

# Chapter 24

## The Science and Art of Contemporary Breathwork and Yoga

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter provides evidence for the benefit of bringing yoga and its breathing practices into a working relationship with contemporary breathwork techniques for the betterment of both in certain circumstances. The history and developmental overlap of both are explored as well as their applications in the field of physical health, psychotherapy, and spiritual growth. The benefits of both faster than normal and slower than normal breathing techniques are reviewed for the treatment of anxiety, depression, and addictions as well as the neurological correlates for breathwork and trauma recovery. A pilot study utilizing the combination of the two disciplines is reported.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1970s there has been an explosion in the blending of ancient breathing techniques for health and spiritual awareness with contemporary growth and therapeutic practices. The result has been the evolution of powerful and incisive healing and consciousness changing modalities. This has given birth to the field of contemporary breathwork which has promoted significant advances in medical, psychological and spiritual domains.

Breathwork is one of the newly emerging tools of complementary medicine which has the daunting yet highly engaging task of blending the old and the new for the purpose of creating something better than either in isolation. It presents a new paradigm of whole brain learning which is at the intersection of science and art. Our life is a dance of the two cerebral hemispheres: right/left, intuitive/logical. This

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understanding is not just a poetic viewpoint, but necessary to a full comprehension of how we operate. We can no longer live in world of Newtonian physics, black and white thinking. We learn with our whole body, organically not just with the cerebral cortex. Breathwork bridges both brain hemispheres and accesses functions of paleo, meso and neo cortex, thus reaches a more inclusive level functioning.

A 3,000 year old tradition, yoga, is now regarded in the Western world as a holistic approach to health, and is classified by the National Institutes of Health in the United States as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (Woodyard, 2011). Yoga is a form of mind-body fitness that involves a combination of muscular activity and an internally directed mindful focus on awareness of the self, the breath, and energy (Collins, 1998).

The time honored tradition of yoga and the developing field of contemporary breathwork have developed independently with both similarities and differences in the use of the breath as evidenced in the various schools of both disciplines, e.g., nostril versus mouth breathing, use of breath retention, slower than normal vs. faster than normal breathing, etc. This chapter focuses on the overlaps and potential complementary benefits of their use together, rather than on the theories which appear to differ or purport to be mutually exclusive. How yoga and contemporary advances in breathwork are complementing and enhancing each other is the objective of this chapter.

## **Slower Than Normal Breathing**

Breath awareness becomes the foundation for practices which I call maintenance breathing skills that have been so influential for humans through millennia in bringing increased peace of mind and healing to the body. This is exemplified by *pranayama* in the yoga tradition and translated into contemporary forms such as mindfulness and coherent breathing. Coherent Breathing, a form of maintenance breathing, for example, entails slowing the breath to 5 to 6 breaths per minute for 4 minutes or more. The physiological effects are documented by Heart Math research (Heart Math Institute, 2001) for regulating the parasympathetic nervous system and calming the mind. It is the practical and immediately experienced effects of breath awareness and modulation that can open minds to the benefits of more regularly implemented practices. This can also prepare people for more major lifestyle renovation, e.g., opening awareness to their dietary and exercise habits.

## **Natural Breathing**

Ultimately our goal in breath awareness is not to be consciously controlling our breathing every moment of the day. Breath modulation techniques are used to counter the holding patterns which impede easy flowing natural breathing and to practice maintaining that state. Breath awareness simply makes us more conscious of when the breath is not flowing easy and naturally so we can pay attention and address the signs of distress. The goal of breath awareness and breath modulation is to experience the joy of natural breathing and being alive.

## **Faster Than Normal Breathing**

Therapeutic breathwork (Morningstar, 2017) is form of breathing that adds to the repertoire of breath awareness and maintenance breathing, by including and teaching the skills of sympathetic nervous system regulation. As a form of healing, increasing the breathing cycle to 30-70 breaths per minute in

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