

# A Basic Breath Practice

## Some Background

The following words are those of the Sufi master Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan, drawn from various (mostly unpublished) sources.

“The breath is the current which is established between all planes of existence. Its current runs from the life unseen to the life on the surface, thus uniting spirit and matter both. When the breath leaves our material being, then comes what we call death, which shows that breath is the sign of life and life itself; and its contact with the body keeps the body alive and its contact with the mind keeps the mind alive, but neither body nor mind *are* life. If there is any sign of life we can trace on the surface, it is no other than the breath. Therefore, the Sufi takes the breath as the means of getting what is needed from the life unseen to the life on the surface; also, making it a means of sending what is desired from the life external to the life within. The breath may be considered as a lift that can take you to any floor up and any floor down. By the help of breath you can send your thought anywhere and to any plane and bring about desired results. In breath abides all the mystery there is. The Sufi’s object being self-realization by the ideal of God, the Sufi works for its attainment by the means of the breath, and an ideal so attained becomes his property, his kingdom, forever.

“As the books, precepts, and doctrines of his religion are important to the follower of a religion, so the study of the breath is important to the mystic. We ordinarily think of the breath as that little air that we feel coming and going through our nostrils; but we do not think of it as that vast current that goes through everything, that current which comes from the Consciousness and goes as far as the external being, the physical world. In the Bible it is written that first the Word was, and from the Word all things came. And before the Word was the breath, which made the Word.

“Behind the Word is the much greater power, the breath. If a person wishes to study the self, to know the self, what is important is not the study of the mind, of the thought, the imagination, nor of the body, but the study of the breath. The breath has made the mind and the body for its expression. It has made all from the vibration to the physical atom, from the finest to the grossest. The breath, the change of the breath can make us sad in the midst of happiness, it can make us joyful in the saddest, the most miserable surroundings. That is why, without reason, in some places we feel glad, in other places a melancholy comes over us. It is the air that makes us so. You may say, “How can the breath make all this? How could it make the

body?" I have seen people become in the course of years as their breath is. What exists in the breath is expressed in the form. As the breath is, so the child becomes.

"There has been so much said about the breath, and enough could never be said about it. The mystic is at a loss to explain what breath is, as a scientist is helpless to give the explanation of electricity, though both will try their best to make it intelligible to their students. And, as electricity when controlled can be utilized for a great many useful purposes, so still greater purposes and important purposes can be accomplished by the control of the breath.

"The ego is made by the first impression of the soul. This impression throws back the ray which turns into a circling current of life, light, and energy, which is the breath. Therefore the Sufi calls the ego and the breath by one term: *Nafs*.

"Breath is life, and its work is to take the condition from within to the external plane, and to take the conditions of the external plane into one's inner being. When one exhales, the condition of the inner plane is brought out, and when one inhales, the condition of the external plane is taken in. When exhaling, the harmony or inharmony of the soul is brought out, its influence first working on one's mind, then on the body, then on surroundings. When inhaling, the conditions of the external plane — harmony or inharmony — are drawn into the body, then into the mind, then into the soul, which sets the soul either in calmness or in disturbance. When exhaling, one's feelings and thoughts first work on one's body, then on surroundings. When inhaling, the thoughts and feelings from the external plane are drawn into the body and into the mind. The same is the case with the physical body; it sends out the gases with exhaling, and inhaling, takes in all the fine properties from one's surroundings.

"Balance in one's life and being is maintained by the evenness of inhaling and exhaling. The compass of our being is as large as the reaching point of his breath. One lives a fuller life, another does not live a fuller life, because the former breathes fuller, the latter does not breathe fuller. Very often the reason why a child is a dwarf is that his breathing capacity does not allow him to breathe fully; and often the reason why a youth does not develop fully is that he does not breathe properly. A person ages sooner, also because his breathing is not right. Very often people who have no particular illness feel tired and lifeless, because their breathing is not as it ought to be.

