



**PRANA:
YOUR
LIMITLESS
SOURCE OF
CREATIVE
ENERGY**

Suneel Gupta

Hustle is an indelible part of American identity and a staple of the modern job description.

We love to see it in our athletes, in our politicians, and even in our fictional characters. It is wildly inspiring to see an underdog like Rocky Balboa get bruised, bloodied (and a bit brain-damaged) yet still come out on top.

The problem is that the qualities we associate with hustle—always being on, working nonstop, being relentless—are some of the same qualities that are scientifically associated with burnout. Sometimes it seems the path to success and the path to exhaustion look almost exactly the same. That we must choose between ambition and well-being.

The good news is that it is possible to have both, but it requires breaking out of a strict time mindset and expanding into an energy mindset.

Prana is the animating force behind your dharma, your “inner calling”. It is an energetic current that buzzes inside of you, making you feel alive and engaged.

When you tap into your prana, you feel lit up, energized, and creative. When you don't, you can feel depleted, apathetic, and burned out. The tiniest tasks can sound overwhelming, and the smallest setbacks can seem incapacitating.

Prana offers you an extraordinary source of energy, and yet it isn't something you need to go find. Just like your dharma, it is already inside of you. Yet, we often ignore this natural supply of energy, relying instead on hustle and grit to squeeze more time into our schedule.

While your time is a limited resource, your prana is limitless. There are only so many hours in the day, but there's no ceiling to the creative energy you can bring to a single hour.

You and I both know what it's like to spend a lot of time on something and get very little done. We also know that one "lit up" hour can sometimes equate to a week's worth of creativity.

THE SWAMI

I got my first glimpse of the power of prana when I was twelve years old. A renowned swami from South India had traveled to Michigan to speak at our temple. He was staying with a close family friend, who invited us to visit the swami before his speech that night.

On the drive there, Dad told me Swami Chinmayananda's story. He had been a freedom fighter for India's independence and a teacher for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

By the time we pulled into the driveway, I felt like I was about to meet a mythical hero. Our friends escorted us to the living room, where he was seated cross-legged on the couch. He wore the same saffron-colored robe I had recognized from religious figures in India. His long, silver hair was pulled back into a bun. He wore thick glasses, and as we entered the room, he gazed softly in our direction.

My parents quickly brought their hands to prayer and bowed before him, and I followed their lead. He didn't respond with any gesture of his own but softly grunted in acknowledgment.

We took a seat in front of him and for the next few minutes sat almost entirely in silence. Then he closed his eyes. The rest of us glanced at one another, wondering whether he was asleep. Finally, my dad asked the swami about his travels. He opened his eyes halfway and said, "Theek" (fine). Then closed them again.

It was Mom's turn to engage. She asked him about the speech he would be giving that night. He unenthusiastically said, "Yes, I will be giving a speech tonight," and then he closed his eyes yet again.

What was going on here? This man had inspired millions of people. He was here in the United States for a speaking tour. In fact, he had a speech beginning in about an hour. Yet he looked like he was about to pass out.

After another uncomfortable beat of silence, I blurted out, "Are you tired, Swami?" Mom shot a horrified look in my direction, and I pretended not to notice.

The swami glacially turned his gaze to my direction. Then he cocked his head to the side and his shoulders began to gyrate up and down. I realized he was laughing. Then, with barely more than a whisper, he said something that seemed ordinary at the moment but extraordinary to me today.

"I'm saving my energy."

By the time we reached the temple that evening, the parking lot was so jammed that we were forced to find a spot in the nearby neighborhood. When we pulled open the carved-wood temple doors, the event had already begun. My parents and I hustled to pull our shoes off and place them in cubbyholes.

That's when I heard the voice. It was thunderous, piercing, and brimming with conviction. I felt a gravitational pull to whoever was speaking. I ripped off my other shoe and walked toward the prayer hall. When I stepped into the standing-room-only space, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

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That voice was the swami's! He was seated cross-legged on the stage, his back was straight, chest open, and he leaned forward like he was about to pounce on the crowd. His hands were gesticulating with purpose. His booming voice transfixed the audience.

I realized then that the swami wasn't kidding when he said he was saving his energy. Rather than letting the energy seep out throughout the day, he pooled his prana, and then unleashed it at the precise moment when his dharma needed it the most.

RHYTHMIC RENEWAL

For decades we've been hearing the term work-life balance. Practically speaking, balance asks us to squeeze well-being into an already-packed work schedule. If you want to get eight hours of sleep a night or get a workout in before the day starts, then go for it—as long as your work doesn't suffer.

The thing about work-life balance is that it will almost always tilt in work's favor. "Workdays" are a traditional part of our daily lives; "well-being days" are not.

For too long, we've separated work from well-being despite the fact that both are essential for sustained success. People who fizzle out in their careers very rarely run out of time or talent—what they run out of is energy.

I've seen entrepreneurs shut down companies, organizations pull the plug on projects, and policymakers walk away from initiatives not because they were out of options, but because they were out of steam. They were simply too exhausted to keep going.

As it turns out, a great work ethic requires a disciplined rest ethic.

To keep their energy high, top performers don't rely on vacations or long weekends in order to reset themselves. They practice what I call rhythmic renewal. Rather than waiting for weekends or vacations, you're periodically renewing yourself with short breaks every day, throughout the day.

A day filled with breaks may sound more like the schedule of a slacker than a peak performer. But studies show us that people who achieve the highest levels of performance take somewhere around eight focused, deliberate breaks every single day.

