

The Energization Exercises — 40 Years of Stories

by Rambhakta

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Nobody wants to read this.

Seriously, unless you're already powerfully motivated to do (whatever it is), you just won't care.

Thus the secret of starting a regular practice of Paramhansa Yogananda's energization exercises is to figure out how to *like* them. As Swami Kriyananda said in *Out of the Labyrinth*, we should never give up something (e.g., sitting on our arses thinking about doing the rechargers) until we're ready, *with inner knowing*, to replace it with something higher.



Toshiro Mifune (on right) as the fool in *The Seven Samurai*.

And that's the kicker, isn't it? Are the rechargers better than not doing them in the first place? No glamorous movies have been made about them – no *Seven Recharging Monks*, no *Energizer Kid*, no *Recharger Trilogy*, no *Energizer Assassin*, no *Enter the Energizer*, no *A Touch of Energization*, no *Crouching Energizer*, *Hidden Recharger*.

From the memory banks: I once watched Swami Kriyananda lead the guests at the Expanding Light in the rechargers. Swamiji stood on the front steps, while the guests stood on the ground facing him.

“Great,” I thought, I’ll take pictures of Swamiji and show the world how they *really* should be done. I had a mental image of him swelling up like the Incredible Hulk and rocketing through them like Ironman.

Alas, he did them like a regular person, looking rather like an ordinary middle-aged shlump. So much for Samurai Swamiji. But I understood: the rechargers are about working *inwardly* with energy – they are *pranayam* – energy-control exercises.

How can I get ready to do these blasted exercises with *inner gusto*, without martial-arts role models and without whining or complaint or feeling that God is a slave driver – because I want to?

Let me stop here a moment. I hauled out this old article on this special day because it marks the forty-year anniversary of the evening when I stood out in the yard of the house where I was living in Los Altos and decided to see how many days in a row I could do the rechargers.

Well, that’s a lie because I didn’t actually live in the house. I was shelling out \$40 a month to sleep on the bare concrete floor of the garage, my bedmate the stripped-down engine of a buddy’s VW Bug. But hey, don’t feel sorry for me – it was a *Los Altos* garage, A Mercedes – Beemer – Lexus kind of garage.

I was paying off my Ananda membership before my move to the Village. I knew that I'd be earning a pittance once I got there, and better to scrape together the \$1000 membership fee beforehand. When I wrote out the last check, I asked an artistic girl at the *Runner's World* office to draw flowers and cute animals all over it.

Okay, how can I learn to love the energizers? And here starts my hopelessly cheerful (ha-ha) article on a fitness topic that we all really don't want to hear about because our life is perfectly fine the way it is, thank you very much.

Or is it?

Okay, to hell with it. It's hopeless. I'm going to scrap the article and tell a story instead. Because as the advertising genius David Ogilvy said, nothing works like a demo. Ready? Okay. Here goes.

During a talk at the Temple of Leaves at the Seclusion Retreat at Ananda Village – I think it was Spiritual Renewal Week in the summer of 1975 – Swami Kriyananda said, “Whenever you experience great fear, if you can manage to get your energy flowing smoothly and evenly throughout your body, you'll very likely find that you'll experience no fear at all.”

When I returned home from SRW to my job in the San Francisco Bay Area, I had a sparkling opportunity to test Swamiji's statement.

I worked as a staff photographer for a company that published five sports magazines. One day, the editor of the martial arts mag asked me to accompany him to San Quentin State Prison and take pictures at a martial arts exhibition.

It seems one of the prison guards, a wonderfully heart-centered man, had battled the prison authorities for months to let him have permission to put on the expo. Hey, those animals were enough trouble without teaching them to do killer karate.

The editor would interview the martial artists while I took pictures of the demonstrations.



San Quentin. Not an inviting sight, even on a bright California day.

When we arrived, our friend the prison guard asked us to wait outside the main gate. The wait stretched to a half-hour. Meanwhile, as we milled under those high, cold stone walls, I began to experience a deep, crippling fear.

