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Citation:

Cohen, E (2015) The Hold and Release Practice: A New Way into Meditation and Mindfulness. *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, 17 (1). ISSN 1366-6991

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This is a pre-publication version of the following article:

The Hold and Release Practice: A New Way into Meditation and Mindfulness

– by Dr Elliot Cohen

Abstract:

I initially developed the ‘Hold and Release Practice’ (HRP) whilst working with enhanced-care service users in the NHS and private practice (between 2005-2009). The HRP was subsequently developed and introduced to BA(Hons) Psychology & Society undergraduates between (2011-2014) and to Interdisciplinary Psychology MA students at Leeds Metropolitan University (2013-2014), and to over 100 participants at various ‘Yoga Manchester – Meditation for Beginners’ workshops (from 2013 onwards).

More recently the practice was offered as a workshop during the 18th Annual Transpersonal Psychology Section Conference, ‘Contextualising Mindfulness: Between the Sacred and the Secular’ (10th-12th October 2014).

This short and seemingly simple practice, serves as an embodied and experiential introduction to the relationship between posture, breath and mind, and is also a potent ‘preliminary practice’, preceding and supporting any style of sitting meditation practice.

In addition to outlining and describing the technique, this paper will provide transpersonally-informed, reflexive interpretations on the practice - inspired by traditional Daoist cultivation techniques, Kabbalistic and Vedantic perspectives.

It is hoped that in addition to being of use to novice meditators that the HRP will also serve as a useful supplement for those with an established practice.

The Hold and Release Practice (HRP) appears remarkably simple, if one is to consider and relate to it only as a physical exercise – comprising, as it does, of three main movements:



Figure 1- Holding (Embracing) – 2 minute duration



Figure 2 - Holding (Bowing) – 2 minute duration



Figure 3 - Release (Slowly rising into upright posture)

However, the physical components of the exercise (what one does with one's body) may be considered as constituting merely an outer form or expression, whereas the various levels of inner form and activity (what one does with one's breath and mind) are what give the technique its potency - its semiotic charge and transformative potential. The movements themselves initially take the form of a kinaesthetic learning activity, with the intention of allowing the meditator to achieve a gentle yet poised posture.

One may initially see some commonalities with Edmund Jacobson's (1938) early work concerning 'progressive relaxation' through consciously tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups- one key difference however is that the HRP doesn't require any tensing, and achieves its aim purely through a shift in posture and accompanying associations/visualisations.

The HRP is also a way to vividly experience what Herbert Benson (2009) describes as the 'relaxation response', through its deliberate contrast with what may be perceived (initially) as a 'stress response'.

As the HRP begins with one's body and posture it would be appropriate to refer to Catherine Kerr's recent work on mindfulness-based somatic awareness, and her observation that 'mindfulness starts with the body' (Kerr et al 2013) - as the body (and one's breath) is always anchored in the present moment.

This focus on the body also provides us with an opportunity to recall and reflect upon the earlier, pioneering work of Wilhelm Reich (1976), concerning bio-energetics and his early descriptions of psychophysical rigidity - 'body armouring' and the importance of being able to identify, loosen and release these restrictive, damaging blockages.

I have found that the HRP is particularly useful for introducing mindfulness-based approaches (Kabat-Zinn 2013) to beginners - as it simultaneously allows new meditators to achieve a comfortable, upright position, whilst experientially discovering for themselves the fundamental relationships between posture, breath and mind.

A Posture Practice

A comfortable and upright posture (a required foundation for any effective meditation practice) is often difficult for new meditators to achieve. One is commonly advised not to slouch too far forward (often resulting in torpor or sleepiness) or arch too far backwards (commonly leading to back pain and an associated agitated state of mind) – thus achieving an embodied ‘Middle Way’, much like the Buddha’s meditation instructions to his struggling disciple Sona (a former musician):

“Sona,” he said, “I have heard that you are not getting good results from your practice of mindfulness and want to return to the lay life. Suppose I explain why you did not get good results, would you stay on as a monk and try again?”

“Yes I would, Lord,” replied Sona.

“Sona, you were a musician and you used to play the lute. Tell me, Sona, did you produce good music when the lute string was well tuned, neither too tight nor too loose?”

