



# The Energetics of Breath

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As healthcare providers, our perspective often translates into an emphasis on dietary and nutritional care. Vitamins/minerals, herbs, homeopathic remedies, physical alignment and acupuncture, while potent and extremely effective, are secondary and supplemental. Over the years, I have spent countless hours talking to people about what they put into their bodies. When people discover I am a naturopath, their first response frequently involves guilt about what they eat. “I know I shouldn’t, but...” seems to be the common preface to any explanation about their food choices. Patients begin sessions by saying something akin to “I know you’re probably going to tell me to give up coffee or something I love.” I believe most of us hold to the idea that the quality of our intake directly correlates to our state of well-being and health. But is intake merely the stuff we “ingest,” limited to food, drink, herbs, supplements and medications? If the bodymind is a singular, unified entity, than what we ingest means so much more than what we literally swallow. If changes in my biochemistry alter my thought process, then it stands to reason that changes in my thought process should, after all, alter my biochemistry. If we truly care about what we take into our physical selves, then we should be equally, if not more, discerning about other forms of energy we allow ourselves to ingest. Intrigued by the simple, the basic, and foundational, I am most interested in the path which calls for the least amount of force. While food, herbs and supplements clearly have energetic signatures, and influence our core vibrational resonance, how are we able to have our own selves? We can do this with breathwork, a simple method for freely unifying our own energetic system. We contain the ability to change our own energy fields



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Dr. Lichtenstein is a licensed naturopathic physician living and breathing in Seattle, Washington. His passion is shifting the health care paradigm from an emphasis on illness to one of living well, despite diagnosis or disease. Currently, he practices as meditation teacher, breathworker, energetic bodyworker, and movement and yoga therapist. He also teaches counseling, yoga therapy, pranayama therapy, movement therapy and naturopathic philosophy at Bastyr University. He created the Explorations in Mindfulness and PranaPlay workshops to teach the cultivation of life through active mindfulness, meditation and movement, believing that body-centered awareness is the key to unlocking the doors to our innate wellness.

by altering or directing our breath, and this can produce profound healing of the bodymind.

*Pranayama* is one of the eight limbs or arms of yoga, and is often referred to as *breath control*. However, agreeing on a definitive, singular translation of the term is far from easy, and countless interpretations abound. I trust the translation which defines *prana* as *the vital energy of the cosmos, the all-pervading universal energy that is part of everything*; this dynamic energy is said to ride on the breath. Some scholars deem the word *prana* to be made up of the roots *pra* and *an*, while others claim it is *pra* and *na*. In both instances, translates to mean to *breathe forth*, since *pra* means to *bring forth* or *the first part*; *an* means to *breathe* or to *exist* or *live*, while *na* has been translated to mean *energy*. Therefore, *prana* means to *bring forth life or existence* or *the essential unit of life itself*. The debate persists at the second part of the word. Some texts claim that the word to consider is *yama*, meaning *control*, while others argue the proper word is *ayama*, meaning *expansion* or *lengthening*. In either case, this vital energy is deeply linked to our breath. Life cannot exist without the breath, either on a physiological or cellular level. When our lives end, we are said to expire; this vital breath exits our being and our physical body dies. The significance of whether pranayama means *breath control* or to *expand* or *lengthen the breath* hinges on intention. One tradition of yoga asserts that life expectancy is based upon a predetermined number of breaths with which we are born. So we might logically conclude that by learning to control the breath via lengthening it, we lengthen our life. Sounds good, right? But here is the catch: paradoxically, while yoga practice cultivates discipline and poise, yoga philosophy is not about control. It involves yoking the mind, body and breath so that we can be in a state of complete and absolute awareness, absorbed in a state of complete Consciousness and Bliss where we join with the Divine. In essence, it is a transformational practice, a path to enlightenment, rather than a physical one. In our modern times, people consider yoga to be physical activity or exercise, something to “do” to make themselves healthy. When we approach the physical postures or asanas in this way, we must control the body in order to make it bend the way the mind commands. This is not in the true spirit of yoga, which teaches *ahimsa*, or *non-violence* to self and others. The intention to control the breath or the body requires effort and force, and the desire for control always puts us on the path of struggle.

