

**Intended for Grades:** 5-6 **Estimated Time:** 30-40 min.

**Lesson Title:** HA - The Breath of Life

**Lesson Purpose:** Students will

- \* Learn the importance of breath in Hawaiian culture
- \* Study how important oxygen and correct breathing are for human health

**Materials & Preparation:**

- \* Read article by Makana Risser Chai, “Hā, The Breath of Life” (see below)
- \* Practice *Hā* breathing instructions from lesson plan
- \* Optional story from *Nana I Ke Kumu*, about *Hā*, passing *mana* at death, to illustrate the significance of *Hā* in Hawaiian culture (See below)

**Background Information:** *Pilikia*: problems, troubles, difficulties

**Why it is important to learn proper breathing:**

“Breathing correctly means that our bodies are being supplied with the right amount of oxygen, replenishing our brain and other vital organs with essential nutrients. If you are not breathing correctly, your body can be robbed of oxygen, leading to a host of conditions. You can feel constantly tired and lethargic because there are not enough vital nutrients being carried in the blood.

Breathing incorrectly can also affect the levels of carbon dioxide - or CO<sub>2</sub> - in the blood. While oxygen is important for our bodies to function properly, CO<sub>2</sub> is just as vital. You need a balance of oxygen *and* carbon dioxide. If you breathe too fast, you breathe off too much carbon dioxide, which, in turn, will make your whole system too alkaline. A certain level of CO<sub>2</sub> is necessary for your cells to maintain the correct level of acidity and to function properly.”

from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-140722/How-breathe-way-good-health.html>

**Steps:**

1. To access student’s prior knowledge, ask the following questions:
  - \* What is the Hawaiian word for breath? (*Hā*)
  - \* When you think of the word *Ha*, is there anything that comes to mind? (*Breath of life, aloha....*)
  - \* Do you think there is a correct or incorrect way to breathe?
2. Use the following notes to guide discussion and the *Hā* exercise with participants:
  - Oxygen is:
    - \* An important element to life on Earth
    - \* Most common element of human body; its 65% of body mass (most is water).
    - \* Something all animals and plants breathe in & use up
  - We breathe out carbon dioxide, which cleanses us of toxins; *Ha* means exhale.
  - Proper breathing replenishes our brain and other vital organs with important nutrients.
  - Ancient Hawaiians knew breath was sacred & *the key to good health*.
  - Without breath there is no life. Breathing was respected & done with purpose.
  - Breath is sacred in part because it carries the words of the pule (prayer). In ancient times, long prayers were chanted on a single breath.

- The *kahuna la'au lapa'au* (traditional Hawaiian healer) created herbal remedies and then added their *Hā* (exhale) on them to impart *mana* (spiritual power).
- A *kupuna* (elder teacher) about to die would pass his last bit of wisdom and *mana* on to his chosen descendant by exhaling his “ha” into the other’s mouth.
- As *kupuna* will say, “Breath is important because when Ke Akua created man, He *Hā* – breathed him into life.”

3. Inquire if anyone in their ‘*ohana* experiences health challenges or stress. Share that modern science has proven that breath control can:

- \* Lower blood pressure
- \* End irregular heartbeats
- \* Improve patterns of poor digestion
- \* Increase blood circulation
- \* Decrease worry/fear/stress
- \* Improve sleep

4. Transition to doing *Hā* breathing by sharing the following information:

\* The simplest and most powerful tool for protecting your health is absolutely free and right under your nose (literally).

\* People may need to re-learn to breathe correctly with their diaphragm, not our chest. Stress influences us to take shallow breaths from our chest. (*If you observe newborn babies breathing, their opu (stomach) moves up and down, as they take deep, relaxing breaths.*)

5. Teach the *Hā* breathing exercise. (*You will need to talk them through this.*)

- Have students stand; circle up to link energy. Ask them to place their hand over their *piko* (belly button). Remind participants to breathe in good thoughts when they inhale, and exhale any *pilikia* or troubles bothering them when they breathe out.

- Instruct students to:

- a. First exhale all your breath.
- b. Breathe in *slowly* through nose, allowing breath to fill and expand *opu* (stomach), **not** your chest. (*Shoulders rising is a sign of improper breathing.*)
- c. Exhale *slowly* through mouth, with the *Hā* sound. (Exhale should take longer.)
- d. Repeat 2 times; try holding your breath after inhale & exhale for a few seconds.

6. Ask students how they feel. (*Hopefully more settled and calmer.*) Encourage them to do this daily, especially if feeling stressed, or if experiencing *pilikia*. It’s free, can be done anywhere, and is good for them!

*Note:* Teachers can start your day/class with this *Hā* exercise, asking students to exhale any problems/negative attitudes they are holding. You can talk them through what you want them to breathe in and what you want them to breathe out.

7. Optional: Read *Hā* story below from *Nānā I Ke Kumu*

## Hā

Excerpts from: *Nānā I Ke Kumu-Look to the Source Vol. 1*

*Ha* - a strong expulsion of breath; to exhale; to breathe; breathe upon; breath; life.  
As ritual, connotes the imparting of mystic powers through breathing on recipient.

“Grandfather was dying, and the entire ‘*ohana* (family clan) was gathered around his sleeping mat. Soon the old man’s spirit would leave his body to join the family *aumākua* (ancestor gods) in the eternity called *Pō*. But before this final moment, the patriarch, with almost his last breath, would impart his specific *mana*, his canoe-building talent, to a chosen descendant.

