

Chapter 7

The Transformative Practice of Core Centering: Hara, Peak Performance, and the Integral Movement

by Barry Robbins

Sports, fitness, and exercise programs in the United States continue to evolve as athletes of all types, both professional and recreational, seek to achieve higher levels of performance. In doing so, athletes, coaches, trainers, and sports psychologists are embracing some of the concepts of the Integral Movement, in order to attain elevated states of athletic functioning and heightened awareness. These somatic mind/body practices integrate both Eastern and Western principles, philosophies, and exercises to achieve optimal results. Michael Murphy, who, along with George Leonard, has introduced the first coherent integral practice in the West—Integral Transformative Practice (ITP)—has coined these approaches “Transformative Practices” and defines them in *Future of the Body* (Murphy, 1993) as “a complex and coherent set of activities that produce positive change in a person or a group.”

One of the fundamental understandings of transformative practice is the emphasis on an internal orientation as the means towards peak performance. Besides the normative external approach of learning from others and looking outside oneself to obtain a solution to reach one’s potential, it is this move towards the “inner game”, the practice of **interiority** that is now gaining significant momentum as a means of elevating an athlete’s game in all areas. Once a sportsperson begins to embrace the path of inner transformation, the interior changes will translate into his athletic endeavors, become a game-changer, and serve to transform every dimension of his life.

The integral movement takes the approach that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and that our ability to attain our greatest potential is best achieved through the simultaneous embrace of body, mind, heart, and soul. In the West, sports has embodied this concept through the development of **cross-training**, in which the emphasis is placed on a multitude of training techniques, which, when taken in their totality, allows for an athlete’s fuller development. The ancient Greek term for this is *antakolouthia*, the mutual entailment of the virtues, by which development in one area enhances development in all other areas.

For example, recent studies have demonstrated that aerobic exercise increases cognitive development (Hillman, 2008). Another study has shown strength training to be a significant aid in emotional improvement and well-being (Hadhazy, 2010). The implications of an integrated approach to self-realization are being unpacked and bridged into every area of life. Sports represents the portal for a pioneering, cutting-edge, cross-training discipline that offers the vision of a window into the advancement of the evolving nature of the human participant. This continues to grow as cross-training techniques become more sophisticated and the athletic experience is elevated into the supernormal.

One of these transformative practices, **core centering**, allows for a more balanced and in-depth approach to all-around physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development,

leading to greater overall achievement and maximum results. It is adapted to the athletic experience in many forms, working with traits such as physical grounding, center of gravity, alignment, stance and posture, confidence, strength, and endurance. Core centering can help the athlete deal with pressure, obtain equilibrium, and realize those in-the-moment experience that sport provides, when time can slow down and new worlds are encountered. The more subtle adaptations arising from core centering include intuition, the flow state, gut feelings, sixth sense, premonition or precognition, seeing from the center, the unitive experience, and oneness with the world. Each one of these qualities, when taken individually, can offer life-changing experiences. In combination, this constellation of transformative practices offers the basis for a breakthrough in one's athletic performance, as well as one's life.

Terms and phrases which describe the core are woven into everyday life, when we hear such concepts as "I had a gut feeling about that," "that person has intestinal fortitude," or "something is eating at me." Do you remember hearing "I laughed so hard I split my sides," or "it turns my stomach"? The subtlety of conversation, in which we use the core as a metaphor to describe direct experience, is integrated into our daily language for a reason. Adepts over the ages have recognized the subtle and not-so subtle influences that this center of strength, balance and wisdom has to offer. Through language, references to the center, or hara, are woven into verbal metaphors in order to further describe the direct experience of one's core.

Core centering is an essential element of cross-training, as it offers multi-dimensional applications in all areas that utilize the center of the body, the true fulcrum of our physical being. It allows an athlete to achieve balance, stability and awareness, while changing one's center of attention in the moment. Virtually every sport uses the core, the center, as a foundational training element for peak performance.