“I was able to produce good music, Lord,” replied Sona.

“What happened when the strings were too tightly wound up?”

“I could not produce any music, Lord,” said Sona.

“What happened when the strings were too slack?”

“I could not produce any music at all, Lord,” replied Sona

“Sona, do you now see why you did not experience the happiness of renouncing worldly craving? You have been straining too hard in your meditation. Do it in a relaxed way, but without being slack. Try it again and you will experience the good result.”

Sona understood and stayed on in the monastery as a monk and soon attained sainthood.

(Sona Sutta, A.iii.374f, Buddhnet Accessed 04.09.2014)

What is important, in relation to the HRP, is the Buddha’s use of opposites and extremes to skilfully demonstrate the ideal state – this will be later explored with reference to Daoist teachings concerning the dynamic relationship between Yin and Yang and the Hebrew letters (*Beit* and *Aleph*).

Practice Outline of the Hold (Embracing, Bowing)

The first position one adopts is the holding position, where (whether one is seated on a cushion or a chair) one crosses one’s arms over one’s chest, while placing the hands upon opposing shoulders (see figure 1) – this resembles both the ‘brace position’ that one adopts when an aeroplane is making an emergency landing, and also the posture

the *Mevlevi* Sufi adopts (while standing) before his dance, as part of the *Sama* ceremony – ecstatic movement (as a form of *Dhikr* – devotional acts).¹

Rather than the ‘brace position’ I would prefer this to be thought of in a more Sufi manner as an ‘embrace’ position – as one is literally left holding, embracing oneself.

As part of the inner practice, at the point of extension and subsequent return, one may use one’s arms, hands and imagination in tandem, to visualise gathering up all the various disparate aspects or fragments of oneself, or of one’s life, into one’s being and centre² - where it is held and contained. At this point one allows the weight of the elbows to naturally lower the body (including the head), allowing it to bow into a semi-foetal position (see figure 2).

During the practice I have found that it is important to consider (and record) not only people’s experiences – ‘how I experienced the movements/what I felt’, but to also take into account people’s associations – ‘what I associate this with/what this reminded me of’. By including participants associations it is hoped that we are able to understand the effects of the technique in more holistic depth.

When performed with student groups (n=32 in 2011, n=36 in 2012, n=30 in 2013) at Leeds Metropolitan University, as part of the Psychonautics (navigating the mind) module, meditators commonly reported two quite distinct ‘feelings’ and ‘associations’ while in the second position (see figure 2):

1. ‘I feel safe, protected, cocooned’
2. ‘I feel a little restricted; it’s not as easy to breathe’

Although the vast majority of meditators experiences were in the first category, I was keen to address the issues raised in the second.

Firstly, whether pleasant or unpleasant, the posture is temporary (held for only 2 minutes) – in this sense one might understand the position as helping one to cultivate qualities of ‘patience, forbearance equanimity and compassion’³ (Wallace 2011, p.167), which should all be integral qualities underlying and supporting any meditation training.

Secondly, the sensation of not being able to breathe as easily (and perhaps some of the resulting associations with being ‘restricted’) is primarily due to our habitual predisposition to breathe from the chest (or in particularly stressful situations the

¹ For some beautiful footage of the *Sama* ritual the reader may wish to visit and view the following link: <http://vimeo.com/87064606> accessed 03.10.14

² Analytically-inclined readers may appreciate certain parallels with Jung’s writings on Individuation, and related Lurianic Kabbalistic teachings regarding ‘gathering the sparks’ of holiness – the curious reader may consult Drob, S. L. (2000) *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought*. Lanham, Maryland: J. Aaronson.

³ Thinking of this posture as an embrace may also call to mind one of the first stages of the Buddhist *Metta Bhavana* – Cultivation of loving-kindness practice – embracing ourselves maybe understood as physical reminder of self-compassion.

throat); the position of the arms across the chest appears to inhibit a full inhalation – however with a slight shift in focus one can effectively and quite dramatically reverse this feeling.

