

‘PRANA’ THE SUSTAINER OF LIFE

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Introduction: The scriptures like Rigveda, Upanishads, Rāmāyaṇa, Mahabharata, Garuda, Vāyu and other Purāṇas etc. reveal ample information about Prāṇa or Vāyu.

Let us begin our survey with Purusha Sūkta. It narrates the origination of several deities from different organs of Parama Purusha or Parabrahman. Of these the Ric says ‘Prāṇād Vayurajāyata’. From the Prāṇa of Purusha Vāyu was born. One can see that in all these literature the word Prāṇa and Vāyu are used as synonyms. He is also called by several names like Prāṇa, Mukhya- Prāṇa, Vāyu, Mātarishva, Prabhanjana, Pavamāna, etc.

Subsequently Vayu was again born out of the couple Lord Sankarsana and Jāya (after Chaturmukha’s birth through Lord Vāsudeva and Maya). He was married to Bhārati the daughter of Lord Pradyumna and Kṛti. He is known as ‘Bhārti-Ramana-Mukhyaprāṇa’ or Bhārti-Pati. He is the most handsome Deva. He is of the colour of Chudamani. His stature is so perfect that it accounts for 32 auspicious signs narrated in the scriptures. He belongs to the class of Rujus. The Rujus are a class of deities who are eligible to the rank of Chaturmukha. Vāyu is said to be the next successor to the post of Chaturmukha. His mobile means is deer. His weapon is mace.

The sustenance of all living beings depend on the breathing function of Vāyu. He performs 21600 Hamsa-Japa (śvāsa-japa) per day in every human being. The counts are different in different species of life. This is a measure of longitivities of every living being. The breathing processes of inhalation and exhalation is governed by Vāyu and Bhārati respectively. All the deities like Indra, Chandra, and Ravi, Rudra etc. responsible for the functioning of the sense and work organs are under the control of Vāyu. Among the deities, he is unparalleled assessed from any aspect like wisdom, innate strength, courage, motivation, offence, defence, health, knowledge, renunciation, devotion to Lord Vishnu etc.

The word Vāyu consists of two syllables Vā means strength and Yu means longevity and knowledge. ‘tadbala Jnānashilo Yah Sa Vayuh Iti Kirtitah’.

The interesting episodes appearing in the Upanishads concerning Vayu, give us a total glimpse of his personality. Let us turn our attention to those portions.

Aitereya Upanishad: This Upanishad narrates an episode concerning Vāyu’s position among Devās. The governing deities of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin etc. were residing in Chaturmukha’s head meditating on Lord Vishnu. On some occasion each one of the deity felt proud of one’s function and asserted each one is indispensable. They approached and then came to an understanding that each one would exit from the body one by one. By whose exit the body falls (or cease to function) he would be the greatest amongst us. Accordingly first the deity governing speech vacated from the body. Without speech, the body was capable of eating food and drinking water. The individual was functioning without speech. Similarly the deities governing eyes, ears, mind deserted the body one by one. It was witnessed that the body was capable of eating and drinking; it was still living. Finally when Prāṇa (Vayu) vacated, the body fell (totally ceased to function) and started decomposing. Upanishad says, whosoever understands the aspects of Vayu will be free from sins.

Although from the above experiment Vayu was proved to be superior among Devas, it did not fully convince them since they still believed in their individual might. They decided to undergo one more trial. But this time, unlike the former, the body will be vacant. We will enter one by one. Whoever activates the body he will be greatest amongst us. First the deity governing speech (Agni) entered. He could not speak. The deities of eyes, ears and mind entered one by one, still the body could not function. Finally, Prāna entered. The body started breathing. That is the sign of living. All the Devas having witnessed that trial, unanimously agreed and declared that 'Prāna is greatest amongst all of us. Every one of us function through you only. You are our master and we are your followers'.

Shatprāśnopanishad: The second question in this Upanishad concerns Prāna. Vaidarbhi asks Pippalada, who are the deities responsible for the functioning of whole mass of people; and who is the foremost amongst them?

Pippalada replied, the governing deities of Ākāsh, Vāyu, Agni, Water, Prithvi, speech, mind, eye, ears, etc. dwell in the body of every individual and enable the people to carry on with their activities.

Then the best amongst them (Varishta Prana) Prana spoke 'Do not be disillusioned. I myself divide into five forms and sustain the body; Viz. Prāna, Apāna, Vyāna, Samāna, Udāna'. The deities did not trust his words. Then Prana went upwards leaving the body. All the deities also went up as though they were forcibly pulled up. When he came down, all of them too returned to their respective places.

Just like all the bees implicitly follow the queen bee, all the deities follow Prāna. He is the one who bestows them power to carry out their jobs. Prāna is also compared to the hub of a wheel which holds all the spokes in position. He is so powerful that he ensures the sacrificial share of **Svaha** and **Svadhā** reach the Devas and Pitrus.

In question three of this Upanishad, Asvalāyana asks Pippalāda, sir, how the Prana was born and how he enters the body?