In this chapter, various experiential exercises are provided as a means by which to demonstrate the concepts brought forth, and aid in developing a consistent practice toward greater athleticism and performance. In combination with these exercises, real-time applications are also provided, as examples of ways in which you can take these practices directly into your sporting experience.

History

In the East, both the Japanese and Chinese developed the concept of core or center primarily through martial arts. The Japanese word for core or center is hara. It is equivalent to the lower of the three energy centers (*dantian* in Chinese, *tanden* in Japanese) meaning "center of being." In the East, dantians are important focal points for exercise/meditative practices such as *qigong*, and martial arts such as *aikido* and *t'ai chi*.

In many martial arts, extension from this center has become a common concept. Aikido in particular emphasizes moving from the hara, the body's physical center of mass and gravity. Located in the center of the abdomen, it is the point at which the body is perfectly balanced and centered. It is the taproot which allows a person to ground themselves and achieve equilibrium. For the Japanese, the hara is the vital source of all human life energy (*ki*), the life force of the universe. When engaging in *tanden*, one practices living from this center of gravity.

In the West, scientific research has demonstrated that every person is born with two brains, one in the cranial area and the second in the tissue linings of our stomach, colon, and small intestine. This “belly brain”, located in the enteric nervous system, contains as many neurons and neurotransmitters as the “head” brain. Shortly after conception, in the fetus, the two brains share similar embryonic tissue. As the newborn child grows, there is a physical separation between the two brains, however they remain connected by the vagus nerve, which reaches from the stem of the head brain into the enteric nervous system. According to Michael Gershon, author of *The Second Brain* (Gershon, 1998), the enteric brain contains between 200-600 million neurons, an amount greater than the neuronal concentrations of either the spinal cord or the peripheral nervous system.

Although research on the functioning of the hara is relatively new, remarkable findings have already been discovered. In a series of studies at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Dean Radin and Marilyn Schlitz found statistically significant evidence demonstrating that subjects experienced stimuli 4-6 seconds in the belly brain before consciously receiving the signals in the cerebral brain (Radin, 2005), demonstrating that the common concept of “gut instinct” is by no means just an old wives’ tale. The adaptation of this understanding to sports is an evolutionary breakthrough in that players can develop the ability to have a hunch as to what is going to happen before it actually occurs. Precognition, intuition, and premonition—the “sixth-senses”—have a physical location in the body, the core. An athlete’s ability to develop this sweet spot through transformative practices heightens his ability to achieve exceptional performance on the playing field.

There is strong momentum for the concept and practice of hara or core training, which has taken on greater meaning with the increasing role of sports psychologists, trainers, and sports physiologists. This practice is adapted to the athletic experience in the West in many forms, such as physical grounding, center of mass or gravity, alignment and stance (posture), balance and confidence, and most recently, working with energy. These applications are intertwined through the matrix of body, mind, heart, and soul; or, our physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual bodies. In the following pages, we will look at the integration of hara and the aforementioned matrix to understand how the synthesis or integration of transformative practices offers the opportunity to take sports to a new level of performance.

Physical Body

Of the various bodies that we inhabit, the physical body is the superstructure that houses the limbs, muscles, organs, and tissue that give rise to athleticism in an individual. Far from being a fixed, non-changeable entity, the body can be regulated and transformed on an ongoing basis. Consider relating to the body as a form of energy in which various atoms and molecules of the universe have organized themselves into these individuated containers. These vessels, through transformative practices, can in fact evolve consciously, as opposed to the sub-conscious and unconscious development that many undergo.

The physical body is a highly adaptive learning mechanism which replaces itself, cell by cell, over seven years. Imagine the imprint of conscious, transformative practices taking effect on a cellular level. In physics, the law of conservation of energy states that the total energy of an

isolated system cannot change—it is said to be conserved over time. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but can change form; for instance, chemical energy can be converted to kinetic energy in the explosion of a stick of dynamite.

