



Counseling and Human Resources Consulting, PC

MICHAEL H. BROWN, ED.S.
LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR
LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST
BOARD CERTIFIED CLINICAL HYPNOTHERAPIST
E-Mail: Internet: MBROWNLPC@aol.com
Website: HTTP://www.MichaelBrown.org

4889 A FINLAY STREET
RICHMOND, VA 23231
(804) 222-0483
FAX: (804) 222-8823

PRANAYAMA A BREATHING TECHNIQUE FOR EXPLORING ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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PRANAYAMA

A BREATHING TECHNIQUE FOR EXPLORING ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

PRANA means vital air or life force, and is the energy or force that animates matter. Prana is also known as universal energy. It is Prana that is manifesting itself as gravitation, electricity, as the action of the body and as the nerve currents and thought force. Knowledge and control of Prana manifested in individuals is called Pranayama, which opens to us the door to almost unlimited power. This little wave of Prana which represents all mental and physical energies is the easiest to control through the regulation of physical breathing. Yogis use this Prana consciously for awakening the dormant spiritual force in man.

Pranayama is one of the most important practices in all forms of yoga. But Prana is not something related to breath alone. Breathing is only one of the many exercises through which we get to the real Pranayama. By practicing Pranayama, the Yogi is able to control the nervous system and thereby obtains gradual control over Prana or vital energy and the mind. In addition to the physical benefits derived through breathing, Yogic teachings further show that through Pranayama man's will power, self-control, concentration power, moral qualifications, and even his spiritual evolution can be increased. The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga by Swami Vishnudevananda, Bell Publishing Company, New York, 1960.

These quotes by Swami Vishnudevananda tell us that Pranayama is a very old method of moving out of known consciousness spaces and accessing the hidden potentials within human nature. The process of Rebirthing that Leonard Orr popularized takes its origins in this ancient Yogic practice, as does Holotropic BreathWork promulgated by Stan Grof. Prana is the life force which abundantly surrounds us all the time, and in the East it is believed that if we are ill it is because we are not making use of the energies that are available to us.

The natives of Bali understand possession states to be that condition which restricts the free flow of energy, and they believe that thought patterns set up the condition for the restriction of physical and spiritual energy. One has to leave ordinary levels of awareness, and attachments to the material plan, to touch healing energies, and this has something to do with going into deep states of consciousness--an inner journey.

John Lilly calls us "oxygen chauvinists," and by this he means that the narrow band of consciousness in which we are usually imbedded is thought to be the real reality. But the consciousness we are use to is created in the brain by a very delicate balance of oxygen, carbon dioxide and nitrogen among other elements. We don't value other states of consciousness in this culture, or at least don't study or experience them in a systematic way that moves us toward a deeper contact with our inner Self. However, the culture is full of people who, in spite of their resistance to explore meditation or visualization, trance states or yoga, will get drunk every weekend or take tranquilizers as a way of life, or smoke dope now and again, or abuse nicotine.

There is a natural urge or tendency or need to step out of ordinary preoccupations and move to a more essential experience of ourselves and we can either honor that tendency in a way that helps us grow and evolve as persons, or choose to pervert the urge and take paths that are ultimately to our detriment. But what is the value of leaving this little corner of reality and exploring other spaces? This inner journey provides us with the opportunity to know something about our inner Selves on an essential level, "who we really are" deep inside, not role identified, not stuck in outgrown and neurotic behaviors, or as the victim of worries,

anxieties and concerns. Ultimately we are free, creative beings with almost infinite potential for dynamic Self-expression in the world but we need techniques and methods to help us remember and experience this.

Pranayama is a rapid-breathing technique that is quite helpful in stepping out of ordinary reality spaces and approaching an expanded state of consciousness. Furthermore, it helps to charge the mind/body with powerful life energy, clears away the blocks and resistance and fears and helps us return to a state of well-being. The basic technique is very simple, though in the Yogic traditions there are many steps and stages and variations. Simply, we lie down, close our eyes and begin to breathe rapidly and deeply, faster and deeper than is required by a resting body. Very quickly a change in basic brain chemistry occurs, as more oxygen enters and disruption of ordinary levels of carbon dioxide and nitrogen occurs.

This process of hyper-ventilating impacts the mind/body in unique ways, depending on several factors: our state of health or well-being, body type, personality, along with the degree of psychological preparation that has been made prior to the experience. Very quickly we move into unusual experiences physically and mentally. Initially we might feel dizzy or disoriented, sometimes slightly nauseous with a rapid increase in oxygen. The hands often become tight and crampy and go into a claw-like closed position. Cramps are sometimes experienced around the forehead or in the chest area, as we breathe rapidly. The body can begin to tremble or vibrate as it tries to throw off the armoring locked into the muscle system and the blocks within the nervous system. And very often emotions which are locked up deep within begin to be expressed and released. Images, fantasies, memories and even past life episodes can come to mine.