But now, *Kulikuli! Noho mālie*. (Hush! Be silent). The moment has come. Grandfather motions his grandson, Kelala, to come closer. Summoning his last strength, the dying man chants briefly. Then come the solemn words:

“To you, my dear and beloved *mo ‘opuna* (grandson), I give my *mana*. May this *mana*, the gift of the *aumakua* passed down through me, guide your hand so that your canoes may be as fleet as the *makani* (wind), as strong as *nalu nui* (high surf), and as bold in ocean’s waves as the *manō* (shark).”

Bending down, Kelala places his mouth close to his grandfather’s. The old man draws a deep breath, and exhales directly into Kelala’s mouth. “Through this *hā* you have now received my *mana*,” he says, and in peace and serenity meets death.”

Such, in this fictionalized but typical example, was *hā*, Hawaii’s ritual in which *mana* in its specialized sense, was passed on. This was not the general, diffused *mana* of power, charisma, or authority. That was passed on by spoken declaration alone. This was not skill or proficiency, for skills came from training and practice.

Rather, the *mana* of *hā* was a talent or natural aptitude. This *mana* might be hand and eye coordination for the craftsman. Insight, keen perceptions, hands sensitive to tactile messages for the various medical *kahuna* (doctor-priests). A “feel for the soil” for the farmer. Keen sight and a sense of direction for the navigator. Color sense, spatial perceptions, perfect pitch, bodily grace, a feel for rhythm, a natural singing voice—all these are examples of specific *mana*.

In the Hawaiian ‘*ohana*, the passing on of specific *mana* through *ha* filled a number of functions. It prevented any family doubts or disputes regarding who was entitled to the *mana*. Psychologically it was a kind of “passing on the torch” ceremony, infusing a sense of pride and dedication in the chosen descendant. Or as Mary Pukui phrases it, “The elder was sending the message, “Now I am going. You must carry on where I left off.”

## **Hā, The Breath of Life**

*by Makana Risser Chai*

Modern science has proven that breath control can lower blood pressure, end heart arrhythmias, improve long-standing patterns of poor digestion, increase blood circulation throughout the body, decrease anxiety, and improve sleep and energy cycles. (Weil)

The ancient Hawaiians knew that breath was the key to good health. The Hawaiian word for breath is ha, but ha has many other meanings. It means exhale. And since the old Hawaiians were deeply aware that without breath there is no life, ha also means life. (Pukui & Elbert) Because ha was so important, breathing was revered and often done with conscious intention. Breath is sacred in part because it carries the words of the pule (prayer). (Pukui, Haertig & Lee) In ancient times, long prayers were chanted on a single breath.

The kahuna la'au lapa'au (medical doctors) created herbal remedies and then ha –exhaled – on them to impart mana (spiritual power). (Pukui, Haertig & Lee) In other ceremonies, kahuna held their breath for two hours. (Kepelino)

A kupuna (elder teacher) about to die would pass his last bit of wisdom and mana on to his chosen successor by expelling his breath ha into the other's mouth. (Pukui, Haertig & Lee) In Hawai'i still today, breath is considered sacred. As my mother-in-law Tutu Elizabeth Pa Chai says, "Breath is important because when God created man He – ha – breathed him into life."

Breath was sacred, but the Hawaiians of old also had fun with it. Children played a game to see who could exhale the longest. (Handy & Pukui) During the Makahiki festival, warriors held breath-holding contests. (Pogue)

### **Playing with the Breath**

To release stress, you too can play with your breath. Most people, when told to focus on breathing, try to take a deep inhale, straining to get more air in. The way to truly get a deep breath is to first let the old air out.

Right now, exhale as long as you can. Keep exhaling, through your relaxed mouth, making a slight "ha" sound. Squeeze your belly a little at the end to get out all the air. Then just allow yourself to inhale. Don't "try" to take in a lot of air. Your lungs are programmed to take in as much air as they can! It's the exhale – the ha – you need to focus on consciously.

Continue two more times, exhaling as long as you can, and then allowing good, fresh air to fill your lungs. Notice feeling more relaxed after just three breaths.

Now that you're warmed up, you can practice breath holding. Exhale for 5 counts, hold for 5 counts, inhale for 5 counts, hold for 5, and repeat. Play with increasing or decreasing the length of time you exhale, inhale and hold.

Notice when you hold your breath you might feel an irresistible urge to smile. Don't resist – smile! Feel how good it feels.

You can play with your breath whenever you think of it. Good times to practice are when you are waiting:

- at the computer
- for the microwave
- in traffic jams
- at stop signals
- for commercials
- in line
- on hold

The best time to practice exhaling is when you are in a stressful situation. If you're having a tense discussion with a colleague or loved one, start paying attention to your breath while you listen. Don't think about what you're going to say next – just listen and breathe. You might be surprised at what happens next. Keep playing with your breath ... for the rest of your life!

**Sources:**

- <http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART02039/the-art-and-science-of-breathing.html>
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- E. Craighill Handy and Mary Kawena Pukui, The Polynesian Family System in Ka'u, Hawai'i, Charles E. Tuttle, 1972 (first edition 1958)
- Pogue, Rev. J.F. Moololeo of Ancient Hawaii (trans. Charles Kenn) Topgallant Publishing, Honolulu, 1978 (written 1858)
- Kepelino, "Hawaiian Collection" from Hooiliili Hawaii, Pepa I, 1858, translated and annotated by Bacil F. Kirtley and Esther T. Mookini, in The Hawaiian Journal of History, Vol. 11, 1977, pp. 39 – 68