Transformation, the transfiguration of our physical nature, is the ultimate outcome of the law of conservation of energy. Frequently, in the type of heightened situation that sport provides, we find ourselves off-balance, out-of-sorts, not well-connected to our bodies. Shifting our attention to the core provides a centered experience that grounds and stabilizes us, literally shifting our centers of gravity.

Exercise - Transforming Centers of Attention

This exercise offers the understanding that we live in various attentional states, and that with good transformative practices we are able to shift our attention to areas that serve us. Our culture is a thinking culture, one that puts us in our heads much of the time. While it is useful to enjoy cognitive pursuits, living “upstairs” can take away from being balanced and centered, which are two qualities desired by many in the athletic world. Shifting our attention to the hara offers a sense of groundedness that redefines our center of attention. The balancing point for equilibrium, the hara is the area of the body where we can be most balanced and centered. Energy follows attention.

Try the following:

Tap your forehead in order to place attention in your brain, and breathe in slowly, taking time to inhale and exhale. As the breathing continues, allow your abdomen, not your chest, to expand with air. This is the area of your hara. You can place one hand on the front of the belly and the other hand behind you, on your lower back. The hara or center is the point between both hands, the center of your abdomen. Now start to breathe your attention into your hara, which is about two inches below your navel. Visualize and feel your hara expanding with each breath, giving it life and feeling your awareness moving into your hara, becoming more stable. Soften the knees and eyes and allow yourself to relax into your body. Visualize breathing your attention down your body, from the head, through the neck and chest, into the stomach and filling up your center. The more you breathe into your hara, the more powerful and grounded you feel. Notice what it’s like to shift your consciousness from the mind of your brain into the mind of your hara.

Now, move side-to-side and allow your body to notice where the perfect balance is between left and right foot, taking your time to align yourself in the middle of each foot. Move forward and back, and find your perfect balance between the balls of your feet and the heels, finding the center of your feet. Use your hara to allow the body to listen to what’s right for you. As you move through this process of alignment, you can follow the act of balancing and centering all the way up your body, through the hips (side- to-side and forward and back), into

the shoulders (same process) and head (same process). As you progressively align your body from toe to head, you enhance your posture, your carriage.

George Leonard is known for saying “the way we stand in the world is the way we show up in the world.” Practice this a number of times until the balancing and centering process occurs more naturally and quickly. Remember to be patient and loving with yourself as you learn to enjoy your practice over time, which is when the real learning occurs.

Real-Time Application

After honing your skills over time, you may now be ready to take this into your sport. First, imagine a situation which causes you to be out of balance in your sport. Your ability to visualize can be a powerful tool which will enhance your training methods. You are creating a virtual reality in your mind's “eye” which will serve you in real-time situations. Practice balancing and centering as you anticipate what will happen in the particular venue of your sport, specifically in a given situation that has previously arisen. By combining various practices, you are creating a new reality that runs parallel to the one that normally occurs when you play your sport. As you first consciously test this new approach in a practice situation, you are retraining your muscle memory and re-patterning your body. As you start to feel more comfortable with this new response pattern, the day will come when your practice will show up on the playing field of your sport. Don't be swayed by the outcome, either positive or negative. Continue to work on refining your technique and see how the frequency of your ability to apply this training increases over time. For example, perhaps when you began, you were only able to be balanced and centered 2 out of 10 times. In your practice over time, has this increased and by how much? Consider tracking your growth by diary or graph, and noticing the changes that have occurred over time. Learn to respond rather than react.

Intellectual Body

Living in hara offers a recontextualization of our very existence, as we are given a different information center, a new form of intelligence within which to operate. New ways of making decisions, moving, loving, and every other aspect of life now become available to the practitioner, as new vistas are revealed with this mind/body awakening. When we shift our consciousness from the mind of the brain to the mind of the hara, we experience the exquisite nature of presence, the here and now, and the moment-to-moment awareness of reality. We access a new kind of wisdom, a body-based intelligence at once both immediate and primal, which offers a full sensory experience into our understanding of life. We also begin to understand that there are many centers of intelligence in the many bodies that we occupy, and our ability to tap into them and integrate them allows for a greater realization of our athletic abilities and performance. Our ability to be in the moment allows us to enjoy a more heightened sense of awareness, and increases our ability to address anything that arises in the moment, rather than living in the past or wondering what is going to happen in the future. This is called **core** or **hara consciousness**.

