

Calm Thy "Self" By John R. Stevenson

Each time the students and I begin preparations for the studio recital I notice distinct changes in the atmosphere. First, the students seem to focus on their practice, and more determined to play well. Second, the parents seem to focus and become determined that their children play their best. Third, the students become anxious about the idea of performing in front of people and unsure of their ability to hold themselves together. Fourth, the parents become more anxious about their children performing in public and their ability to hold themselves together. Can you see the snowball rolling? A snowball with fear based at its very core. The parents catching it from the children, and the children catching it from the parents. If gone unchecked, the fear will lead everyone down the path of calamity. Fear is our greatest enemy. However, without fear, would we know when to run and when to fight? It is true; we cannot live without it. Fear, like all aspects of our lives has two poles: one negative and one positive with ourselves stuck in the middle, continuously pulled in one direction and then in another. We must take control of this polarity and bring it into balance. In effect, we must learn to live with it.

As people, we have all types of fears in all sorts of varying intensities. They may stem from our life experiences, no matter how young or old, they may stem from the gene pool we inherited, or they may be part of our creative imaginations, but one thing is sure; it does not matter. Fear is fear and the only true way to deal with it is to acknowledge that we have it, realize some of it will be with us forever, and accept that it is an integral part of being a fully alive human being. Therefore, parents are going to be apprehensive, students are going to be anxious, and teachers are going to be concerned as a public performance approaches. I would be more worried if this phenomenon were ever to stop occurring. Naturally, the effect on some individuals is more profound than on others, but everyone is affected.

To acknowledge and accept the reality of our fears is the first step and a difficult one. It slows the snowball, and helps prevent stressful situations escalating out of control. However, it does not necessarily make living with fear any easier: to do that we need to take the second step toward calming our inner "self". This step is even harder since it involves discipline: that dreaded concept we all want to avoid. We must learn to discipline our mind, so that it can begin to turn down the volume of our fear, calm our spirit; and focus our attention away from ourselves and toward the given task.

For all performing musicians no matter what age, no matter how experienced it is all the same. We all must learn to discipline the mind so that it can divert our thinking away from the fear of regretting the time spent in preparation, the fear of feeling inadequate, the fear of feeling humiliation, and the fear of possibly disappointing our supporters and advocates, and especially the fear of disappointing ourselves. We must discipline the mind so that it is able to focus our attention on the gratification we obtain from making music for a very generous audience. We should be thinking about the appreciation they feel for our efforts, on the satisfaction we receive from completing a difficult task, and on the reward we earn from

having learned a new piece of music and having learned something new about ourselves in the process.

The only path open to the mind is through the body. The body is the vessel that holds and yet conceals the true inner "Self": the "Self" who understands reality, the "Self" who is waiting to be unveiled, the Self who God intends us to be. By learning to be in command of our body, we learn to gain power over our mind, which allows us to reveal the "Self" who no longer needs to buy into fear, doubt, loneliness or despair.

Question: if the body is the only path open to the mind, where do we begin? The answer is **the breath**. Donna Farhi, a well-known expert in the field provides us with some insight in her text "The Breathing Book."

Breathing is one of the simplest things in the world. We breathe in, we breathe out. When we breathe with real freedom, we neither grasp for nor hold on to the breath. No effort is required to pull the breath in or to push the breath out. Given the simplicity of breathing, one would think it was the easiest thing to do in the world. However, if it were truly so easy there would be few unhappy or unhealthy people in the world. To become a welcome vessel for the breath is to live life without trying to control, grasp, or push away. And how easy is this? The process of breathing is the most accurate metaphor we have for the way that we personally approach life, how we live our lives, and how we react to the inevitable changes that life brings us.

Throughout time the process of breathing was always considered inseparable from our health, consciousness, and spirit, and is only recently that we have reduced breathing to a mere respiratory exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen. In Greek, *psyche pneuma* meant breath/soul/air/spirit. In Latin, *anima spiritus*, breath/soul. In Japanese, *ki*, air/spirit; and in Sanskrit, *prana* connoted a resonant life force that is at no time more apparent than when that force is extinguished at the moment of death. In Chinese the character for "breath" (*hsi*) is made up of three characters that mean "of the conscious self or heart." The breath was seen as a force that ran through mind, body, and spirit like a river running through a dry valley giving sustenance to everything in its course.