I imagined it was from past-life memories of having been incarcerated, but regardless of the source, the fear was paralyzing. I was shaking inside, and I wondered desperately what to do.

And then I remembered what Swamiji had said about getting rid of fear by bringing the body's energy under control.

I had practiced those energy control exercises for eight years. I had practiced them fairly consistently: in eight years I'd missed probably no more than sixty days. Now I had a wonderful chance to see if they would help me release these crippling feelings of panic.

I began tensing and relaxing my muscles in groups, one group of muscles at a time, shifting the energy from one part of the body to another, using the tensing and relaxing techniques I'd learned.

My first goal was to get *at least some* of my physical energy under control. I knew that purely mental methods wouldn't work; they'd be useless – pitifully inadequate against the horrible mental turmoil that had nervous energy bouncing all over my

insides. My heart and brain were far too wildly out of control for such gentle means.

I didn't start doing the energization exercises in the prescribed order. Instead, I stood a little apart from the group of waiting martial artists and began pushing energy into one muscle group at a time, with absolute, uncompromising strength and will power. I was completely, one-hundred-percent determined and committed to the practice. *I would not enter that prison in fear!*

I chose each body part randomly, moving the energy where I felt the most nervousness and disharmony – in my right arm, right upper thigh, calf, neck, left forearm, stomach, abdomen, etc. Just tensing and relaxing with fierce uncompromising will.

After ten minutes I began to feel that my energy was coming pretty much under my control. And after a few more minutes of shoving energy around, I felt completely calm and at peace.

The guards inside the prison gate were scary – it was just four years after Black Panther George Jackson led a breakout attempt at the prison in which Jackson, three guards, and two other inmates were killed. The gate guards were a particularly nasty-looking, hardcore bunch of no-nonsense guys with cold fire in their eyes.

As we filed through the gates and across the huge inner courtyard, I was relaxed and inwardly calm. At one point, we passed a big grassy field where several hundred prisoners stood talking in small groups. As we passed a group of particularly tough-looking prisoners, I overheard one of them say, “Look at those guys – they’re so calm and poised!”

Inside, I laughed heartily. If he’d seen me fifteen minutes earlier – a quivering mass of fear!

At this point, my record with the “rechargers” is fairly good. I’ve done them twice a day for exactly 40 years as of today, with four or five days when I did them just once, preceded by the eight years when I missed perhaps 60 days.

The thing is, I do them effortlessly now. I never have to force myself to get off my arse and get started. I actually *like* doing them. And beyond what I experienced at the Big House, I find them useful in my dull, ordinary life.

Whenever I get emotionally upset, I find that it helps to get away from the source of the bother for a few minutes and do some tensing and relaxing, using my upset feelings to power my practice – as I did on that ferocious San Quentin morning, with full concentration and will.

After doing this a while, I’m more likely to be able to control my emotions and see the situation in a calmer light.

Okay, big disclaimer. Am I claiming that the rechargers will turn you into a Zen Buddhist martial arts master – one of those *Yojimbo* guys who goes around slicing off other people's ears with calm eyes and perfectly cool inner self-control.

Well, maybe after you've done them for a little while. But let me tell you another story.

I learned a tremendously useful tip for handling emotionally loaded situations from Nayaswami Asha. I'll share it with you here, but as you read, please keep in mind that it helps if you already have a pretty good inner sense of what self-control feels like.

Imagine yourself feeling like a self-restrained samurai warrior, if you please – I mean, *restrained* is the big idea. And the rechargers, done regularly, will give you a healthy taste for that feeling. Parenthetically, they will also help you be more mature in challenging situations, including handling many of the petty little social annoyances that God has strewn this world with to teach us self-control, compassion, kindness, et cetera, et cetera.

Okay, when Ishani and I got together, the romantic phase didn't last long. It was clear that, at this point in our lives – I was almost sixty, Ishani was in her late forties – God was going to get right down to brass tacks and teach us to expand our awareness to

include another person's reality. And He wasn't going to be gentle about it.