Exercise - Taking Your Energetic Pulse

As you continue to practice being balanced and centered, breathing deeply and focusing your attention on your center, let go of the thoughts from the mind of the brain. If you find yourself thinking, notice the thoughts and let them go, as you come back to the rise and fall of the breath in the belly. This is your focus: breathing, and the expansion and contraction of the hara. Energy follows attention.

As you focus on your core breathing, allow all of your senses to be activated by simply being in the present moment and taking your consciousness to your sense of touch (feel your feet on the floor)... your sense of taste (can you taste the air?)... your sense of smell (allow scents to come to you)... your sense of vision (allow all objects in your visual field to come to you, as well as your inner vision)... your sense of sound (listen deeply)... As you connect with all of your senses, you become more acutely aware of being in the present moment. Use your senses to feel the energetic pulse of life.

Now place your hand on your heart, and feel your heartbeat. Place your hand on your wrist or neck and feel your pulse. If you become distracted, balance and center and reconnect to your core. By developing the practice of living in the mind of your hara, you recontextualize your experience and your worldview.

Real-time Application

Continue this practice and note your progress in living in the here and now. See if the distractions occur less frequently and are of shorter duration, as you develop the ability to shift your mind into the belly brain. Consider situations in sport where you become distracted and your performance is diminished. Use visualization techniques to take yourself into those situations, and then practice being in the moment and notice how that might affect your performance. Next, bridge this exercise into your practice time for your sport, becoming more familiar with the messages you are receiving from your body and how to work with them. Finally, take your practice into your sport and again, don't be affected by the outcome. Continue to refine and practice and hone your skills.

The Emotional Body

The integration of heart and hara can have a remarkable effect on higher achievement in sports. Our emotional maturity is directly tied to the attainment of peak performance, and many sport psychologists are achieving significant results by emphasizing our further emotional development. Many emotions are tied to the memory of a certain situation and can be transformed by core practice.

As an example, the endorphin release in a heightened and aroused state of exercise, characterized by an array of opio-peptides, adrenaline, hormones, and other electro- chemical reactions, puts an athlete into the “fight-or-flight” state also known as “butterflies”. The experienced athlete learns to train these sensations, attain emotional stability, and use the sensations as energy to heighten her play, and achieve peak performance. The use of core or hara serves to ground these physiological sensations, so they do not overwhelm the player, who is able to more consciously use the body’s senses to convert these experiences into higher levels of achievement. In sports, the sensations termed “fear” and “nerves” can often be recontextualized by understanding these terms as gifts of energy than an athlete receives.

Exercise - Location, Sensations, Emotions and Transformation

Balance and center and consider a situation in your memory of your sport in which you were really triggered and allowed emotions to overwhelm and get the best of you. Identify where in the body you experienced this memory (use your finger and point to the location), the physical sensations you are experiencing in that part of your body (tightness in the chest, shallow breathing, sharpness in the arm, etc., and finally, the corresponding emotions. Remember to be loving to yourself as all people have reactions to situations, both physically and emotionally. In a detached manner, simply witness how your body reacts; become a good historian by noticing your reaction patterns and mapping them out.

By being conscious of the location, physical sensations, and emotions you are experiencing, you now have the opportunity to ground them and use them for some positive result. Do so by balancing and centering, breathing into the location in your body where you notice the sensations and emotions, and experience them as energy. Breathe them down into your hara as you visualize them moving downward. The more you shift your emotional reactions into your core, the more grounded they become, empowering your athletic prowess by providing an internal source of energy.