The position of the arms across the chest is actually and naturally moving the centre and sensation of breath, from the chest into the belly. In effect the hold and bow position (see figure 2), should encourage one to move the breath deeper into the body and the belly – this is the identical place one typically focuses on in Yoga (abdominal breathing) and the ‘preferred location’ of focus during Daoist meditation (Kohn 2010, p.2).

Wisdom is like water. It resides in the lower meditation field, the belly. The head is for thinking; the heart for willing and desiring. The belly is the place for wisdom and contemplation. We “return” to Dao’s gestating presence, from this inner womb of intuitive awareness.
- Daoist Master Zhang (Saso 2012, p.1)

This shift in attention from the chest into the belly leads to a natural deepening, lengthening and gentling of the breath, and also provides a sense of release (when contrasted with restricted chest or throat breathing). This position is held for only a short time - 2 minutes is sufficient.

Practice Outline – The Release

The following release movement is done extremely slowly with close attention paid to every sensation and association. The hands are released from the shoulders and slide slowly down the outside of one’s upper arms, then down the legs until the hands are palms-down, just above (or if one prefers upon) the knees. One then begins a very steady and conscientious process of moving into an upright position; using the in-breath to provide a gentle momentum; pushing gradually upwards, leading with the head. One continues until one ‘feels’ perfectly upright, poised and balanced (see figure 3). After reaching the fully-upright position one may gently roll the shoulders back to enhance the sense of openness; one may also gently and slightly tilt the head backwards then forwards before resting naturally at the centre to further enhance the sense of balance – one is then free to simply sit with bare attention, or to gradually move into one’s familiar practice.

Meditators have consistently reported very vivid and pleasant sensations during this movement into the final, resting position:

1. ‘I felt so relaxed’
2. ‘I felt so free’
3. ‘My mind felt really still and calm’

The shift in posture and the subsequent re-opening of the chest area (physiologically and psychologically) provides a strong sensation of release and the feeling of opening- allowing one to feel as though one is now breathing with one’s whole body (from both the belly and the chest). It is a relatively swift method to induce a ‘relaxation response’ (Benson 2009) and many meditators reported that it wasn’t simply a matter of them feeling physically more relaxed, or breathing deeper/gentler,

but that their minds also felt calmed and centred by this practice. It is in this manner that one can begin to demonstrate the way one's posture affects one's breath, and the way one's breath affects one's state of mind. The Daoist scholar and cultivator/meditator Professor Livia Kohn has insightfully observed:

In all cases, the breath is a bridge between body and mind, as an expression of mental reality, closely linked to emotions, nervous conditions, and peace. The more the breath is deepened and calmed, the quieter the mind becomes and the easier it is to suspend the critical factor and enter into the serenity of the meditative state. (Kohn 2010, p.2)

The HRP's kinaesthetic properties may also be related to, and supported by a relatively recent experiment conducted by Carney, Cuddy and Yap (2010) concerning 'power poses'. The research team explored how by adopting certain 'power poses' (one particularly dramatic example included having both one's arms raised above one's head in a heroic or victorious manner), participants would actually begin internalise what the posture signified, and to feel more confident and self-assured – due to its particular pertinence I have taken the unusual step of including the abstract in its entirety:

Humans and other animals express power through open, expansive postures, and they express powerlessness through closed, contractive postures. But can these postures actually cause power? The results of this study confirmed our prediction that posing in high-power nonverbal displays (as opposed to low-power nonverbal displays) would cause neuroendocrine and behavioral changes for both male and female participants: High-power posers experienced elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk; low-power posers exhibited the opposite pattern. In short, posing in displays of power caused advantaged and adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioral changes, and these findings suggest that embodiment extends beyond mere thinking and feeling, to physiology and subsequent behavioral choices. That a person can, by assuming two simple 1-min poses, embody power and instantly become more powerful has real-world, actionable implications. (Carney, Cuddy and Yap 2010, p.1363)

These findings point to the bi-directionality of body language- in that our physical posture and movements (features of non-verbal communication) don't simply communicate and indicate aspects of ourselves to others (revealing whether we may be feeling - scared or self-assured), but that our postures are also speaking to ourselves (and that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we are listening).