"The nourishment of the nervous system is what breath attracts from the space. As far as science goes, it says one gets into one's system oxygen. The mystic goes further in saying, not only oxygen, but that life and intelligence, that power and radiance which makes the nerv-

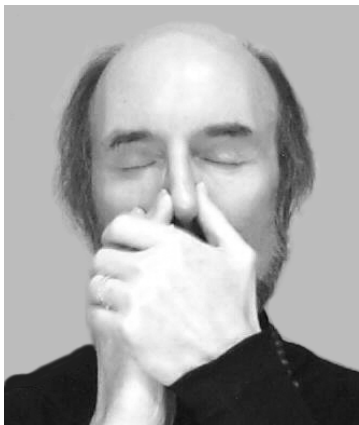
ous system in perfect order, the result of which is not only good health but ever-increasing magnetism, which comes forth from the person in his thought, speech, movement and action, charging his atmosphere with magnetism which surrounds him as a fortification and protection against all influences, physical and mental; thus making man live a fuller life."

### The Practice of "the Purification Breaths"

The Purification Breaths given here are the most basic of Sufi breath practices. It is through this practice (plus your personal practices) that you establish the foundation for your daily activities. They also form the basis whereupon one may begin learning the fundamentals of what is called by the Sufis "the Science of Breath" (*Pas-i Ānfās*).

The purpose of this practice is *clearing* and *balancing* of the channels of breath. The more advanced forms of breathing practices using a retained breath serve to energize the channels of the breath and thereby the whole being, and this practice is a preparation for those more-advanced practices. This practice should be done prior to any practices of retained breath done that day; it's not a good idea to energize an energy channel until it is clear and balanced.

This practice is done in a relaxed, *natural* rhythm and depth of inhale/exhale, with *no* retention, and with as little "noise" as possible at the nostrils. The classical Sufi nostril-controlling hand position is this:



Place the *thumb* of your *right* hand in the horizontal center of your throat below the chin (just above the "Adam's apple"), and the *middle finger* of the right hand on the right nostril. Place the *thumb* of your *left* hand on your left nostril, and curl the fingers of your left hand around the back of the right hand. The air flow is controlled by the left thumb and right middle finger, *not* the glottis, i.e., don't close your throat. (This hand position is more balanced and grounded than the yogic mudra of controlling the nostrils with the thumb and middle finger with the index & ring

fingers on the third eye, which concentrates energy in the third eye.) The proportion of inhale to exhale is usually timed to the heartbeat, using multiples of four as the increment, i.e., four beats per inhale, four per exhale, or eight per inhale, eight per exhale. The purpose of this timing is to bring two of the basic three human rhythms into sync. (The third rhythm is the gait.) The absolute best time of day for this practice is between first light and sunrise, but first thing after arising or morning shower/teethbrush is fine. This practice can also be done any other time during the day for a quick tuneup. The best location is out-


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side, bare feet on the earth, facing east. If that is not possible, at least stand in front of an open window.

The sequence is this:

| Inhale        | Exhale        |
|---------------|---------------|
| left nostril  | left nostril  |
| right         | right         |
| left          | right         |
| right         | left          |
| left          | mouth         |
| right         | mouth         |
| mouth         | left          |
| mouth         | right         |
| (drop hands)  |               |
| both nostrils | both nostrils |
| both nostrils | pursed lips   |
| pursed lips   | both nostrils |
| pursed lips   | pursed lips   |



5 times each

In the corpus of practices given in the Ināyati Order, one will encounter the last twenty breaths of this sequenced being called “the Purification Breaths.” The practice as given here is more complete.

The subtle rhythms which are aligned and synched by this practice are fundamental to much of human functioning. Our life force cycles through the Elements of “Earth,” “Water,” “Fire,” and “Air” several times during 24 hours, each Element predominating in succession during these cycles and having an effect on which nostril, and whether inhale or exhale, is more open. Each Element rules a chakra and in turn the appertaining chakra rules an organ system and a domain of subtle and gross physiology and psychology. A great deal of emotional and psychic imbalance is traceable to the energies of the Elements getting out of balance and/or out-of-sequence. This practice moves the Breath intentionally through all the patterns of nostrils and directions, and sets each Element to “neutral” predominance.

As noted above, this practice should be done first thing in the morning, in a relaxed rhythm, out-of-doors or at least in front of an open window. It’s not necessary or desirable for your physical breath to be much deeper or longer than normal.