

Notes from Quarantine

What Do Covid-19, the Amazon, and Yoga Have in Common?

What if the Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak that is crippling the globe is related to the recent wildfires in the Amazon rainforest? Not in a direct cause-and-effect way, mind you, but in a more subtle, karmic kind of way?

I'm not the first person to link the current pandemic to climate change and our uneasy relationship with Nature. And much discussion has taken place recently about how we have lost a large part of the Amazonian rainforest to massive wildfires started by human beings, who have also been deforesting this important area of the world's geography, known as "the world's lungs." Perhaps the current deadly virus could be Nature's way of thinning the population so that there might be fewer beings taking up the more limited supply of fresh oxygen. Either way, it strikes me that after we burned away a significant portion of the *earth's* lungs, Covid-19, a *respiratory* virus, is now damaging *human* lungs worldwide. Talk about instant karma!

That whole idea of the world's lungs stimulates a deeply spiritual way of looking at Nature. She has provided us with everything we need to thrive. The plant kingdom exhales the oxygen we so desperately need to stay alive. Obliging, it inhales the waste carbon dioxide we exhale, using it to sustain itself and creating a marvelous symbiosis between the plant and animal kingdoms. Plant life also sacrifices itself to nourish humans and other animals. We can't survive without Nature. It truly is our loving servant—but that doesn't mean we are its master, even though we behave as if we were. We think we can plunder it, control it, ignore it, change it, improve it. With the Amazon fire as just one in a long line of human assaults on the planet that sustains us, we continue to burn Nature, poison it, dehydrate it, frack it, overheat it, genetically modify it, and think of ever more ways to alter it. Yet time and time again, Nature has to remind us that we are not in charge. The more we act like Dr. Frankenstein, believing we can bend Nature to our purposes, the more She rebels.

My spiritual teacher, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, considers Nature to be the body of God. He says God is the cause and Nature is the effect, but the two are inseparable. The mysterious, ineffable, formless God manifests in the material world as Nature. Indeed, for millenia, our ancestors worshipped Nature, and rightfully so.

We still see this primal respect in many of the world's mythologies and spiritual traditions, including the wisdom of ancient India. In Vedanta, the timeless philosophy underlying Yoga, it is said that everything in the material world is composed of five elements, identified as air, fire, water, earth, and ether. Of course, this idea is not unique to Indian thought, although the number and naming of the primary elements varies slightly from culture to culture around the world.

These elements compose the world around us, and they compose our bodies. Yoga philosophy recognizes our inter-connectedness with these elements. Five *pranas* or vital forces keep our bodies alive. Each of these forces has a Sanskrit name that is difficult to translate into English. I had a hard time comprehending them until I read that each one corresponds to one of the five elements.

In my upcoming book *Finding Our True Companion*, I've included a chapter on the practice of *Omkar*, a very simple but profound Yoga ritual of chanting Om 21 times to correspond to the 21 layers of the body-mind complex as described in Vedantic spiritual anatomy. Five Oms are chanted for the five organs of action, five for the sensory organs, five for the *pranas*, five for the sheaths that cover the individual soul, and one for the true person or *Purusha* encased in these sheaths, the inner Self or eternal consciousness. For a long time, I would easily concentrate on my hands, feet, mouth, reproductive system, elimination system, ears, eyes, nose, tongue, and skin—the five organs of action and the five organs of perception. All those are concrete and easy to contemplate. Then I'd quickly gloss over the five *pranas*, the ones I couldn't quite comprehend, as I chanted five more Oms, focusing next on the physical, *pranic*, mental, intellectual, and bliss sheaths. Finally I'd chant one more Om for the Person within. But not having a handle on the five *pranas* proved to be a distraction to my meditation, so I decided to learn more about them.