Can we lengthen the breath without force? Once more, it depends on our intention. Intention is vital since it is another form of energy we ‘ingest’. People might say “I don’t want this...” concerning something in their lives. If thoughts are energy, and this energy moves throughout our bodymind, we have to consider what type of energy we are circulating within our being when we speak in the negative. When we spend our time bemoaning all that we don’t want to happen, what we don’t want to do, what we don’t want to see, we become immobilized and stuck. From this narrow vantage point, by focusing on what we don’t want or like, we cease envisioning or creating. Our bodymind becomes fixated on one segment of existence, and remains ignorant of



the rest of our surroundings, of all the potentials and of the universe. Instead, let us emphasize direction and movement: where do I want my life to go; how do I want to live; what is my intention? A response such as “not like this” not only lacks trajectory, it has no path and it stops us cold. If we cannot imagine a direction, it is assured that we won’t get where we want to go. Without a path or course of action, we freeze. And physiologically, when we freeze, we tend to hold our breath!

Holding the breath is an act of control. Like many self-protective mechanisms unthinkingly adopted, at one time it served us. In the long run, it does more harm than good. And what harm holding the breath can do: current research on the effects of breathing techniques suggests that a great deal of health concerns are directly correlated to dysfunctional respiration patterns. Asthma, hypertension, coronary heart disease, chronic pain, anxiety, depression and panic attacks have all been subjected to some level of study about the respiration connection. Recently, two studies have shown the beneficial use of yogic breathing patterns to help regulate menopausal symptoms, specifically insomnia and hot flashes. Certain practices have also been reported not only to lessen asthmatic attacks, but when practiced over time, completely reverse any dysfunction of the lungs.

When in an emotional state of arousal, whether anger or anxiety, the advice you are most likely to hear is “take a deep breath.” Such advice is not only counterproductive to our emotional states, but may be physiologically incompatible with relaxation. When told to take a deep breath, we tend to inhale large amounts of air.

Additionally, many of us even hold our breath after the inhale. Inhaling deeply, however, stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and increases the heart rate. This change in heart rate during the respiration cycle is called respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA). During inhalation, the activity of the vagus nerve is impeded, which decreases its signal to the heart, thereby increasing the rate and force of contraction of the heart. It is exhaling which has the reverse - and sought after - effect. Exhalation increases vagal stimulation, which allows the rate of the heart to slow down. Furthermore, inhalation and exhalation both impact the baroreceptors in the carotid arteries and the aorta. These receptors sense any changes (stretching) in the walls of the blood vessels in order to regulate arterial blood pressure. When baroreceptors sense a stretch, as during inhalation, they send a signal to the medullary centers in the brain stem, which signal to decrease sympathetic tone resulting in hypotension, and hence, vasoconstriction and increased heart rate. As our heart rate increases, so too does the output of glucocorticoids, which further aggravate anxiety and panic.

For the sake of our health and wellness, it is time to reconsider our respiration diet. The first step is identifying and eliminating the obstacles to cure, or in this case, functional breathing, which are smoking, poor ventilation, toxins, and pollutants. From here we arrive at the question, what actually is healthy breathing? The yogis teach us that healthy breathing consists of an exhalation twice as long as the inhalation, and that there is naturally a pause or gap between the end of the exhalation and the beginning of the subsequent in-breath. Some further suggest that the ideal rate is 1 breath every 10 seconds, which translates to an average of 6 breaths per minute. Yet, medical texts state that the respiration rate for the average adults ranges from 12 – 24 breaths per minute. What the yogis are suggesting amounts to a 50 – 66% reduction. This suggests the average adult is far from achieving their most optimal breathing rate. Interestingly, in several studies on cardiac rehabilitation and breathing, when the patient learned to decrease number of breaths to 6 – 10 breaths per minute, the rate of recurrent heart attacks dropped. Based on this information, a critical change to our breathing diet would include reducing our intake, an issue akin to many people's relationship with food.