To put no very fine point on it, we went about six years of absolute hell. God was swinging a baseball bat, and He wasn't just aiming for the wall, but for the cornfield beyond. And like a gentleman, I accept most of the blame for our troubles – why not, really? – it was mostly my fault. Hate to admit it, but women are generally right when it comes to the issues that come up in relationships.

After an endless series of weekends stretching out to years of horrible disharmony and painful reconciliations and great relief, we were both feeling thoroughly done-in. We were ready to throw in the towel, and so we arranged to talk separately with Asha and ask for her help.

When it was my turn to go to Asha's for counseling, I told her that whenever there was a great disharmony between Ishani and me, it seemed to work well for me if I would get in the truck and go out and drive in the hills for an hour and a half, chanting desperately for God to harmonize my heart. When my heart began to feel open and harmonized from the prayers and chanting, I told her, I knew that I could reliably come home and that my restored and healed heart would be up to the challenge of helping to diffuse the situation.

Asha thought for moment – I could see that she was turning inward and asking Swamiji what to say. And then, in a very low voice, almost whispering, she said, “If you could go to Divine Mother in the moment...”

It was life-changing advice.

But what did “going to God in the moment” mean?

It meant being a warrior.

What could I do but try? I had nothing to lose. I would make the experiment. I really felt I had no other alternative.

Several weeks before my meeting with her, Asha had told me, “When David and I were in India recently with Swamiji, he said, ‘I’m so happy that Ishani and Rambhakta are together.’”

Oh, very well then, what could we do but hang in?

I could always sense very clearly when storm clouds of discontent were gathering on the distant horizon. There was a nervy feeling of disharmony, as if evil green lightning flashes were crackling in the air. The storm was brewing and darkness was near.

The solution was this. I found that help was always close at hand, if I would only do a simple but very difficult thing. I would stop whatever I was doing, stand absolutely still, rooted in place, and say with utmost, complete determination, “*Divine Mother, I will do ANYTHING to bring harmony in this situation. I will kill Rambhakta – I don’t want anything for him, no ego-pleasing*

'being right,' no whiny self-justification, no ego balm or weak retreat. But you MUST GUIDE ME!'

What I found then was that Divine Mother was always eager to help us find love and understanding – so long as my prayer was sincere.

And – aha! – that's a very big "if," isn't it?

Because it meant that I had to take all of the resentment and scary fear and sadness and hopelessness and wanting-comfort and wanting-self-justification firmly in hand and crush it into a little ball of energy and give it to God utterly and completely leaving nothing for myself – and all while waiting in a kind of scary emptiness for God to tell me what to do.

But it was the answer. It was in fact the lesson that I'm convinced the six years of pain were intended to teach. Loving relationships on the spiritual path are seldom easy; ours has been one of the best, for the liberating lessons it has brought us.

Okay, poop, there I go again. "Liberating lessons" is way too gushy and abstract. What it gave us in truth was an appreciation, a visceral taste, a lust for the joy of getting to know another person's reality.

Okay, that's all I'll say about that. And what made it possible, at least in my case, was the fact that I had done the rechargers for umpty-dumpty dozens of years. In other words,

twice a day I had walked into San Quentin and fought the battle for physical, mental, and emotional self-control. And, hey, if you don't think the rechargers are about the martial arts, let me tell you, they are. They bring benefits that are very practical in all kinds of situations where self-restraint, moderation, intuition, self-mastery and self-offering are called for, whether it's going into a very scary place, or public speaking, dealing with difficult people, or loving a partner.

I did a fun thing back in 1974 when I started my recent forty-year streak. I found a patch of bare ground just outside the door of my little garage home and vowed to do my regular practices there.

I loved to stand on that smooth patch of dirt early in the morning and in the evening as the sun went down and do the rechargers. It linked me to the best times of the day, just before work and just afterward, when the world seemed fresh and nature was happy – the quiet transition times when birds did their choreographed dances and the air was peaceful and hushed. It made me feel part of nature to do them then. After all, I was doing spiritual practice, dancing with the wind and transition-time aromas of flowers and dinners cooking. It was a homely, right kind of feeling that helped me enjoy the practice very much.

All right, let's look a little closer to home.