Real-Time Application

Continue to perceive situations as gifts of energy, and practice full body awareness by noticing where and how you react in a triggered situation in your sport. The more familiar you become with this practice, the more you will become aware of the Integral footprint in your reactions to all of your senses . Your body is your early warning system and serves as your teacher, providing accurate information that can take you into the realm of the unimagined, the supernormal, where incredible achievement occurs. By balancing and centering and transforming sensations as energy, you can extend the limits of your abilities and realize your greater self.

Take this transformative practice slowly into your sporting life by first working with the memory of an athletic situation, experiencing the location in your body of that memory, the

sensations and the emotions, and repeating the exercise. As you become more conscious in your practice, consider the bodily responses to be gifts of energy, and use them to become more emotionally stable. Then take this newly created approach into a real-time exercise situation, first in your training program and then finally into your sport. Again, be patient and allow for transformation to occur over time. Failure is one of our greatest teachers, and much learning takes place when we use a situation as our practice partner.

Soul/Spiritual Body

Hara is much more than a biological-physical entity. As the center of the human body, it is also the center in a spiritual sense. One who is in touch with hara has something that is tranquil and all-embracing. The person who has hara can wait and is patient, composed, and in touch with spirit. Anchorage in the vital center allows one to enjoy a power which masters life in a new and different way.

There is an interesting correlation between the various states of consciousness that are attained in sports and the euphoric ecstasies in certain religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. Many athletes have encountered states where time slowed down, or they could see everything on the field. Others have had a certain knowing or premonition about how something was about to happen, they were able to read the opposing player's mind or had a gut feeling about the correct way in which to do something. Some have had an inner knowing that guided them while doing something that they never thought possible. Others have had a transcendent moments born from something both extraordinary and memorable on the field, an otherworldly experience. These are the moments that athletes live for, where sport and spirit merge into one entity and take on a significance beyond ordinary understanding.

Core centering is an essential component of these experiences, and enhances our ability to remove ourselves from the past/future orientation of ordinary consciousness. We either dwell on what has already happened in the past, or focus on what may occur in the future. In either case we are not present in the here and now. Hara takes one into the present moment of awareness, where all things are possible, and allows one to enter into the direct, immediate experience of reality. This is one of the things so prized in sports: the moment of full presence to everything that is happening, that athletes live for.

George Leonard states "To be centered is to say yes to life. The center joins past and future, heaven and earth, the near and the far, the way out and the way in. It is a secure place from which to venture forth and to which you can always return."

In its most simplistic form, core centering is a physical activity. We relate to the center of the abdomen as the focal point for this practice. Shifting our attention into the center creates multiple effects, which, when properly harnessed, expand and enhance the sporting experience. As a true transformative practice, hara consciousness takes on an ever greater meaning as one plumbs the depths of this lifelong practice and finds more and more adaptations. As we shift our consciousness to another part of the body other than the brain, new worlds open up, and our worldview and consciousness are transformed.

In the words of Karl Durckheim (1970), “(Hara)... is simultaneously the center in a spiritual sense. The word Hara refers to the person in his totality, to the basic quality of one’s nature, his whole disposition, and to those special traits and faculties through which they are expressed. Calm, unprejudiced judgment. Consider hara to be a tap root into the divine. Hara as a practice means above all right earthing—grounding and entering into our primordial nature.

Hara gives one a special strength for living in this world, and at the same time, allows for contact with the other-worldly powers of one’s being, which unite us with our higher being. To realize being in all and everything then becomes the sole function of one’s life. Time is no longer opposed to eternity, but is the medium which reflects it. Everything in space and time means ultimately only eternity.”

Exercise - The Ever-Present Moment of Awareness

Take a nice wide stance and balance and center. Breathe deeply and align yourself through your entire body. Your hara serves to ground you into the earth, and as you become connected to the earth, you are more in the moment. Use the breath to expand your center, and experience your core as the tap root into zanshen (ever-present awareness). You are also connected to a oneness with all living beings, with the earth and with the universe. Breathe into the consciousness of being a timeless soul, into core consciousness. Allow your consciousness to expand from inside of you, to the room around you, to the city that you live in, into the state, into the world and into the all-encompassing cosmos that you are a part of. Feel the unitive experience of oneness with the divine.

