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A WRONG VIEW ABOUT THE DIRGHA AND SUKSMA STAGES IN PRANAYAMA

Traditionally speaking, in pranayama, effortlessness in breathing cannot be increased, unless slowness in breathing is also increased.

While translating the Yogasutra, Chapter II. 50, dealing with Pranayama, the well-known Orientalist Ballantyne, renders the expression dirgha-sukshma by “long or short”. Such renderings by Indologists and Orientalists, become confusing. Even worse, it is inappropriate, as the following consideration will show. It appears that Ballantyne was ignorant of the technique of practising pranayama.

The use of the word ‘or’ in the rendering ‘long or short’ shows that the two stages, namely dirgha and sukshma are taken by the translator, as alternative, i.e. pranayama attains either the ‘long’ stage, or the ‘short’ stage. This means that while some practitioners acquire only the ‘long’ stage, others acquire only the ‘short’ stage of pranayama. The traditional exposition of pranayama, does not support the explanation. Any person can acquire both of these two stages of pranayama, if he follows the process correctly.

According to us, it is highly inappropriate to use the word ‘short’ for sukshma, though dirgha may be rendered by ‘long’. The two words ‘long’ and ‘short’ bear opposite meanings; ‘long’ is contrary to ‘short’. The use of the two words ‘long’ and ‘short’, would show that pranayama has two mutually opposite developed stages, a view which is untenable. No yoga practice can attain such development, as are mutually opposite. This shows that if dirgha is rendered as ‘long’, sukshma cannot be rendered as ‘short’. According to us sukshma may be conveniently rendered by the word subtle, or fine, or by any other word showing a kindred sense.

The distinctive character of these two stages of pranayama has been shown by the commentators clearly. The stage called dirgha seems to be based on the factor of ‘time’, while the stage called sukshma on the factor of ‘effort’. To be explicit: When breath can be held for a very long time easily, accompanied by calmness in the mind, and pleasing feeling (often called sukhasparsha in the treatises on yoga) in the body, then the pranayama is said to attain the stage called dirgha. Similarly, when air passes through the nostril, so slowly that it does not produce any sensation in the tip of the nose (or in other words, the flow of the air becomes so low that it does not make even a thread placed on the nose move), then the pranayama is said to attain the stage of sukshma. In fact, these two words speak of two kinds of development of pranayama in different directions. Thus it is clear, that these two stages are not of opposite nature.

To attain the dirgha stage, one is required to practise ‘slow breathing’, with a particular kind of observation as shown in Yoga Sutra II. 50; similarly to attain the sukshma stage, one is required to exert effort, as least as possible. Experience shows that, between these two methods, namely ‘slowness in breathing’ and ‘lowness (alpatva) of effort’, the former is easier than the latter. Practitioners of pranayama should note that though these two methods are not of one kind, yet both of them are to be applied by the practitioners from the beginning. Both the methods are mutually helpful. ‘Slowness in breathing’, cannot be brought about if effort in breathing is not lessened; similarly the amount of effortlessness cannot be increased, if slowness in breathing is not increased.

Traditionally, we know that the dirgha stage of pranayama is accomplished at first, and then the sukshma stage. That the traditional view is valid, can be proved by experiment. It appears that Patanjali placed the word dirgha before sukshma, to indicate the aforesaid fact. This shows that the word ‘dirgha-sukshma’ must be dissolved as दिर्ग सुक्ष्म: i.e. pranayama practised according to the method prescribed in Yoga Sutra II. 50, at first attains the stage called ‘dirgha’, and then the stage called sukshma’. That is to say, that the expression ‘dirgha-sukshma’ speaks of two developed stages, one appearing after the other.