The word *prana* itself can be confusing, because it refers to the vital forces overall as well as to a specific sub-type, the *Prana* we associate with breath. But this *Prana* is even more fundamental than breath. It also governs consciousness in the spiritual, transcendent sense, not as the conscious mind but as the general Awareness that is an aspect of Being in the Vedic system, which holds that the ground of our being is the eternal truth of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, or Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss. According to one source:

“Prana, literally the ‘forward moving air,’ moves inward and governs reception of all types from the eating of food, drinking of water, and inhalation of air, to the reception of sensory impressions and mental experiences. It is propulsive in nature, setting things in motion and guiding them. It provides the basic energy that drives us in life. Ultimately it connects to the Purusha or the higher Self within.” (“Secrets of the Five Pranas,” American Institute of Vedic Studies, <https://www.vedanet.com/the-secrets-of-the-five-pranas/>)

All five *pranas* relate to movements and processes within the body and to drives within the emotional make-up of human beings. The second *prana*, *Apana*, literally means “air that moves away” and regulates processes that have a downward movement, like elimination, release, and reproduction. The third, *Udana*, has to do with upward movement, governing growth, expansion, and will. *Samana* describes a movement from the periphery to the center. It relates

to digestion, including the taking in of air through the lungs where it is then “digested” or broken down into its components to circulate via the blood. It also relates to digesting experience. Finally, *Vyana* moves from the inside outward. It has to do with circulation.

The hint I found that the five *pranas* correspond to the five elements allowed me to absorb the quality of these rather abstract forces more concretely. Most obviously, the *Prana* carried on the breath must correspond to air. I think of *Samana* as corresponding to fire because it rules digestion. In Ayurvedic medicine, based on the Vedas, the fire god Agni is said to govern metabolism. In this view, Agni’s internal fire “cooks” the food in our stomachs so we can digest and assimilate it. And the whole concept of metabolism is tied to the heat we experience in our bodies. Without metabolism, without the proper balance of heat within, we would die. *Vyana* must correspond to water because of its connection with circulation. Blood and lymph flow like water through the river-like vessels of our bodies, and the amount of water we consume affects the ease with which these internal rivers flow. I think of *Apana* as related to the earth element because the earth exerts gravity, pulling matter downward. Earth gives us food, and the food we eat creates the substance and structure of our bodies, grounding us to our home planet. And in my view, *Udana* corresponds to that mysterious element ether, because it has to do with upward movement, defying gravity and allowing for expansion. Ether doesn’t really exist, but the ancients considered it to be an invisible substance filling space, so ether conveys the idea of space and a kind of transcendental glue that unites all creation in a living spiritual field. In this way, it alludes to the subtle bodies composed of energy and spirit, and it suggests the expansion of consciousness.

Now, I can’t say that the correspondences between *pranas* and elements as I’ve presented them here are the same as what a Vedic scholar might offer. What I read only gave me the hint, so these correlations come from my own way of thinking about these things. But it works for me, and contemplating the *pranas* with these elements has deepened my appreciation of the gifts Nature gives us. In the body, the *pranas* emphasize our clear connection to Nature by linking internal processes with external elements. They demonstrate that Nature is outside us and inside us, governing our life forces.

Of these five, breath is surely primary. Our lifespan is measured from the moment we suck in our first breath to the instant we exhale our last. All five elements are essential to our life: air to breathe, earth for food and the material of our bodies, ether to give us three-dimensional space and multi-dimensional experience, fire to warm us and give us light, and water to sustain and purify us. But we can live for a long, if painful, time without food and gravity; we can survive in a very limited space, physically or metaphysically. More critically, we will die before long if our body loses too much heat. We can only live for a short time without water. But we will die in *minutes* without air. So the symbolism of the Amazon wildfires damaging the world’s lungs and

the current respiratory pandemic making us gasp for air reverberates most urgently as a matter of life and death—or life and breath.

Sai Baba reminds us that chanting Om, or any Name of God we cherish, purifies and revitalizes the vital forces that are keeping us alive. In these challenging times, I am more grateful than ever for each comfortable breath I take. Why not join me in taking a moment to practice *Omkar* with the awareness that each Om is cleansing, balancing, and energizing your being? Breathe in deeply, and thank Nature for the air that fills your lungs. Exhale, and give thanks for the breath itself. Feel the quality of the space in which you reside and the power of the Invisible that wraps Its loving arms around you. Chant Om, recognizing that Nature, the body of God, gives you the water that circulates in your body and the inner fire that warms your body and stokes your metabolism. Now, in the midst of rampant fear, take time to practice the healing, purifying power of gratitude, compassion, and reverence. As long as we are still breathing, there is reason to give thanks.



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