On my recent tour down under I was stimulated into thought by a statement of Sri Bala that police in the USA were using Pranayamas as part of their training to reduce adrenaline overload during pursuits. After some further research on the topic I discovered that they were using something called combat breathing to help lower adrenaline levels. During pursuit, intensity of the situation causes a surge in adrenaline level leading to the decrease in fine and complex motor skills. Short term memory that is part of the creative and reasoning part of the brain can be severely hindered, leaving an officer with nothing more than long term memory and primal, emotional instincts to operate with. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the technique of combat breathing that was attributed to the Chinese martial arts tradition was actually the Sukha Purvaka Pranayama of our ancient Yoga tradition.

Sukha Purvaka (Poorvaka) Pranayama is one of the important Pranayama in the Gitananda tradition of Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga. It has been described by Swamiji as a necessary and fundamental part of any Pranayama training. Sukha means pleasant or comfortable and Purvaka refers to the fact that this needs to be completed prior to other practices.

Sukha Purvaka has three initial parts that are then brought together in the fourth part that is the Sukha Purvaka itself. The ratio used in all the four parts is of an equal count of 4, 6, 8 etc depending on the student / patient’s capacity. It is important to remember that we must always start with counts that are in tune with present capabilities of the student / patient and then gradually work up as they improve through practice. Teachings should always be from known to the unknown and from present to the future!

The first part of the Sukha Purvaka quartet is known by different names. It is called Sama Vritti or Shwas Prashwas or Gita Pranayama but is more commonly known by as Sukha pranayama for it is a comfortable process of breathing in (Puraka) and out (Rechaka) for an equal number of counts. This may be either a count of 4, 6 or 8 depending on the person’s capacity. This is usually quite easily performed by most students / patients and helps calm down the mind and develop inner awareness. It is a useful practice for breath observation in Prana Darshana (reverential witnessing) techniques. The best posture for any Pranayama Sadhana is the Vajra Asana as it allows the maximum movement of the diaphragm with the spine at its straightest and most stable position enabling us to breathe at our maximum capacity.

The second and third parts are known as Visama Vritti Pranayamas and consist of the Loma and Viloma Pranayamas. The Loma Pranayama is performed by breathing in for a 4, 6, or 8 count, holding in the breath (Antara Kumbhaka) for an equal count and then breathing out for the same count before repeating the whole cycle. The Viloma Pranayama is performed by breathing in for a 4, 6, or 8 count, breathing out for the same count and then holding out the breath (Bahira Kumbhaka or Shunyaka) for an equal count before repeating the whole cycle. Loma pranayama is also known as converse breathing while Viloma pranayama is called inverse breathing.

It is important to note that the process of holding the breath (Kumbhaka) goes against our primitive billions of years old animal conditioning and helps us to gain conscious control over our breathing mechanism. Animals fear the holding hold of the breath as they are afraid of dying, but as humans we
know that we can hold our breath safely and this gesture of opening up to our higher nature helps conscious control of respiration to occur. Technically speaking we can never die by holding our breath! Yoga is the science of consciousness and this is why the phase of holding the breath (Kumbhaka) has been given so much importance in yoga literature and the Pranayamas are referred to in classical literature as Kumbhaka.

The final phase where the previous three parts are brought together is known as Sukha Purvaka Pranayama. This is a four part breath where we inhale, hold in the breath, exhale and then hold out the breath. As it unites all four phases of Pranayama namely, Puraka, Kumbhaka, Rechaka and Shunyaka it is also called the Yoga Pranayama. A 4, 6, or 8 count is used to breathe in, hold in, breathe out and hold out the breath. This Pranayama reduces respiratory frequency from 15 - 20 respirations per minute to 3- 4 respirations per minute. This brings about a decrease in other vital parameters such as heart rate, blood pressure and body metabolism that are intrinsically related to respiratory frequency. The body temperature is lowered and a calm and quiet state of mind results from decreased sympatho-adrenergic discharge. Areas of the lungs that are normally not being used in our day-to-day tidal volume life are opened up creating health and well being at all levels of our existence.