begin with and you cannot last the full count of ten. This will improve the more you practise and the main objective is to exhale longer than you inhale so even if you reach seven or eight counts, that is fine.

Another essential life breathing exercise which can be learnt by anyone and the effects felt almost immediately is Nadi-Sudhi.

Again try and sit in a relaxed state, and start to listen to your breath. Inhale deeply through the left nostril by closing the right, then close the left nostril and exhale the air out of the right. Then inhale from the right nostril and exhale out of the left. This is one round. The first stage of Nadi Sudhi is not to worry how long you are inhaling or exhaling but to just inhale and exhale to your maximum capacity.

Both of these two breathing techniques will decrease vata and lead to a calmer outlook.

As we have seen these three techniques of eating differently, oil therapies and yoga and pranayama can greatly benefit the vayu by regulating it and not letting it become imbalanced. This will in turn balance the mind and thus the body.

Once these 'physical' changes have been made to the individual's lifestyle, the next step is to change the mind-set so that the person really does make the mind their best friend. This may be done by positive thinking affirmations, meditation and visualisations. A simple meditation is to focus the mind on a positive aspect in an individual's life at the moment and let the positive energy from that enter into the whole body.

By working on the vayu in the body and also separately on the mind, we have a greater chance of achieving a balance in our lives.

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