

Mahatma Gandhi and the Baha'is:
Striving towards a Nonviolent Civilization

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A Very Brief Excerpt

Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard Medical School is a pioneer in behavioral medicine and mind-body studies, as well as in spirituality and healing. Through his work, he defined the “relaxation response” and continues to lead research into its efficacy in counteracting the harmful effects of stress. The relaxation response is a meditative process which interrupts the sympathetic nervous system's storm of the fight-flight reaction, and is taught as a form of prayer for persons from religious traditions, while for the nonreligious it is taught as a form of meditation. The two general steps to eliciting the relaxation response are (i) to repeat a word, sound, prayer, phrase, or muscular activity and (ii) to disregard everyday thoughts that come to mind, and passively return to the repetition. There are nine specific steps that seem to work well for eliciting the relaxation response: (1) pick a focus word or prayer that is rooted in your belief system; (2) sit quietly in a comfortable position; (3) close your eyes; (4) relax your muscles; (5) breathe slowly and naturally, and repeat the chosen focus word, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself while exhaling; (6) if other thoughts come to mind, gently and passively return to the repetition; (7) continue the repetition for ten to twenty minutes; (8) do not stand immediately, rather sit quietly for about a minute, allowing other thoughts to return before opening your eyes and then slowly rising; (9) practice this technique once or twice daily. Secular

focus words can include, e.g., “Ocean,” “Love,” “Peace,” “Calm,” and “Relax.” Religious focus words or prayers can include, e.g., “Our Father who art in heaven” for Christians, “Shalom” and “The Lord is my shepherd” for Jews, “Inshallah” for Muslims, “Om” for Hindus and Buddhists, and “Alláh'u'Abhá” (God the Most Glorious) for Bahá'ís. Dr. Benson and others have used the relaxation response to treat hypertension, anxiety, chronic pain, and heart disease in a general program of stress management, and have scientifically shown that prayer is good for the person who prays. Moreover, in his recent book, Benson goes so far as to say that we're wired for God, meaning that faith is a survival trait that is biologically built into human beings. See Herbert Benson, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Scribner, 1996).