The longer we practice the Pranayama technique over time, the deeper we go experientially. The choice to continue or to end the exploration is totally ours to make. At any moment, if we choose to end the experience, we simply stop breathing fast and deep, and immediately stop the forward movement or the expansion of consciousness. There can be fear associated with the release of deep inner tensions, to the degree that we have a lot of stuff inside stored up, repressed, bound and unexpressed.

Our bodies are a reflection of the way we use our energies. If we're stuffed with anger, that anger will be reflected in our posture and distort our bodies away from their best form and functioning. If we spend our energy repressing anger, or sadness, loneliness or grief, happiness or joy or whatever, we will naturally be much less available for creative and spontaneous Self-expression. We avoid people who are expressing these energies because their expression resonates with what is hidden inside, that which we do not choose to explore and expose.

We need to learn how to trust our bodies, minds and spirit, to let go of the rigid controls we place on ourselves and let our energies flow. Pranayama is a technique for learning how to trust the wisdom of our inner Self as it tries to return to a naturally open and responsive state of being. We are built to be healthy, the products of millions of years of evolution as physical and psychic beings. It is only when we close down, repress our feelings, hide our energies, deny our impulses, and refuse to share that we begin to become ill. We have anger, adrenalin, to help us fight or flee, because survival requires it of us. If we deny our anger when appropriate, we block a natural circuit of energy. We have sadness and need to grieve for a reason. It releases our pain and tensions, helps us let go of attachments, cleanses our hearts and souls. If we deny this aspect of ourselves, we diminish our capacity for wholistic living. We have these systems, and many, many others, because we need them to function in a way that expresses our potential. If we deny any one of these inner states, all the rest function less adequately, because we are whole beings, intricately wired with integrity.

The choice to search for wholeness, and to employ a tool like Pranayama, is often a very radical step to take. At a certain moment we become aware that we are functioning at a level which is less than our potential. We may be bored, frustrated, nervous, listless, tense, dissatisfied or ill, operating unconsciously and without fulfillment. When we make the decision to search for our well-being, it means that we are willing to risk and change, and change is always difficult. But the more that we know about the true state of our inner Self, the clearer we can see what is not working in our lives and why. If we are twisted inside, our outer lives will reflect this exactly. But if and as we return to inner health and well-being, our lives will naturally move to reflect this in the world.

We have bodies but we are not our bodies. Our bodies reflect the state of being of the inner Self. We have feelings, but our feelings are the ways in which the inner Self expresses in the world. We have thoughts, but we are not those thoughts. Our thoughts are created by the inner Self as it puzzles with the world and its place in it. It is the inner Self that we must come to know, if we ever hope to understand, balance and enjoy our lives. Pranayama helps us disconnect with these more superficial levels of manifestation and move toward Self. Our "I" ness is embedded in our bodies, uses the feelings, and thinks.

While employing the tool of Pranayama, anger energy may come up. The idea with Pranayama is to allow that energy to express but not to become identified with it, not to get trapped by it or to get lost in it. If the body starts to shake, we let the body shake, and keep as our focus the deep rhythmic breathing. If we begin to experience cramping, we allow this to occur for as long as possible, to learn how to disidentify with bodily sensations, and appreciate the Self we are inside. To do this, for as long as possible, we focus on breath and keep it running deep and fast.

Energy that is blocked is like water that gets blocked and stops moving. It makes little puddles and then goes stagnant and nothing can live in it. The idea of Pranayama is to bring the vital air, life force, universal energy, Prana into us as deeply as possible so that we can become aware of where we're blocking. If we are unconscious of where the blocks are within us, most often we just assume that this is the normal natural state or way of being. The deepest insight is, however, that the world in which we live is of our own creation, and is just a reflection of the state of being of our inner Self. Learning to be responsible for the condition of our inner Self is the path of evolution and our greatest challenge.

GROUP PRANAYAMA

In the experience of Pranayama in a group context, I suggest that you lie on the floor connected to each other by holding hands with the people next to you. Try to keep some contact with your neighbors for as long as possible, but if you move away into a deep inner experience, allow that to occur. If you become too frightened, or find yourself wanting to stop your experience, just stop the rapid breathing and you will not go further. You can then just lie in the circle, integrate your experience and witness all the energy that is happening around you.