Paramhansa Yogananda suggested before meditating, it will help us calm our energy (consequently, the mind) if we tense and relax our whole body while inhaling deeply with a double-inhalation (“in-innnnnn”) then “throw out the breath” with a double-exhalation (“huh-huuuuuuuh”).

This practice, done with energy and attention, gives a good start to a feeling of calmness and relaxation that can help us kick-start our meditation.

Here are some – confessedly weird – tips to help make whole-body tensing and relaxing a little easier.

At first it might not feel natural or easy to tense the whole body. It’s not something we do every day. But it becomes a whole lot easier if you begin the double-breathing aspect *first*, before you start tensing. First, kick-off the tensing part by inhaling forcefully, and only then start tensing a split second later – you’ll find that it’s a lot easier to engage your whole body.

Second tip – okay, brace yourself, this is just plain odd. When you tense the body, start with the buttocks. I don’t know why this works, perhaps because it’s the “middle” of the body? But it does work, possibly because we have more control of those muscles since we use them all the time – for walking, standing, sitting. In any case, starting “bum-first” makes it easier to tense the whole body.

Don't step too hard on the gas pedal all at once – make it a controlled, strong, smooth, increasing flow of energy.



Early morning rechargers before a fundraising “Joyathon” at the American River Parkway in Sacramento, California for the Living Wisdom School at Ananda Village, early 1990s.

After each round of tensing and relaxing, pause for a moment before you start the next round. Make the intervals gradually a bit longer as you feel to. Dwell on the feeling of inwardness and peace that comes when you relax, as the energy flows back within. “Tense with will, relax and feel.” – Paramhansa Yogananda

Before I moved to Ananda, I lived in Palo Alto and worked at *Runner's World*. One of my roles there, as I mentioned earlier,

was as staff photographer for the company's five magazines. On weekends I would often drive to San Francisco and run 14-17 miles, then walk in Golden Gate Park or downtown, taking pictures while doing silent spiritual practice.

One Saturday noon found me at Fisherman's Wharf, sitting in the amphitheater in front of the Maritime Museum, looking out at the Bay. I'd walked a considerable distance and felt a need to get re-harmonized. I did some deep, slow breathing of an athletic kind – that is, not shallow wimpy breaths but great full heaves of air, in and out, until my nerves began to calm. I then decided to meditate. I started with several rounds of hard, vigorous tensing and relaxing. And then on the last exhale and relaxation I felt the energy drain out of my limbs and outer body, like a small stream, its energy currents flowing happily back to their source. It was an enjoyable sensation that brought an interiorization of mind that was relaxing and restoring.

The rechargers have saved my bacon many times when I've needed to find a more relaxed, interiorized, centered place inside me.

Before I moved to Ananda, I didn't own a car, and on my frequent visits to Ananda Village I would take the bus from Palo Alto to Nevada City. It was a six-hour trip. I would stop at a little hippie health food store in Nevada City and ask for a piece of

cardboard on which I would write “Ananda,” then I’d hike out to Highway 49 and hitchhike to the Seclusion Retreat.

It was a long, draining trip from the Bay Area to Ananda, often requiring several thumbed rides to the remotely located Retreat.

On one trip, I carried a heavy backpack laden with camera gear and spare clothes, and in my hand I lugged a dulcimer in its case. When I arrived at the Village I was unable to find a ride and decided to walk the last five miles to the retreat. When I got there after the long bus ride and hike, I was toast, kaputt, *finito*, and ready for a nap. Then someone – I think it was Anandi – asked me to lead the recharger practice before the evening meditation. I said okay.

It was all or nothing – I had no energy left but what I could summon with my will power and Yogananda’s techniques. And, what did I have to lose? – if they worked, fine, and if not I would enjoy a nice nap during the meditation. I gave it my all, forcing energy throughout my body with ferocious focus and deep will. At the end I felt renewed, restored, awake and able to meditate for two and a half hours alertly without a nod.