In 1999, while attending teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist master Sogyal Rinpoche, I was conscious of how he spent a great deal of time talking about the importance of taking an "inspiring posture" during meditation – imagining one is a king or a queen, or even a mountain, and to sit in manner that conveys this majesty or solidity. This advice certainly transformed my practice and it is hoped that the HRP may be utilised

as a moving practice that embodies and communicates (to oneself and others) a sense of rising and opening up, in confidence, and sitting with authentic presence.

Transpersonal Perspectives and Reflections on the HRP

The HRP rests on a keen awareness of contrast, between first being in a closed and then open posture. Meditators' respective, accompanying associations are as important as the postures, and I am always keen to consistently record reflections following sittings, and encourage others to follow the set procedure in order to replicate these results for themselves.

The holding positions may be seen as a deliberately exaggerated embodiment of being in a stressful state; although it is important to note that the position itself is typically adopted due to its comforting properties. A foetal or semi-foetal position is commonly observed during times of stress or as a result of some trauma. Whilst working in the Grafton ward of Manchester St. Mary's Psychiatric unit (during 2003-2004) I would often observe patients (particularly new patients) in this all-too-familiar posture.

On the one hand it is typically/traditionally interpreted as a symbolic act of, or attempt at regression – to return to the warm, safe prenatal environment of the womb. It may equally be understood from an evolutionary or comparative psychological perspective, as an inbuilt defensive mechanism - in that vulnerable prey can often be observed (when neither 'fight' nor 'flight' is possible) attempting to roll into a ball in order to protect themselves – retreating within as opposed to retreating without.

But one may, and I believe should, also take a more transpersonal view and understand it not merely as an attempt to return to a pre-birth state, or a form of atavistic regression, but rather the psychophysical expression of a wish to initiate a process of re-birth. In this way the movements themselves can begin to take on a deeper, more personal and spiritual significance, whilst being simultaneously rooted in ancient wisdom traditions – in this instance I have utilised Daoist, Kabbalistic and Hindu concepts (and I would actively invite and encourage additional insights from the reader).

I do not believe this to simply be a mere process of 'reading in' to these postures, but rather if one conscientiously follows the practice these connections and resonances appear to present themselves; to be intuitively and experientially 'read out' (Lancaster 2007) by practitioners.

To this end, what now follows are series of Transpersonally-informed reflections (Anderson and Braud 2011) and reflexive interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009) – that is to say 'Ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing' (Clegg & Hardy 1996, quoted in Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009 p.271). It then remains up to the reader and practitioner to test and establish for themselves the usefulness of these reflections and connections (and for this purpose I am keen to enter into correspondence).

Daoist Insights

Through my ongoing immersion in Daoist traditions⁴, including my work with the Northern School of Daoist Studies (2009-2013) and the British Taoist Association (2008-2015), some clear connections between the HRP and traditional Daoist cultivation have emerged.

We have already explored the manner in which the second position one adopts (see figure 2 – holding- bowing) is evocative of the foetus. In Daoist traditions of 內丹 *Neidan* - Inner Alchemy, one of the ultimate goals is to cultivate the immortal embryo - 聖胎 *Shengtai* (see figure 4). This inner-chemical process is described in Richard Wilhelm's (1962) famous translation of 'The Secret of the Golden Flower', for which Carl Jung (his close friend) provided the foreword and commentary.



Figure 4 - The Immortal Embryo/Foetus (Author's collection)

This embryo may be understood to represent the cultivation of an immortal, fully-realised potential, and authentic Self. I have previously written about both the significance and symbolism of this idea from an Analytical perspective:

A Jungian may view as particularly intriguing that the Daoist's visualisations of conceiving and gestating the immortal embryo, centre beneath our navel (in the lower *dantian*); beneath the original,

⁴ Primarily the *Quanzhen* (Complete Reality) *Longmen* (Dragon's Gate) tradition.

simultaneously physical and symbolic mark of separation from our mother (from *the* mother). This psychological separation, or freedom, from the mother would likely be understood by Jungians as being part of the heroic journey towards selfhood; and what better way to symbolize this process than by “symbolically” giving birth to one’s Self. (Cohen 2011, p.112)

The long and complicated processes of Daoist cultivation include introducing the practitioner to the technique of embryonic breathing. Embryonic breathing is understood to be the key in regulating and directing the *Qi* around the body to ensure health, longevity and eventual realisation.

