

## BASIS OF UNSTRUCK PRACTICE

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 Pradīpikā* (4,81). (The *Pradīpikā* 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 Upaniṣad* 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 Upaniṣad* 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.

## SEALING THE SEVEN GATES AND KUMBHAKA HYPOXIA

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 the *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 sthitih*.)

From the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradīpikā* (4.64–67): "I will now describe the practice of *Anāhata-Nāda* (*nādopāsana*) 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 *Pûraka* (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 *Anâhata* 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-Samhitâ* 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 Upaniṣad* (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 (*sarasvatīcālana*), who is correlated with both the central *suśumna* 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, *kevala-kumbhaka*. *Kevala-kumbhaka* is complete retention. The Atharvavedic *Śāṅḍilya Upaniṣad* describes *kevala 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 Pradipika* (2:73-74) states that for yogis who have attained *kevala-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 *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* (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. (Teachers and writers beware: the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* 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 *suśumna* 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 *kevela* atmosphere. *Kevela-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 *kevela* 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 Sutras* 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. *Kevela 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 *Vijnahbhairava* (verse 27) explicitly states that *kevela* 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.

So you see, 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.

*excerpted from The Practice of the Unstruck Word:*

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