

Pranayama without Tears

by Fra. Abrahadabra 11

Pranayama is the yoga of breath control. It has its origins in India, where it is used either as a technique in itself, or in a wider context, such as Bhakti (devotion). Prana meditation is essentially about discipline, and to magickians is an invaluable tool to make possible the exercise of the will. By achieving control of the body, even for the shortest of periods, it becomes possible to do more complex things. It is probably for this reason why Aleister Crowley devoted so much of his attention in his treatises on yoga to this one, theoretically simple exercise.

To the mystic, pranayama is useful in the same way. By learning to discipline the patterns of breathing it becomes possible to learn the harder disciplining of the mind that is necessary to achieve dhyana (focus). Often mental discipline is learned as a product of disciplining the breath. In Bhakti, the point of this discipline is to make the entity that is the object of devotion the centre of attention.

Beyond these explanations of pranayama there are various more "cosmic" views about life energy in breath, but such views are not particularly important at this stage unless you really want to find out more. To the sceptic, however, I should like to point out that Psychologist Wilhelm Reich in his work "The Function of Orgasm" suggests some similar ideas, although he does not come from a Yogic background.

For the purpose of this introduction we are going to consider pranayama in terms of discipline and the focus of attention. The method described here is based on that outlined by Aleister Crowley in his book "Magick", although for a more authentic, Indian pranayama, the reader is referred to Chapter 18 of "Introduction to Tantra Sastra" by Sir John Woodroffe.

How to Do It.

Pranayama usually starts with asana, which means posture. The posture we adopt during yoga is important as it may be held for quite a while (some yogis spend hours at a time). Even in short pranayama sessions a certain element of discomfort is likely in early attempts. The posture should facilitate easy breathing and not be so comfortable that you can fall asleep. It is important to keep your back straight in order to achieve this. Crowley suggests various asanas in "Magick" but feel free to develop your own. Of particular interest are the "God posture" (sitting on a straight backed chair with your hands on your thighs and facing forwards), the "Dragon posture" (kneeling with your feet touching, heels apart and your bottom resting in the space thus provided, hands on thighs and facing forwards) and the "Lotus" (as seen in cheesy films about the far East). You may wish to simply use what I call the "Cross Legged Asana" which is useful for people who, like me are flexible but not contortionists. Once in your asana, try to relax into it for a moment and then be still. As you all no doubt got flying colours with your MMM this will not be a problem... until the itches set in, then the cramps, etc... Persevere with this. You can go through the pain barrier if you try to ignore it. With practice your asana will become more and

more comfortable! You may wish to experiment with other asanas, but be warned, they will all provide you with a pain barrier that must be crossed. It is unwise, however, to grit your teeth and make yourself do an hour of practice. Your resistance to the pain will come gradually as your body gets used to doing a new trick, and until it does, frequent short attempts are far more conducive.

O.K. so you've got your asana(s), now what? The next stage is the breathing. This will all sound very familiar in terms of MMM and at first it is. From there the aim is to not only concentrate on your breath, but also to control it. The standard pranayama breathing rhythm is to breathe in, hold your breath for the same length of time, and then breathe out for the same time as your in-breath and hold. For example, if counting your breath to rhythms of four counts (which is generally a good idea as will become apparent later) you would breathe in 1-2-3-4-Hold-2-3-4-Out-2-3-4-1-2-3-4-In-2-3-4-Hold...etc. This can easily be practised by counting. Using a clock is unwise as it would then be imposing its rhythm on you. This is the opposite of what you are trying to achieve as you are attempting to find your own rhythms to control your own breath. The ideal way to time pranayama is by mantra. This is the way that it is done in India, where Sadhus don't necessarily wear clothes, let alone watches.

If mantras can be organised into rhythms of four counts (Aha!) you have a perfect way of counting your breathing and further focusing your mind. No doubt some of you will be wondering how on Earth you achieve breathing in or holding your breath whilst chanting a mantra. The answer is simple, you breathe through your ears. When silently intoning a mantra you could be doing anything. So what mantra do you choose? Really it does not matter, but mantras with a tantric relevance are likely to be more interesting for those who are inclined towards tantra. For example, I was using the mantra "Om Nama Shivaya Shivaya Nama Om", which roughly translates as "Honour to the Lord of Dreams". This mantra use, coupled with some experiments of assuming the Godform of Shiva led me to meet said Lord of Dreams in my sleep, which then led to some interesting synchronicities during waking consciousness.

Pranayama in Ritual

Pranayama used in invocation helps focus on what you are doing by discipline of thought. The concentration required to breathe, keep still and intone a mantra shuts out enough of the mind's internal dialogue that a very one pointed gnosis can be achieved. This gnosis is of use in sigil sorcery, and personal enchantments from this mode of yoga have shown excellent results. In invocation the mantra used can be linked to the entity being invoked, thus serving two purposes.

Other applications.

Pranayama can include other methods of breath control such as restricting the flow of breath through only one nostril at a time or only through the mouth, or spending long times between breaths. Such practices have their own intrinsic values, but are not necessarily so appropriate in ritual contexts. One application I find extremely useful is something that I call "Walking pranayama", which is achieved in exactly the same way as the method outlined above, only it is performed whilst walking rather than from an asana. This can be performed at any time, such as when walking to catch a train, without attracting any attention to yourself. By timing your steps with your breaths and mantra, the whole quality of walking is changed, and a tedious journey

seems to become almost timeless, apparently ending shortly after you began. At first it is a bit difficult to master, as your walking will speed up your heart and breathing rates, but once again, regular practice for short periods at a time can improve your performance.

Sex and Heavy Breathing.

Pranayama has some interesting affects on the body from long term usage. Firstly it conditions your lungs and breathing apparatus, which for those of us living in a city with filthy, car polluted air must be a good thing. This also has implications for asthma sufferers and those who simply wish to be fitter. Bear in mind, however, that if you are unfit pranayama will be harder to do, so it is important not to rush it. Secondly, pranayama can make you sweat from the effort required. Along with this perspiration are small amounts of sexual pheromones that have aphrodisiac qualities, making you even more sexy and desirable than you already are.

So there you have it. Pranayama is simple to learn, if you have the determination. It has a variety of uses, and this introduction has only lightly covered them.