It begins by instructing the practitioner in normal abdominal breathing, or 佛家呼吸 *Fo Jia Hu Xi* - Buddha breathing (Yang 2003, p.68) which can naturally occur as a result of the second posture in the HRP (figure 2). As one inhales the abdomen gently expands, and as one exhales the abdomen slowly contracts – ‘...Normal Abdominal Breathing is able to bring a beginning practitioner to a state of deep relaxation’ (Ibid. p.71).

As the traditional visualisations include generating and raising the *qi* from the belly (lower *dantian*), up the spine, into the head (upper *dantian* – or third eye) this ascent is mirrored in the lifting/straightening of the posture (from figure 3 to figure 4).

In almost all Chinese arts of cultivation, *Daoyin* (a form of Daoist Yoga), *Qigong* and the more recent *TaiChi* the practitioner seeks to harmonise his/her breathwork with his/her movements and mind in order to locate one’s centre and discover the meaning of ‘stillness in movement’ (Horwood 2008, p.6).

The British-born Daoist priest Shi Jing (the chair of the British Taoist Association) reflects on the purpose of *Daoyin* in his writings on the Eight Brocades:

So these teachings are not just a philosophy, they are a practical instruction on cultivation! Lao Tzu also talks about returning to the state of a little babe. The deep abdominal breathing, the expansion and contraction of the lower dan tian, the effortless breathing of the babe. Tao Yin is part of that return to simplicity and natural stillness. (Shi Jing ND, pp. 4-5)

The effectiveness of the HRP may be further understood through the ancient Chinese principle of *Yin* and *Yang*, and the theme of complementary, mutually-defining opposites:

In Chinese worldview, the cosmos is generated from the undifferentiated Dao through the interaction of Yin and Yang, two principles or “pneumas” (**qi*) that are aspects of the functions of the Dao itself. Their continued hierogamy engenders everything within space and time, giving rise to the material and spiritual manifestation. The cosmos is not static but in constant change.

The term *yin* originally denoted the shady or northern side of a hill, where *yang* was its sunny or southern side. This early definition, found

in sources of the Spring and Autumn period, was later expanded to include all that is shady, dark, and cool, and all that is sunny, bright and warm respectively. The notions of Yin and Yang were thus applied to various complementary entities and phenomena, such as female-male, dark-light, night-day, low-high, earth-heaven, passive-active and so on. (Baldrian-Hussein 2008, p.1164)

Following in this description, one may now understand that it is precisely through feeling off-balance (through bowing forwards), feeling closed and constricted that one is able to tangibly appreciate and differentiate a feeling of being upright, balanced and released. As Yin and Yang alternates, so too the HRP is not a static posture, but an active movement that can symbolise (and in some cases initiate) a transition from one psychological state to another.

Within the iconography of Yin and Yang, one can observe the seed of Yin within Yang and vice versa – the example I often give to students is to remember a time where they laughed until they cried (or cried until they laughed). This also serves to remind us (in this case) that the potential for equilibrium can often be found precisely within the preceding imbalance. Yin and Yang may be understood as opposites that are not necessarily in opposition, as is illustrated in the second verse of the *Dao De Jing*:

...having and not having arise together. Difficult and easy complement each other. Long and short contrast each other; High and low rest upon each other; Voice and sound harmonise each other; Front and back follow each other. (Gia-Fu Feng and English 1996)

We might also reflect that we may come to know and achieve a suitable posture for meditation by first deliberately adopting an unsuitable posture for meditation.