One Christmas at the annual eight-hour meditation I decided to sit as close to Swami Kriyananda as possible. I’m sure it was due to his blessing that I was able to sit motionless and

without significant pain for the full eight hours. It was unusual, as I'd spent three years paralyzed from the chest down in my early twenties and had lingering spasticity in one leg and partial paralysis in the other. Also, inharmonious currents of energy in my spine, due I suspect, to the severed nerves and damage from the tumor and surgeries. (Yogananda urged his disciples not to let surgeons operate on the spine.)

And yet, when the mid-meditation break came I was very reluctant to stand up for *The Blue Danube*; I only stood to avoid making a distraction. The meditation wasn't particularly deep; I'm rarely able to go deep because of the spinal damage; but it was peaceful and harmonious – not least, I think, because the rechargers had taught me to harmonize my physical energy.

Recharging in Sickness and in Health

About a month ago, I fell ill with an unusually virulent type of bronchitis. It came at a time when I'd been praying to Divine Mother for a spiritual renewal. I was desperate to return to the roots of my practice, and the full force of the beginner's longing for God. In my work I use my brain primarily, and Divine Mother had kindly shown me how to balance my life by singing, exercise, and friendships. But something more was needed, and that's when I got sick.

I'm a student of bronchitis, as I have the chronic kind. But this was very different from the usual three days of malaise and coughing. I got not a wink of sleep for the first three nights and could only nap fitfully for ten minutes at a time during the day. And it completely separated me from the standard rhythms of my life. I couldn't read or watch videos. So I spent a lot of time lying down and coughing and thinking of God in a very elemental and simple way that was healing to my soul, if not my body. It was wonderful, in its way. But though physically laid-out, I was determined not to miss the rechargers.

It was comical, even at the time. One evening, preparing to do the exercises, I felt unsteady and braced myself against a small table with a laser printer. I stood, feeling very wobbly and ill, like a shaky old man, leaning against the printer and waiting for the right moment to take the first inhalation.

Something like forty-seven years ago, when I was in SRF, I attended a talk by Daya Mata in which she urged us very strongly to do the rechargers.

"I've done these exercises every day for over thirty years," she said, "and as a result I know beyond question that this body is directly sustained by God through the medulla oblongata."

The moment I straightened up and threw my arms wide and inhaled, I felt profoundly energized by some otherworldly source. I

sailed through the exercises, carried on a blazing cloud of energy that seemed at once mine and not-mine. I thought of Daya Mata's words and realized that these exercises are, as Swami Kriyananda stated, *pranayam*. They are spiritual exercises, designed to unite us with God.

As I suspect you'll know, this world has entered an age of energy-awareness, and this is why Paramhansa Yogananda brought the yoga teachings up to date for an energy-aware age. By Kriya Yoga, and the rechargers, and proper diet, etc., we can come closer to God by increasing and refining our energy, until we realize that all energy comes from God and is God's, including the energy that makes and sustains our bodies. Energy is the link, Swami Kriyananda said, between consciousness and matter.

I'm glad I didn't skip the energizers, pleading illness, or I wouldn't have had the experience of God doing them through me. The energy that fairly rampaged through my body was much bigger than anything I could summon. It was unbounded, limitless, inexhaustible. I realized that every time I had practiced the exercises – erratically for the first eight years, and every day for forty years – it had helped open a channel, by tiny increments, through which God could give me this experience. Will I skip them tonight or tomorrow? Not likely.

So here we are, four decades into a regular practice, about forty-eight years overall. And I wouldn't dream of not doing the rechargers now; they've been terribly helpful, and I'm looking forward to the next forty years.

Standard Stuff

Here followeth standard advice for doing the rechargers.

The energizers can give us a sense of inner contact with God, if we do them with the right motives and in the right spirit. Draw on God's energy, calmness, and harmony while you do them.

Do them receptively, devotionally. You can make that contact. Just follow the instructions that Yogananda said are essential for success: Do them slowly, with deep willingness, in the order given, with closed eyes and with calm concentration at the spiritual eye.

