

Breathwork - A pathway to wholeness

by Judee Gee

Although breath awareness has been an essential element in spiritual practises since ancient times, the significance of breath and its utilization as a therapeutic tool in contemporary psychological practice is relatively recent. Conscious breathing is advocated in several "modern" methods of body/mind therapy - Primal Therapy, Reichian Work, Postural Integration, Feldenkrais, Bio-energetics and Rebirthing - and while each of these techniques has its own "trademark" style and precise method of application, they all acknowledge the importance of the breath in the transformational process.

The original and most commonly known of the modern techniques of conscious breathing - Rebirthing - was first developed and presented by Leonard Orr in the USA during the early 1970's, and has been taught and practised extensively throughout the world ever since. The method has experienced tremendous success as a tool for personal development, and this is no doubt due to its simplicity, power and efficiency as a means to access the inner realms, heal past traumas and transform personal limiting belief systems into new paradigms of perception creating much greater choice and liberty.

Thirty years after the introduction of Rebirthing, there now exist several other methods, or "branches" of conscious breathing currently taught and practised in the world. Holotropic Breathwork (pioneered by Stanislav Grof) and the Vivation technique (by Jim Leonard) are possibly the most well known, as both their creators have been active in the field for many years and have been published as extensively on the subject of conscious breathing as both Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, the very first pioneers.

Other titles given to describe techniques of conscious breathing around the world include Integrative Breath Therapy (Holland), Transformational Breathwork (Italy), Rebirth Therapy (Spain), Free Breathing (Russia) and Heart-Centred Breath Therapy (USA).

The more "generic" term now applied to conscious breathing practices is Breathwork.

What is Breathwork?

Essentially, Breathwork recognizes the breath as the most simple, natural and powerful inner resource available for triggering openings into our inner state of being. A typical session begins as a personal awareness experience, demanding full and continuous breathing over a specific period of time. Relaxing and breathing in a circular rhythm, the "breather" maintains a focused awareness of sensations, emotions, thoughts and memories as they come and go, experiencing and accepting these different phenomena without judgement and interpretation. Encouraged to relax, to accept and to "let go", the client develops awareness about their inner world of being, experiencing their thoughts and emotions from a different perspective and progressively creating a new dynamic in the breathing process.

Self-understanding and acceptance

Supporting the Breathwork method we find a philosophy encouraging personal transformation through self-understanding and acceptance. Breathwork recognizes that the body, mind and spirit are essentially interconnected and that change in the state of one aspect triggers change in the others. As a natural and wholistic therapy, Breathwork supports the view that the individual contains within themselves all the resources they need to develop to their full creative and spiritual potential. Furthermore, Breathwork advocates that the essential state of being of the individual is one of equanimity - a state of inner peace and balance that can be re-discovered in a number of ways; firstly by addressing traumatic or "unfinished" experiences from the past and bringing them to resolution and integration; secondly by cultivating an attitude of acceptance towards the cyclical nature of moods, emotions and existence itself; and thirdly by developing an awareness of "self" beyond personality and ego.

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When the client breathes, relaxes and maintains awareness with an attitude of acceptance, an internal atmosphere is created which allows suppressed "material" to rise to the surface of awareness. Thoughts and memories which come to conscious awareness also have an emotional counterpart and a physical

reference point in the body. As material surfaces and circulates in the body/mind, physical tension is affected and eventually dissolved, emotions are experienced and expressed, and insights occur. As physical and emotional release occurs the breath deepens, flowing more fully and spontaneously. The client is assisted to resolve and integrate past experiences, thereby progressively liberating their body/mind from past traumas and welcoming a respiration that circulates with greater freedom and ease.

For many clients, Breathwork opens up a spiritual dimension of experience that has never before been encountered. At a certain moment, often following a passage of release and integration, the breath becomes suddenly "liberated". In this moment it is as though the body rediscovers how to breathe naturally and effortlessly. Barriers dissolve and the concept of self expands, opening into a vast dimension of energy, light and transcendence. In this state one is "in the light" and "is the light." The experience of breathing "in light" creates a state of profound relaxation, healing and integration. The resulting sense of inner peace, reconciliation and harmony can be carried into daily life with long lasting results.

Empowered both physically and spiritually, individuals finds themselves more free to express their creativity, more able to adapt to the movement of life and more capable of participating in the creation of the life-path of their choice

Breathwork in the new millenium

Breathwork is thriving. Although the technique as we know it today is primarily recognized as a psychotherapeutical tool for personal growth, we are currently discovering a much wider range of application of the method. Breathwork (and the concept of conscious breathing not only as a tool for well-being, but also for efficiency) is now rapidly moving into schools, hospitals, corporate businesses and university curriculums.

There is no doubt that Breathwork will eventually receive recognition and accreditation as a specific method of transpersonal therapy within the broader field of wholistic medicine that is currently receiving recognition throughout the world.

As we continue to explore and develop the method, we are sure to discover further valuable keys opening to the spiritual dimensions of union, communion and transcendence.

In the meantime, breathworkers continue to meet together nationally and internationally in a spirit of cooperation, inspiration and synergy, working towards their vision of personal and global transformation one step (and one conscious breath) at a time.

Judee Gee is an Australian Breathwork trainer based in the south of France, who has been teaching internationally in the field of conscious breathing since 1981. She is the author of "Intuition - Awakening your inner guide", Samuel Weiser Inc. 1999, and the co-creator of the "Tantric Training for energy, essence & emptiness". She is a former President of the International Breathwork Foundation.

Excerpts from "Intuition - Awakening your inner guide" (Chapter 7 - Breath, Movement & Emotion), have been used in the creation of this article.