Kabbalistic Insights

As a result of ongoing Transpersonal group-work with the Hebrew letters (from 2008-2014) and my work facilitating the Jewish Meditation group *Ohr Menorah* (2012-2015)⁵, the hold and release practice has also taken on, and resonated with particular Kabbalistic principles. It is perhaps also appropriate that my very first introduction to Kabbalah (in 1994), was through the work of Perle Epstein, which included a comparative study of Daoist and Kabbalistic meditation techniques:

Taoist meditative practice also compares the human body to the macrocosm, focussing on the spine as the source of divine energy, which can be evoked by a combination of visualisation and breathing. Like the Kabbalist, who “stirs the world above” by sitting down to his meditations here below, the Taoist reflects the outer world through the harmonising of mind, breath and body. (Epstein 1978, p.70)

⁵ The group’s 2012 launch was reported in a press release from the Movement for Reform Judaism <http://news.reformjudaism.org.uk/press-releases/a-new-light-for-menorah.html> accessed 13.10.15

As the Hebrew letters are considered to be the tools of creation (Lancaster 2005), by embodying the letters one may symbolically engage and participate in the creative process.

The first and last positions of the HRP, strongly resonate with, and are reminiscent of two particular Hebrew letters – **ב** *Beit* and **א** *Alef*, and may be interpreted as constituting a movement from *Beit* to *Aleph*.

Beit appears with a firm base, opening on only one side (the left side – the same direction one reads Hebrew, from right to left), with its top-half bent over. The letter *Beit* is traditionally understood to be a feminine letter, related to the Divine Attribute (Heb: *Sefira*) of understanding (Heb: **בינה** *Binah*) which may be associated with the belly/womb (Heb: **בטן** *Beten*), and also a house (Heb: **בית** *Bayit*) (Matt 2004, p.185⁶, Ginsburgh 1990, p.40).

Although *Beit* is the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it is the very first letter of the Torah (the letter that initiates the process of creation), as the famous first words of the bible in Hebrew are **בראשית** *Bereshit* – ‘In/With the Beginning’ (Genesis i.i).

In the holding - bowing position (see figure 2) one is keenly aware of one’s firm foundation, upon the cushion or the chair – one’s curled shape is also strongly reminiscent of the letter *Beit*, symbolising the beginning of a creative/transformational process. One is conscious of and firmly within one’s body – which in Kabbalistic terms is understood to be the vessel/house/temple of the soul. It is also significant that in the second position, the head is naturally lowered towards the body, as this precedes and anticipates the release aspect (third movement) of the practice, which will constitute the subsequent embodiment of the letter *Alef*:

The first word of the Torah, **בראשית**, spells **ראש בית**, “the head of the house”. The intention of creation, the Divine act of building, is that the head, the secret of the letter *alef*- the revelation of G-d’s Absolute Unity –comes into His house, the letter *beit*. (Ginsburgh 1990, p.44)

From the firm and directed, closed and constricted letter *Beit* one straightens into an upright, open position, led by the head, that evokes the letter *alef*.

Alef is upright and open on all sides -appearing primarily as a letter of balance; between God and Man, Heaven and Earth, and ‘The secret of the “image” in which man was created’ (Ginsburgh 1990, p.26), and also returns us to our previous description of Yin and Yang:

⁶ In particular see footnotes 633 and 634

Aleph is thus a Jewish version of the Yin-Yang symbol of complementary tendencies. Aleph embraces the ambiguity and the balance of form and emptiness, separateness and unity, oneness and ‘thousandness’. The Zohar describes this situation: “Crying is enwedged in my heart on one side, while joy is enwedged in my heart on the other side” (interestingly both laughing and crying use the same muscle, the diaphragm.) (Seidman 2011, Chapter 1)

According to a central Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (book of formation), Alef represents the element of air (Lancaster 2005, p.182) and this further relates to its traditional association with the respiratory system and diaphragm (Ginsburgh 1990, p.26) - indeed one of the most immediate sensations accompanying the movement from the second to third position in the HRP, is the vivid sense of air/breath entering and animating the entire body (but with a particular focus on the diaphragm and belly). The letter *Alef* is a silent letter, and as such may be understood as being the letter of the breath, and in Genesis it is the Divine breath that animates Adam:

Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7)

From a Kabbalistic perspective therefore, the movement from *Beit* to *Alef* does not only symbolise a personal rebirth but may be seen as a re-enactment of the process of creation itself.

Vedantic Insights – A Concluding Tale of Two Birds.