Pippalāda replied, Prāna is born out of Parabrahman. He is the shadow of the Almighty. At his will Prāna enters the body. Prāna places all the governing deities in their position and ensures their functions. The Upanishad declares that whoever understands the glory of Mukhyaprāna will secure salvation.

Chāndogyopanishad: In this Upanishad, we can see at least three episodes which highlight Prāna's superiority over gods.

i) Udgithopāsana: At that time, gods and demons were about to fight. The gods thought of meditating on the supreme god Udgitha and derive special strength. First they chose Nasal-Vāyu as seat of Udgitha and meditated. The demons spoiled it. As a result one gets good smell and bad smell. Then they choose the governing deities of speech, ears, eyes, etc.; the demons spoiled all these seats. Finally they meditated Udgīta in Prāna. The demons attacked but failed to make any dent. They themselves got hurt; just like a lump of mud hit against a rock. Finally gods gained victory with the help of Prāna. That established his superiority. As lord Udgitha dwells Mukhyaprāna, he is also called Udgitha.

ii) Samvarga Vidyā: Sage Raikva imparts this knowledge to Jānasruti Pautrāyana. The central theme of this Vidya is that the Vāyu is absorbent of all the governing deities both in Adhidaiva and Adhyātma. Hence he is called Samvarga.

For example, during Mahapralaya when water dries Agni merges in Vāyu. When the sun and moon sets they go into Vāyu. With reference to Adhidaiva Vāyu is absorbent. With reference to Adhyātma Prāna is absorbent. When one is asleep, speech merges into Prāna. The Chaksus merges into Prāna. Prāna is the absorbent of all these deities. No deities is capable of absorbing Mukhyaprāna.

iii) Prāna Vidyā: This episode describes the disputes amongst the governing deities of eye (Sun), ears (Moon), mind (Rudra) and Prāna (Vayu) as to each one claiming superiority. They went to Prajapati and reported their claims. Prajapati replied by whose exit the body falls he can be considered great.

Accordingly Sun left the body for one year and returned; he asked 'how did you live?' Like a blind man was the reply. Further when the Moon left the body individual lived like a deaf man. When Rudra left the body, the individual lived like a child. But the body was intact and functioning too. When Mukhyaprāna started moving, the other deities were pulled up. They were unable to stay there. Then they all individually appealed to Mukhyaprāna that he is definitely superior to each one of them. The Sun, Moon and Rudra said for their function they owe their power to Mukhyaprāna only. This episode also confirms the greatness of Mukhyaprāna.

It is explained that all governing (Abhimani) deities are like specialist doctors. One can do one's own job only. For example, sun will enable us to see only. He is unable to enable us to listen. Similarly others. But Mukhyaprāna can assume the duties of all the deities simultaneously. It is explained by Bhashyakara (Sri Madhva) that in the first six months after the birth of every baby, only Mukhyaprāna carries out the functions of all the deities. They regularly assume their functions after six months.

Brihadāraṇyakopanishad: In this Upanishad, some of the instances are repeated in different context. Those will not be repeated.

Mukhyaprāna is called by several names. He is called 'Dū'. Whosoever understands this his death will move far away.

Prāna is designated as Angirasa. He is the energiser of all the limbs in the name of Ayāsya. When Prāna leaves the body, the limbs get dried up.

Prāna is called Brhaspati. Since he is husband of Bhārati who governs the speech.

Prāna is called Sāma, Here 'Sa' means Bhārati and 'Ama' means Prana. Hence the name Sama.

Prāna is called 'Udgīta'. He sang Udgīta for the victory of Devas. Asuras were miserably hurt for attacking Mukhyaprāna. That is the admirable strength of Prāna.

Prāna is called Uktha, since he motivates the whole world. All the living beings are happy on account of Prāna.

Prāna is called Ksatra since he protects all. He who knows this will be prevented from doing harm to others.

The name Prāna occurs in Adhyātma and the name Vāyu occurs in Adhidaiva.

When question of establishing superiority comes, it was unanimously decided by the Devas that Prāna is best amongst them. At one time there was competition. The condition was whosoever will not sweat or get tired, will be best amongst Devas. Except Prāna, all others got tired and were profusely sweating. Thus Prāna was declared outstanding.

Apart from various Upanishads Balitha Sūkta mentions the three incarnations of Vāyu; viz. Hanuma, Bhīma and Daśapramati (Madhva).

Pavamāna-Sūkta exalts the glory of Prāna. A devotee prays to Prāna to migrate him to the world where there is pure happiness and bliss.

Vayudeva has got twenty forms; viz. Pradhāna, Sūtra, Dhruti, Amruti, Medha ----- vijnana, Vairagya, Sukha. How he got these forms appropriate to his natural qualities are explained in Garudapurana-Brahmakanda.

Owing to space and time limitations I am compelled to be too brief in my presentation. Vayu-Deva may pardon me for having omitted large part of his glory from the preview of this paper.

Conclusion: The personality of Vayu is simply magnificent. His activities in the divine kingdom have created awe and wonder. I wish to conclude this small paper by an appropriate quotation. It is said that “**all functions of this world (Brahmanda) are under the control of Vayu. He is finally under the control of Lord Vishnu**”.

Om Tatsat