Today, our intuition about the potential power of the breath is firmly embedded in the very structure of our language. We speak about the breath in common, everyday expressions but it rarely occurs to us to associate this with our immediate bodily experience. We say that we need "a breath of fresh air," "You take my breath away," "I couldn't catch my breath," or "I waited with bated breath." Alternatively, exclaim that something was "simply breathtaking we complain of someone "breathing down our neck" and needing "room to breath", "breathing a sigh of relief," or

taking a breather.” We tell our friends “not to breathe a word,” and we complain about being “out of breath.” Yet, few of us, when faced with fatigue, illness, or anxiety, look to our breath as a possible source for regeneration. Because it is right under our noses, the significance of this ever-renewable source of energy has escaped our attention. [Page 5, 6]

Controlling our breathing certainly does lead to relieving fatigue, illness and above all anxiety. As Ms Farhi states: it is a natural function and yet rarely drawn upon for physical and emotional relief. If done properly one can energize the entire organism by reducing the heart rate, lowering the blood pressure, rejuvenating the organs, revitalizing the skin, expanding the lung capacity, strengthening the muscles and producing a natural “high.” Oxygen is a powerful gift that can work miracles.

Breathing is one of the main reasons I enjoy teaching students to sing. A singer must learn to breathe well in order to sing well. As I coach a singer, I must teach breathing. It is not so strange to be talking about how the lungs function, how the organs are affected, and how the muscles work. I know that as I discuss breathing, the student is learning not only to support a musical phrase but also to calm or revitalize himself at will.

Pianists should also learn to breathe as well: just because their instrument functions without air does not mean their body does. They too must learn to inhale before the phrase and exhale throughout the execution. For them however, the concept is far more abstract, and therefore very difficult to comprehend its importance or its purpose. For most pianists, young or old, it is almost impossible for them to realize that they breathe at all.

A particular exercise will help singer, pianist, and parent to calm themselves, lower their blood pressure and relieve their anxieties. The exercise helps to balance the body and mind and leave you in a mentally alert but relaxed state. I use this technique myself before going on stage, before doing any public presentations and workshops, and when I am able to catch myself losing my patience. It is “Alternate Nostril Breathing” and it has worked wonders for me. I have borrowed some of the directions for this exercise from MS Donna Fari. My description leans more toward my practice as a yogi. Her complete description of this exercise is found on pages 161 -- 163 in her text “The Breathing Book,” published by Henry Holt and Company, New York, ISBN 0-8050-4297-0. I highly recommend the book to everyone.

HERE’S HOW I DO IT!

Sit squarely on your sitz bones cross-legged either on a cushion or just sitting on the edge of a chair. The important thing is that your knees should be lower than your hips. You will use your thumb and your ring finger of either hand. Alternating hands each time you practice is a good idea. As you begin, close your eyes and place the tip of the thumb on the side of one nostril and the tip of the ring finger on the other nostril. The cycle is as follows:

Take a good breath through both nostrils.

Close the right nostril and exhale completely through the left nostril.

Inhale through the left nostril.

Close the left nostril and exhale through the right nostril. This completes one cycle. Continue for up to 20 or 30 cycles, finishing by exhaling through the left nostril.

As you proceed through the cycles check your posture and be certain that you are not slouching forward with your torso.

Once you have become adept at the basic form of alternate nostril breathing you can begin to time each segment of the breath by mentally counting. In this way, the inhalation and exhalation will be exactly the same length. Start with a number that is comfortable such as four and gradually build up to six, eight, ten, and even twelve counts for each phase of the breath. Above all, do not use force at any time. The lengthening of the breath cycle should arise because of opening and relaxing and not through force or aggression. Counting can be an excellent way of keeping the mind focused, especially if you have a tendency to drift off. Practice disciplining the mind by remaining focused on your breath.

This exercise, done on a regular basis will produce cumulative benefits. Therefore, students should do this exercise at least once a day for about 2 weeks before a performance, and two or three times on the day of the performance. Just before playing and in the seat, another 20 rounds or so would be most beneficial.

There are many other types of alternate nostril exercises as well as a myriad of other types of breathing exercises. They all have various functions and benefits, and yet they all lead to the same place: a greater control of the body leading to a greater control of the mind, and a calming of the inner “Self.”