My study of Vedanta, in 2010 with Swami Dayatmananda, mainly centred on the *Mundaka Upanishad*. In this scripture is found a very brief but profound tale of two birds:

Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on without eating. (3rd *Mundaka*, First *Khanda* – Müller 1962, p.251)

It is further taught that the first bird who eats the fruit occupies the lower branches, whereas the second bird that looks on, occupies the higher branches (Hariharananda 2008).

This lower bird represents the ordinary self/mind, engaged in constant activity, flitting from branch to branch, ‘tweeting’ and ‘flapping’ through its existence; stopping only occasionally to look up to the still, silent, second bird who sits serenely in the upper tree canopy. One might also say that this first bird represents ordinary cognition, consensus consciousness - our daily mental processes and activity.

The higher, second bird represents the transcendent Self; the Atman, who silently witnesses but is ultimately beyond the first bird’s worldly existence. In this way the

second bird may be thought of as representing the transcognitive realm – above and beyond our ordinary thoughts and feelings.

The story continues that each time the lower bird tastes bitter fruit it yearns and gradually begins to ascend to the place of the higher bird.

The light from its plumage is reflected on the first bird and the latter's own plumage starts melting away. When the first bird finally reaches the branch on which the second is sitting the whole vision changes. It finds that all along it had been the second bird. The apparent duality existed only because it had deserted its true Self for the fruits of the tree. Its former Self was only a distorted reflection of its true Self. (Hariharananda 2008, p.9)

For those who are familiar with the Chakras (the psycho-spiritual centres discussed in *Raja Yoga* - Badlani 2008, p.240), this story also reminds us of an ascent from lower levels of being up to higher levels of realisation.

The HRP (moving from figure 2 to figure 3) enacts a 'rising above' one's previous position/situation, with the focus moving from the *Manipura chakra* (centred around one's belly and navel) in the second posture, to the *Ajna* or *Sahasrara chakra* (located in the third eye region or just above the crown of the head) in the third posture - as the majority of meditators' also reported experiencing a genuine sense of stillness and serenity in the final upright, resting position.⁷

Concluding Remarks

It is my sincere hope that this practice will be able to serve a multitude of different functions- from helping new meditators in achieving a comfortable and conducive posture for any sitting practice, and that it may also constitute a supplementary practice that precedes one's familiar meditation sitting.

I would also ideally like the HRP to be thought of as a 'practice' as opposed to a 'technique'. The word 'practice' suggests some level of continuity, discipline and cultivation; whereas 'technique', to me, seems to connote some sort of trick, or short-term strategy.

In our age of speed, shortcuts and 'quick fixes' the HRP should represent a need to slow down, gather ourselves - determining to begin again and rise up.

⁷ Additionally, one may notice certain physical parallels with yogic *Pranayama* and the use of the *bandas*, which translates from the Sanskrit as 'lock' but can also mean to tighten or hold (Rachman 2014) - where a particular posture is held/locked while the breath is also consciously restricted. The feeling of release effected by unlocking the *banda* is not too dissimilar, in principle, from the feeling of release in the HRP, and both are intended to help align the body and restore a sense of flow and equilibrium.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to my wife, Zhang Zhilu, for agreeing to pose for the various HRP positions (in figures 1, 2 and 3) and for helping me with all the various Chinese terms and characters.

Profound thanks to Professor Les Lancaster and the Kabbalah group, including *Ohr Menorah* at Menorah Synagogue (Cheshire Reform Congregation) for all our work with the Hebrew letters, and to Rabbi Danny Bergson for discussing this paper with me in some depth.

I extend my gratitude to the British Taoist Association and the contributing members of the Northern School of Daoist Studies for all your playful insights.

An additional thanks to the Manchester Vedanta study circle and to Matt Ryan from Yoga Manchester.

Thanks to all the members of the British Psychological Society's Transpersonal Section and attendees of the 'Hold and Release Practice workshop' at the 2014 conference. Particular thanks to David Luke, Ho Law (for drawing my attention to the significance of the Chinese commentary in figure 4), Jackie Miller, and Harris Friedman for your questions, suggestions and encouragement.

A final thanks to all our UG and PG students at Leeds Beckett University whose feedback and enthusiasm has been invaluable.

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