Real-Time Application

As you practice this soul/spirit exercise and develop the ability to shift your consciousness, certain realizations may occur, such as being part of a greater whole, larger than ourselves and the unitive nature of life. Your ability to transcend yourself can be particularly useful in your sport, particularly by being able to see “the big picture.” As you become practiced at core consciousness expansion, take this into your sport’s practice environment first, seeing how it may affect your game. There are many benefits, and after fine-tuning this exercise, you will be ready to take this into the direct experience of your sporting event. Enjoy the ride. Our ability to appreciate the nature of multi-dimensional consciousness brings its own rewards.

Breathwork

Breathing is one of the most powerful forms of regulating the body and is a transformative practice in and of itself. There are multiple breathing exercises in traditional Japanese martial arts where attention is always kept on hara. The area of the body that we breathe into, the frequency of the breathing, the duration of the retention of the breath, and the length of the release of the breath all play a significant role in affecting consciousness and one’s resulting

performance. Breathing through the hara, as opposed to breathing into the chest, creates a shift in our attentional state and correspondingly in our consciousness. Core breathing activates the center and becomes a significant part of an athlete's cross-training techniques, as he learns to regulate his body through the breath. By integrating this practice with the core, as well as other practices, the athlete provides more options for higher levels of performance.

Belly Brain-Research

Recent scientific discoveries show that the hara contains a cluster of neuronal endings which is being referred to as the enteric brain or "belly brain", further evidence of another form of intelligence. It is the area of the body in which we experience a "gut feeling", a felt sense of wisdom and understanding.

Dean Radin's work at the Institute of Noetic Science has demonstrated a correlation between the core and intuition and emotions (Radin, 2005), a body-based form of intelligence. This other form of intelligence is body-based. His studies reveal that information is initially received in the hara seconds before the cerebral brain processes it. Radin describes this type of precognition as "presentiment" and concludes: "This experiment suggests that some somatic feelings may be associated with perceptions transcending ordinary sensory capabilities." He further opines that "it may turn out that the 'belly brain' is more perceptive than previously suspected, and that common reports of gut feelings having special intuitive qualities may have a basis in fact."

This growing body of research supports the understanding of multiple intelligences in the body, and evidences itself in the arena of sports. Many athletes have directly encountered the worlds of intuition, sixth sense, clairvoyance, and other non-ordinary phenomena that reveal themselves on the field of play. We are just finding out how powerful we are, and core centering plays a major role in coming home to the wisdom of the body.

Integral Fitness

Core Centering is increasingly becoming utilized in sporting activities throughout the world, as athletes, sports psychologists and trainers move into the inner game of sports to help athletes achieve higher potentials through cross-training. The integration of transformative practices is gaining a foothold in the sports psyche as athletes of all caliber embrace the Integral worldview, evidenced by an unfolding of higher levels of performance in both individual and team levels. The practice of hara, with its rich lineage in both the East and the West, is central to the practice of interiority, as athletes go within to find their higher potentials. Rather than seeking external solutions, players are finding a vast inward infinitude of potential. As they unpack their limitless nature and apply it to sports, we enter a new era in which we will witness extraordinary events reveal themselves, as a sign of the vast possibilities of the human experience.

As athletes constellate transformative practices in body, mind, heart, and soul and create their own customized, integrated latticework of practice, they will give birth to newer versions

of themselves. Mankind will observe the evolution of a new order of species, moving from *homo sapien sapien* to *homo sapien sentiens*, an intuitive and athletic human being with heightened sensitivity that promises to elevate humanity through the game of sports, with all of the life lessons it has to offer.

Sports are one of the world's great metaphors, teaching us life lessons that extend beyond the playing fields. Through Core Centering, athletes find their way home to their very essence and explore new worlds both within and without, redefining their athletic experience and achieving higher levels of performance. Athletes not only have the opportunity to reach out and touch the stars, but to be the stars.

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