

What is Breathwork: An Interview with Ann Harrison

Q. What do you mean by Breathwork?

AH. "Breathwork" is a general term referring to a range of breathing techniques that Breathwork therapists use to help people.

Q. Everyone has to breathe to stay alive. so don't we all know about breathing?

AH. Yes and no. Of course we have to breathe to stay alive. However *the way* we breathe is effected by short term stress as well as by various past traumas which may create chronic patterns of restricted breathing.

Q. What do you mean exactly?

AH. In the case of stress, we tend to shallow breathe. This means we don't get enough oxygen through the system. Our body is not able to work at an optimal level, and the lack of oxygen often effects our judgment. We make errors and this causes us even more stress. And stress related illness is now well documented.

Q. How else does the way we breathe effect us?

AH. When we experience any strong emotion we tend to hold our breath. For example, if we are walking across the road and suddenly a car comes racing around the corner and nearly runs over us. We will hold our breath in shock before we find words that express our thoughts and feelings. The holding of the breath locks that emotion, in this case fear, and any thoughts we have at that time, into the body.

Q. Can this happen with any type of emotion?

AH. Yes. Think of the expressions in our language which show this — "I was speechless", "It took my breath away", "I was all choked up", "I just swallowed it down and carried on". Imagine the occasions when you might say these phrases and you will realise that at the same time you were holding your breath for a short time.

Q. Well, why is holding the breath and locking these emotions into the body such a bad thing.

AH. Well it's not bad in itself. The problem comes from the accumulative effect. We become like a pressure cooker full of steam. We might have various sorts of supportive safety valves: things such as exercise, massage and music. However often we relieve the pressure by outbursts of temper or crying over what appear to be the smallest things. And we can't understand why our reactions are out of proportion to the situation. It's because we have so much pressure built up inside us we just can't take anymore. Breathwork takes the pressure off!

Q. Now, Ann, How does just breathing take the pressure off?

AH. The technique is extremely simple. I guide my clients to breathe in a certain way and its like flushing out the system. Anything that has been accumulated in the past is brought up and cleared out.

Q. How does it work?

AH The most simple answer is that you are just doing *the opposite* of what you did to lock emotions and thoughts in your bodymind in the first place.

Q. Well then, what's the not so simple answer?

AH. You then need to look and understand the ancient wisdom of the East . This has been the basis of my training and experience. Thousands of years ago the Chinese gave the name "chi" to the life force contained in the breath. The Indians call it "prana". Its movement in our body is mapped by the acupuncture meridian lines. When we hold our breath and lock emotions and thoughts into the body this energy system becomes blocked. You might like to think of the breath as being the fuel for the engine. If there is any blockage in the fuel lines then the engine doesn't work as well and there is an effect on the whole system. The use of breath techniques and meditation on the breath are ancient, traditional ways of creating peace of mind and physical well-being.

Q. When did Breathwork become popular in the West?

AH During the '60's and '70's there was a great awakening of interest in alternatives of all sorts. Young people especially were looking for others ways of being and doing things. Breathwork developed then on the West coast of the USA.

Q. Who was Breathwork developed by?

AH. There are two main streams of breathwork that developed simultaneously. One strand is best represented by the work the psychiatrist Dr. Stanislav Grof. While working in his native Czechoslovakia he developed an international reputation for his research into transforming mental states through drug therapy. After coming to the US he saw that the same sorts of changes could be effected by breathwork. Alongside this method that grew out of a medical model of the mind, there came the work of Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray and those who were strongly influenced by the Eastern yogic techniques. All forms of breathwork acknowledge the wholeness of the individual and the inter-relatedness of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual systems. Over the subsequent decades thousands of people have been trained and tens of thousands throughout the world have benefitted from breathwork.

Q. What is the professional situation of breathworkers?

AH. Today the International Breath Federation joins breathworkers from all strands in a professional global association. While in Australia there are professional associations in South Australia, NSW and Queensland.

Q. What types of people come to you?

AH. As many different types as there are people — from business executives and professionals to those who are retired or at home looking after children.

Q. Why do they come?

AH. Often it is because they are feeling stressed, or they are going through a particularly difficult time. They can be suffering from anxiety or depression. Sometimes it is because there is an ill-defined "is that all there is ? there's got to be something more to life" kind of feeling.

Q. What form does your work take?

AH. Well my approach has been more influenced by the yogic tradition. I work with individuals over a series of 10 two hour sessions. The client is also given personal work to do in between the weekly sessions. In addition I have developed workshops and a number of 9 day residential courses that are very frequently real turning points in peoples lives.

Q. If an individual comes to you what can they expect in the two hour session?

AH. A short amount of talking, between an hour and an hour and a half of breathing, a rest period and finally a debrief at the end. The purpose of each session is to release suppressed emotion and bring to the conscious mind the unconscious beliefs and attitudes that govern behaviour. Then the individual has the possibility of changing in a way that they choose. You really get to know your own mind and become more able to use it to your advantage.

Q. How has breathwork effected your life?

AH. Soon after I consciously began my own inner journey I travelled to the East. I left behind a career as an academic. And during my 9 years there I studied Tai Chi with Grand Masters in China, meditated with teachers in India, Nepal and Tibet and set up my own retreat in a secluded mountain area of Hong Kong. I worked with individuals, groups and corporations, developing the first trainings offered in Hong Kong and Singapore in Transformational Deep Tissue Massage and the first Breathwork trainings in Hong Kong. Work took me throughout Asia and Europe before I returned to Australia. It is always a joy to pass on knowledge and share techniques that enable individuals to take charge and transform themselves and their lives.