I will be chanting spontaneously and playing a musical rattle during the 30 minutes of the experience, to provide you with rhythm and song and energy to help shatter your normal ways of thinking and holding energy and help you move inward. I have learned from sharing ritual experiences with native people that this can help you let go, can guide your journey to some degree, and help you express and let go of your own inner forces vocally. Pranayama can last a much longer time, but 30 minutes is a good beginning for people unfamiliar or no use to this technique. If you choose to do this on your own, at home or with close friends, play a selected piece of music that is evocative for you. It is critical that no interruptions or distractions

occur during the time you employ this tool because it is not easy to stop the process and immediately begin to interact in ordinary ways.

No matter what happens, this experience is a good mirror for you. How you use this experience will say something very strongly about who you are at this moment in your life, and will reveal the nature of your patterns of risking and letting go and experiencing emotion, physical discomfort and so forth. The images or fantasies that come to mind will be important, and can tell you of the deeper aspects of you that need to come into consciousness. You have the choice to go farther and farther by continuing the breathing rhythm, or to stop. If you want to explore and move away from what you know and journey into new terrain and, perhaps, unusual and higher energized states and spaces, you have the freedom to do so. It is that simple.

QUESTION: "Is this a quiet process?"

No. This is a very high energy process. It is unlike centering or meditating in that it is moving toward hyperarousal. The people around you may be crying, screaming, chanting, shaking, or be very quiet and unmoving depending on where they are at this time in their lives. Each person will flow and unblock uniquely depending on who they are and what they need at this time. Allow all of this to occur, and witness your own reactions.

QUESTION: "How do I choose to continue to breathe or to stop?"

How you choose, and what you choose, is a function of your total gestalt. In the presence of resistance, let yourself be focused on the rapid breathing and if your body starts to shake or your hands begin to gesture or your emotions begin to flow, just allow that to occur, keeping your focus on the out-breath and the in-breath, the out-breath and the in-breath.

Most people find the limit of their willingness to risk and experience unusual phenomena fairly quickly, say, after 10 minutes of rapid breathing. If this happens, just lie there and experience the group energy, the chanting, and your own process of gradual integration. It is not easy to move through blocks and let go of the crud inside. If it were easy, none of us would have any! It's work. It's hard work. It is the hardest work we can ever do. It's much harder to transform our own consciousness than to create empires in the world...

QUESTION: "What do we do afterwards, when the Pranayama is complete?"

There are several responses to the question. First of all, the experience is valid in itself, for just what it is: a way of being with yourself in a powerful and unusual way. How will it change you? That is very much a function of who you are and your willingness to change. I can tell you that your issues are X, Y, and Z. You can hear that and just store it away in your brain and in your memory and never act on it. You can tell yourself what you need to work on through Pranayama or prayer or psychotherapy or pot: through any number of techniques and methods of Self-discovery. "These are my issues, X, Y, and Z." But knowing and acting on what you know are two separate processes.

The will to know and the will to change are different. The will to know is relatively easy to strengthen. The crises in our lives can impel us to look more deeply at our current values and beliefs, attitudes and actions. And through the use of tools of depth such as Pranayama, unconscious material can rise into the light of full awareness. Images can come fairly easily and the will to know what they mean

stretches and develops the more we are willing to know.

The will to change is a horse of another color. The will to take what we know and grow it, or take the insights we gain and change our behaviors is a much harder affair. Knowing alone is not transformative. The struggle to change is what helps change occur. And that is hard, hard work. The grounding, integrating aspect of this work is what many people fail to actualize and so they fill their awareness with their issues and awareness but never actually change.

Change can only occur in the intimacy of our own inner space, as we wrestle with our own dynamics, energies and forces. The will to change grows slowly, because it involves everything in which we are involved out in the world. A restructuring of the personality takes time, is never easy and never fast. Taking responsibility for our changes is a very private affair.

QUESTION: "What will we do as a group at the end of this experience?"

At the end, I will stop chanting and stop the rhythm of the rattle. I will remain quiet for about 5 or 10 minutes, depending on where the group is at the end, allowing reintegration to occur on the individual and group level. If you are involved in some emotional release, I will not intervene in that process, I will allow those waves to subside gradually. At the end of a certain period I will do a count down from 10 to 1 and suggest that at the count of 1 you choose to return to a normal state of consciousness. Then I will direct you to work in your journals, first drawing a Mandala, spontaneously capturing a reflection of the energy field in which you find yourself, then ask you to write up your experience with words, in language. This will also help you reintegrate your experience. After this we will sit in a small group of 4 people to share our experiences, then join in a circle with everyone to do group sharing and closure.