A temptation is to do them absent-mindedly, to stand outside the process and say, "Well, I'm doing this because it's good for me and I'll get such-and-such result." But you'll get minimal results if you do them mechanically. Merely putting in the time won't give you the best results. The exercises work devotionally: they are a divine dance – a physical chant – a way to pray with the body instead of with the mind. When you do them in that spirit, God responds as if you'd offered Him a prayer.

If you do them devotionally, the spiritual benefits will become real. Remember Master's promise, that the energization exercises will give you the vision of your body as energy, as light, and as a thought of God's pure consciousness. When you have that perception, the body will no longer be an obstacle on the spiritual path.

The energization exercises stimulate the center of will power and spiritual awakening in the forehead, and thus hasten the appearance of the spiritual eye in meditation.

Create an energization habit

Paramhansa Yogananda said that it takes three years to plant a new habit in the brain. Here are some suggestions to help you get through the temptations and distractions at the start.

Do the exercises at the same time every day. If you vary your practice times too much, the resulting sense of irregularity and confusion will work against you. Be regular, and your subconscious mind will begin to support your new habit. It will be much easier to blast through inertia and begin practicing at the times of day that you've set aside for the exercises.

Do them in the same place. Wherever I've lived, I've set aside a little space for my twice-daily practice – a little patch of ground, a corner of a room, a few square feet on a deck, or a spot in front of a window.

If I'm practicing outdoors, the earth becomes packed smooth, giving it a well-worn, homey look. I'm sure, too, that helpful vibrations build up on that spot.

Do them with intense zeal, and the habit will form much faster. Let's face it, 10-15 minutes of all-out effort twice a day won't kill you. In fact, you'll get great satisfaction from giving your best. And – hey – they're called the *rechargers*, right?

Make a vow. Gandhi spoke of the wonderful freedom that his many disciplinary vows had given him. Keep a calendar of your practice, if you wish. Stubbornness and rajasic restlessness can be turned to the service of a worthy goal.

Reinforce your good habit in every possible way. Take time now and then to think deeply, willingly, and energetically about the spiritual advantages of doing the energization exercises – not in selfish terms, but with the understanding that the fastest way to get the selfless devotion and universal love that you crave is by pleasing Master.

Do them when you least feel like it. Unwillingness is an enemy and willingness is a friend when it's particularly hard to do the exercises: when you're tired, busy, or feeling sad and unworthy. At such times, think of yourself as the good, noble warrior who's been driven into a corner by unworthy opponents.

Don't allow unwillingness to take away your loyalty to "the good."
Do the rechargers with zeal, and unwillingness will flee.

Enjoy them. If you can form a daily habit, the energization exercises will reveal to you the stunning perfection of their design. There is endless joy and fascination in the beautiful, ever-new intricacies of their flow. Sometimes rollicking, bubbling laughter will rise up within you as you practice; sometimes the energy will flow so strongly that you can barely contain it – you'll feel yourself swimming in an ocean of joyous, divine life. Even when you don't get those experiences, enjoy the exercises just because they remind you, like chanting does, to turn your attention inward to the spiritual eye and thoughts of God.

Realize their value. Unlike hatha yoga, there are no famous teachers who've made the energization exercises the cornerstone of their instruction; no academies of energization; no lovely picture books; no medical research; no TV programs called Energizing with Elaine. So it takes a little extra courage and faith to practice something that's new, that lacks a long and hallowed tradition. You simply have to do the energization exercises to find out how great they are; no one will try to sell you on their worth.

I once attended a lecture in which the speaker said: "I can stand here and inspire you with the things I say, but I can't motivate you. That's up to you."

You'll have to cultivate your own desire to do the energization exercises. And the best way is to tie them firmly to the deepest desires of your heart. Realize that they can help you very much to find your inner connection with God.

“When I was lecturing around the world, I was saddened to see how very few people who were following Master’s teachings bothered to do the energization exercises.” – Swami Kriyananda

Don't be that guy.

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Nayaswami Rambhakta is a monk of the [Nayaswami Order](#). He is the author of a new book, [*The Joyful Athlete – The Wisdom of the Heart in Exercise & Sports Training*](#), which was published in April 2015 by Crystal Clarity. Follow [this link](#) to read the first two chapters.