

KUMBHAK PRANAYAM

Riding the Wind

The first time I went sailing was on a calm day with my elder brother. Enjoying the warmth of the sun and sparkling light on the water, we gently drifted quite far from the shore. Suddenly the wind blew up and caught the sail – wow!! I was exhilarated and yet, being young and so far out at sea, I was also scared. Excited and scared, with no choice but to ride the wind! With the wind billowing the sail and the sleek laser speeding through whitecaps, it was such a memorable experience to feel the immense force of something way bigger than a small body. Way bigger than what can be controlled by my small hands tightly grasping the single line that guides the sail. To ride, rather than control – be it riding the wind, riding a horse, or riding one's powerful emotions – is to be one with the source of nature.

Pranayam is the science of the breath that harnesses the wind energy. Just as we cannot control the wind, we cannot control human nature. But through conscious breathing practices we can fine tune this vehicle – the body and mind – to wisely steer our boat through life. Bringing our breath with awareness in alignment with the master-consciousness, life's magnificent presence is realised, transforming the physical breath into *pran*, the power-source of the breath.

Just as a wave is a breath of the ocean, one breath is a wave of the sky, drawing from and then resolving into pure Being. No single wave can control the ocean, for there is no separate wave to be the controller. And no gust of wind is other than the sky. The sense of body and mind is the manifestation of *pranic* power, just as the wave is the manifestation of the ocean. The recognition of the oneness, the sameness of wave and ocean, the sameness of wind and sky, and body-mind and *praan*, dissolves the struggle between the individual and its own source.

Kumbhak Represents the Source of Life

One technique, perceived and thereby practised by yogis since Vedic times, is to reduce the breath and retain it for a period of time. The practice is called *Kumbhak*. *Kumbh* is a clay pot used for transporting water, carried on the heads of Indian women. The *kumbh*, first conceived of in the mind of the potter, and then moulded into manifestation as a vessel to carry the life-giving water, is like our body and mind that is shaped by unseen, *pranic* forces, to be made manifest to fulfil our higher purpose.

The value in *Kumbhak* practice is to develop the ability to ride the *praan*, whereby the mind expands beyond the boundary of simply recognising the physical breath, opening to a deep trust that the body, mind and breath are supported and sustained by the subtle, infinitely more powerful, and innately intelligent *pranic* force. The physical breath becomes so subtle that the realisation unfolds that body and mind is not divided from its power-source, just as the *kumbh* is not separate from the clay.

The open mouth of the *kumbh* allows the free flow of water to both fill and empty the pot – like the inhalation and the exhalation of the breath. The rhythmic pattern of the breath corresponds to the patterns and waves of the mind. When one practises *Kumbhak*, the mind waves slow and settle down, the nervous system slows down, turning on your natural relaxation response (the parasympathetic nervous system).

Kumbhak is not simply to take a big gasp of air and hold the breath until you are about to burst. The true practice of *Kumbhak* is to lighten the breath until it is imperceptible, slowly reducing your intake of oxygen, until there is a spontaneous suspension of the breath, in which there is no struggle or force. In a true *Kumbhak*, a wonderful recognition of the stillness at the source of the mind, and realisation of the true sustaining power, the *pran*, is naturally revealed.

Take a Deep Breath

“Take a deep breath,” is the well-intended advice one gives to a friend who is stressed, afraid, or wound up about something. But taking a big gasp of air turns out to create the exact opposite result – it causes your blood vessels and muscles to contract. Taking a big breath, your chest raises, your belly contracts, and then your breath bursts out with an equally inefficient exhalation. Whereas, less is more! Less intake of oxygen, i.e. gentler, lighter, belly-breaths are more oxygen-efficient, and are therefore more calming, strengthening, and energy-enhancing on all levels – body, mind, energy and spirit.

The standard oxygen saturation in our lungs lies between 95 – 99%. Because oxygen is continually diffusing from the blood into the cells, 100% saturation is not feasible and not necessary. So if you huff and puff, taking big breaths, you hyperventilate, but you do not increase the oxygenation of the blood. So, if we do not need more oxygen, how should we breathe for an optimal effect?

Reduced Breathing Increases Oxygen Absorption

As you know, breathing delivers oxygen from the air, through the respiratory system, to be converted into energy in your body's cells. Oxygen is transported in blood by red blood cells, but oxygen needs to be released from the red blood cells in order to be absorbed more efficiently in the body. Here is the surprising part. When there is a higher concentration of carbon dioxide in your blood, then hemoglobin in the red blood cells release oxygen, allowing more oxygen to reach your muscles, organs, and tissues, to be then converted into energy.* So carbon dioxide, commonly thought of as a toxic gas, turns out to be a key player in getting oxygen to where it is needed in your body.

***Kumbhak Pranayam* - The King of Calming Breathing Practices**

The ancient Vedic breathing practice of *Kumbhak* reduces and then retains the breath for a short period of time. Modern science now can explain the health-promoting and calming effect of slightly reducing our intake of oxygen, but we are not reliant on science for this rational explanation, for we are our own reliable scientist and our nervous system is our laboratory to confirm the result. If we take some time to practise *Kumbhak* in the correct way, we will prove the effect to be true within our own nervous system.

All the *pranayam* techniques are preparation for *Kumbhak*, considered to be the king of *pranayam*. But *Kumbhak* is not the result of hyperventilating, pumping up the lungs with air and holding the breath by pushing the limits of tolerance, tensing the body in the spirit of competition. "For how long can I hold my breath?" In this way, *pranayam* practice will not be transformative, because it does not bring about the result of ease, relaxation, wellbeing, and the optimal absorption of oxygen. *Kumbhak* is a completely effortless suspension of the breath, without the need to increase the rate or intake of oxygen when breathing is resumed.

Kumbhak is the natural rest or stillness between each inhalation and exhalation, but we tend not to pay attention to it. The purpose of *pranayam* is to pay attention to the *kumbhak* – the stillness, the indestructible source of power. That power is available to everyone all the time. That power is the life-giving force.

It is possible to hold your breath without ANY strain or struggle.

[Click here for a guided *pranayam* recording in *Kumbhak*.](#)

* This scientific discovery was made by Christian Bohr and is called the Bohr effect.