Looking at your busy calendar, eight breaks a day might sound unrealistic, if not impossible. We've grown accustomed to a schedule that doesn't stop. By the time you end one commitment, you're already late for another.

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Doing this week after week, month after month is enough to break a Buddhist monk. Suddenly, you find yourself crashing hard. And no amount of caffeine will save you. You need a vacation, but deep down you know that won't be a long-term fix either, only a temporary escape from the energy drain. Most people report feeling more stressed one week after their vacation than they were before they left.

In 2018, a research paper referred to this as the "recovery paradox." It demonstrated how when our minds and bodies need to recover the most, we're less likely and less able to do anything about it. And yet, we often save our recovery periods for the moments when we feel most burned out.

To boost your prana, you must turn recovery into a daily rhythm, rather than something you do when you feel overwhelmed. Taking small breaks might sound simple when compared to a massive problem like burnout. But it's amazing what can happen when you turn tiny breaks into a discipline.

THE DRIVER

A few years ago, I was asked to host a new docuseries on entrepreneurship, showcasing the stories of small businesses all around the world. I was a novice on camera with zero training and I felt like an impostor. By the end of the first day, the director was starting to suspect the same. We had done take after take, and each time the director coached me to "loosen up" while the other twenty members of the crew kindly tried to hide their annoyance at my incompetence.

I woke early the next morning and resolved to show up on set with the right attitude. I stretched, went to the gym, and ate a breakfast high in protein. At seven thirty a.m., I was going to be picked up by a driver. I showed up a few minutes early just to appreciate the morning sky. I was feeling as Zen as possible when my ride pulled up.

I hadn't met the driver before, but as soon as I got into his car, I could tell that he was in a bad mood. He'd been fighting rush-hour LA traffic on the way to my hotel and was about to do the same thing all over again.

He was an enormous man. His chest and biceps threatened to bust through his suit. A wraparound tattoo edged just slightly above the neckline of his white-collared shirt.

On the ride to the set, he squeezed the steering wheel tightly. He was cutting off other drivers and being cut off in return. With every lane change and every sudden brake, I could feel his stress level going up.

By the time we got to our destination, his disposition had completely rubbed off on me. I was no longer loose; far from it. I un-buckled my seat belt but stopped myself from exiting. When I got out of that car, I would have to be "on," and at that moment I felt terribly off.

So I just sat there. I looked at the rearview mirror to find the driver staring at me coldly, wondering why I wasn't getting the hell out of his vehicle.

I cleared my throat. "Would it be okay with you if I just sit here for a few minutes and meditate?" His lips pursed together. He probably had to get back on the road. That's when I decided to go out on a limb. "Is there any chance you would like to join me?"

His stare intensified for a moment, but then his shoulders dropped a little. He leaned back slightly, and said with a husky, drawn voice, "Okay, I'll meditate with you."

I pulled out my phone and started a five-minute meditation. The two of us sat together in the parking lot of the film set and just breathed. When the five minutes were up, I felt ready to walk in. I opened the car door and got out.

The driver did, too, and by the time I was out of the vehicle, he was already standing in front of me. Twice my size, he pulled me into a big bear hug. Then he said, "Thank you. I needed that. I really needed that."

He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny square emblem attached to a red string. Lustrous southwestern stones were pressed into its center. It looked like a small piece of a pretty mountainside.

With tenderness, he handed it to me. "I carry this on the road to keep me grounded," he said. "I want you to have it. I promise it will do the same for you today."

I looked down at the beautiful amulet now in my right palm. I told him I couldn't take it, but he insisted.

If the driver and I could reset ourselves with one focused, five-minute break, what would happen if you took multiple breaks throughout the day?

Earlier that morning, neither of us knew the other's name. On the ride over, we hadn't said anything to each other. Now he had just given me something that mattered deeply to him. We were two strangers in the middle of a busy studio lot, neither of us wanting to say goodbye.

I watched him drive away, tracing my thumb over the smooth face of the emblem. I walked onto the film set with an almost otherworldly sense of confidence.

After the first couple of takes, the director poked his head out from behind the camera equipment. “You must have slept well last night,” he said.

It continued like this for the remainder of the shoot.

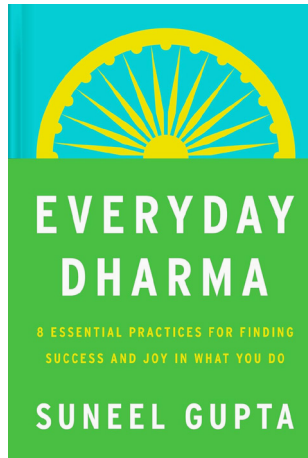
That driver and I never exchanged names or numbers. We haven’t seen or spoken to each other since. But I carry that emblem with me everywhere. It keeps me grounded, as he promised it would. It also serves as a constant reminder of the magnificent power of a short break.

If the driver and I could reset ourselves with one focused, five-minute break, what would happen if you took multiple breaks throughout the day?

Over the years, I have asked leaders, executives, athletes, and artists to experiment with rhythmic renewal. One of the most common pieces of feedback they give me is: “For the first time in my career, I feel more energy at the end of the day than I did at the beginning.”

When was the last time you felt that way? 📌

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suneel Gupta lost his Dharma and then found it again. He is the founding CEO of RISE and co-founder of the Gross National Happiness Center in the United States. As an author, a visiting scholar at Harvard Medical School, and host of a hit documentary series, Suneel studies the most extraordinary people on the planet to discover and share simple, actionable habits to lift our performance and deepen our daily sense of purpose. His work has been featured by major outlets including *CNBC*, *TED*, and the *New York Times*.

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