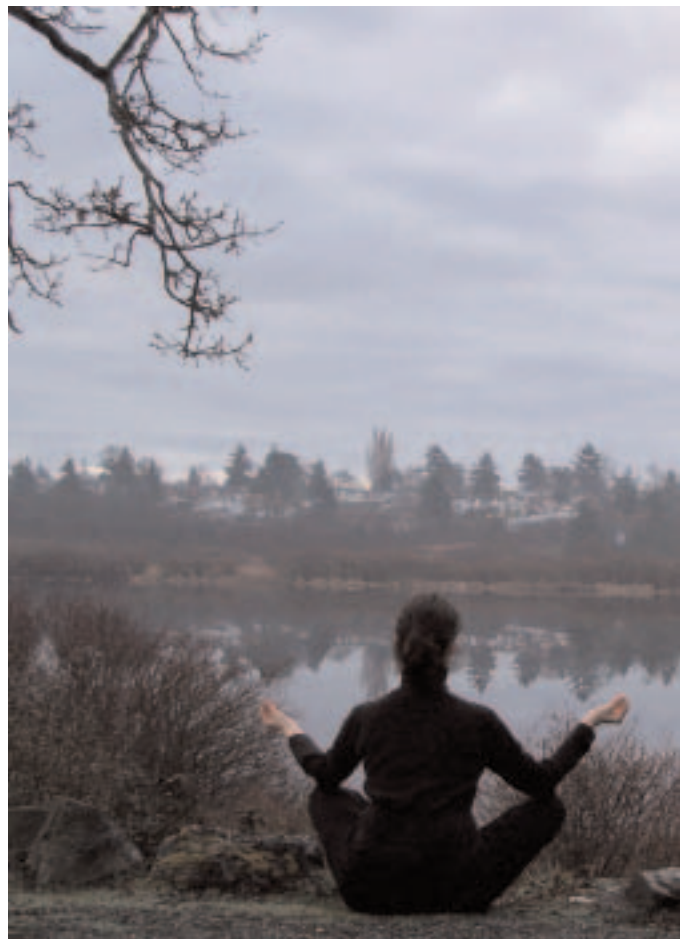
To inhale, to breathe in, is to take in life. To exhale, to breathe out, is to manifest yourself out into the world, to bring yourself forth. Take some time to get to know how you breathe before doing anything with the breath. You may learn a great deal about your energetic balance as well as your resonance with the world. Notice how you inhale and exhale, pay attention to whether or not you pause or hold your breath during any part of the respiration cycle. Where are the pauses, if any, in your cycle; at the end of the inhale? If so, is there anything you find yourself holding onto, afraid of letting go; have you experienced any traumas that still live within your bodymind, impacting the way you breathe, move and live? Keep in mind that deeper inhalations and holding of the inhalation increases both stress on the heart and sympathetic nervous stimulation. If this is your pattern of

inhaling, what does this say about the way in which you take in life, the vital force, qi, or prana? Is feeling stressful a common experience for you; does life seem to be a struggle; do you allow yourself the right to exist? These are a mere sample of the questions pertaining to inhalation. Examine your exhalation as well. Does it come in a sudden burst, or is it short and forceful; do you find yourself frequently experiencing long, protracted sighs; what does your exhalation say about you; do you feel that your life is a series of obstacles that you continue to bump up against; how is it for you to be definitive and committed? Notice the rate at which you breathe: is it fast or slow; how long are the inhalation and exhalation, as well as the pauses; consider the depth of the breath; where is the breath located: in the belly, the chest, the back? What part of the bodymind breathes first; what part breathes most; are there areas in the bodymind where the breath gets trapped or stuck? You might find that when you start to inhale the belly begins to move, but then the upper chest takes over and fills up fully as your shoulders raise. What is the quality of the breath; is it forceful and aggressive, or does it tend to be timid, tired, and weak; does it come in jerks and stops, or is it smooth?

As you can see, breathing issues can get quite complex. Befriending the breath in this way, exploring these questions, can lead to greater insight into our very



nature, since energetic patterns and psychological compensations commonly surface. There are a few practices to try while observing what happens to your disposition, mood, and energy level. Begin by focusing on the exhalation. In times of stress or anxiety, remember not to breathe in deeply. Rather, see how long you can exhale. In cardiac rehabilitation and asthma education, instructors have been known to give their patients a narrow straw through which to exhale. Another method is simply to purse your lips and exhale slowly through the mouth. This method of exhalation will invite the breathing rate to soothe and settle. Exhale as much air as possible. This should engage the diaphragm and abdominal muscles, stimulating the natural inhalation reflex. At the end of this exhalation, close your mouth (remove the straw if using one), and let all the muscles in the lower torso relax, releasing constriction in the belly, waist and low back. Then inhale spontaneously through the nose. You should find that your next inhalation is deeper, yet effortless. Breathe normally through your nose for 5 – 7 cycles; notice the change. You will most likely find that by the 5<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> breath, your pattern returns to baseline. Repeat this cycle for 5 minutes, exhaling all your air through pursed lips or straw, and then breathing normally. You will be giving your bodymind your blessing to breathe fully and effortlessly. As your energy becomes more balanced and steady, you may find that your way of experiencing yourself and the world shifts. Try it for a month - just see what happens.



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