

# WHAT IS BREATHWORK – PRACTICE AND SPIRITUALITY?

## Introduction

When I was a child and had any kind of pain, my mother used to tell me “Breathe darling, and relax.” She would hold me and stroke my whatever-was-hurting part and sing a little song for me. When I fell on my knee, the song would go;

“Heal, heal little knee,  
behind the mountain lives a man who can heal *all* little knees.  
It’s gone now.  
It’s gone now,  
Hurrah!”

Mostly it felt like a miracle – my mother’s magic worked!

Thinking back I realise that my mother, like all the mothers in this world, had an intuitive knowledge about how healing works. What’s more, she knew about how our thoughts influence our feelings. As children hurt themselves all the time, (and I was a real tree-climber) she must have done her little healing-act and sung this little positive, healing song hundreds of times for me.

After I finished high school, in 1956, I wanted to follow my dream and go to the dancing academy in Rotterdam. My brother, who was quite intellectual in those days, had a lot of negative thoughts on the subject. A dancing academy would be perverse, dangerous to my spiritual wellbeing, etc. etc. He wanted me to go to university and to study like everybody else in the family. My father simply told him that if I had aspirations to ‘do wrong’ in, or with my life, I would do it anyway. He trusted my good intentions and if I wanted to go there, I most definitely could.

I learned from both of my parents about trust, touch, healthy thoughts and the power of healing.

In the dancing academy, one of my principal subjects was modern dance, Martha Graham style. In this form of dance the movements are strongly connected with the breath. One uses the inhale to stretch the body and the exhale to contract the body. In fact the exhale initiates the beginning of every movement. It is as if the inhale symbolises the intake of strength, power and presenting oneself in this world, whereas the exhale gives the opportunity to let the movement naturally evolve, and to express oneself and one’s emotions clearly.

One might think that having being brought up as I was, and having been thoroughly trained as a dancer for several years, I would have understood how breathing and thinking are connected. However, although I got a much deeper relationship with my body, my feelings and myself, I did not become conscious of that connection that on a conscious level.

Isn’t it amazing how I could “forget” all of that, and how I had to meet Rebirthing, get excited about it, and work hard on and with myself to rediscover this knowledge that lay deeply hidden inside me – the knowledge both of my parents gave me simply by giving me a warm and thoughtful education.

## Breathwork-Practice

In all kinds of spiritual training, Breathwork has been an essential part in some form or another. We find it in Buddhism and other eastern religions in meditation techniques. We find it in Christianity in the healing techniques. We find it in Yoga in the postures and in the movements. We find it in American Indian rituals. Breath was

and still is a wonderful tool to take us deeper into ourselves and to reach different states of consciousness.

The kind of breathwork, many people who are involved with some sort of therapy like to use today because of its effectiveness, is the connected breath. It has been called Rebirthing because of the possibilities it gives for remembering, among other things, details about one's birth. It is often called 'Conscious Breathing' or 'Conscious Connected Breathing'. Both names describe the technique very well.

I prefer the name my colleague, Hans Mensink, and I gave it, "Holistic Integrative Breath Therapy" ®. We chose this name, which since 1992 we have registered in Europe, because we believe that it is not just the breath that is important.

- "Holistic": because this kind of breathwork effects the whole human being.
- "Integrative": because of the integration of thoughts and judgements that confine us, and thus restrict us from flowing freely with life. And I think that this is even more important.
- "Breath": because the breath is used as a means to make the connection between mind and body, thoughts and feelings. And, because it is such an effective/powerful tool for getting the energy in the body to flow in such a way that we realise that we are in truth spiritual, unlimited beings.
- "Therapy": simply because it has deep therapeutic effects on us.

Integrative Breath Therapy consists of 1001 ways to tempt our clients to say *Yes* to all the situations they said *No* to in the past, or, to put it differently: to integrate and embrace their old judgements.

### Assumptions

The first principle I start with is this:

***Behind all the inner and outer judgements they may have,  
human beings are – in their essence – good.***

Each of us carries within her or himself all the resources necessary to have a healthy, creative, fulfilled and happy life. Our goodness may be covered under layers of strange, maladjusted, or even bad behaviour – the kind of behaviour we normally would despise or at least consider not very practical.

I cannot work without this assumption.

If I do not believe in the basic 'goodness' of people, how can I ever have enough trust in myself or in someone else to be able to change or transform a certain behaviour, theirs or mine?

If I do not believe that we have all the resources necessary, how can I trust that we will be able to integrate what needs to be integrated?

Even more important, if I do not believe that people are basically good, how could I ever forgive others or myself for whatever went "wrong"? How could I come from a place called 'Love' while working with other people? In my opinion, this is the only place to come from while doing therapeutic work.

The second assumption I work with is this:

***Our deepest thoughts,  
the ones that have become convictions,  
do in fact create the way we perceive life in all its forms.***

These convictions create the way we think and feel, about ourselves, the world and the people around us. They limit the flow of energy in our bodies and they restrict our freedom of choice.

This assumption helps me to take responsibility for myself, my thoughts and my actions. It takes the “blaming” out of my life. In the same way it helps my clients to take responsibility. If I did not start from this point, it would always be as if someone else would or could have power over me, hurt me, and so forth. It would seem as if I would always be the victim of circumstances.

The basic purpose of any kind of therapy is to help us to recognise our thought patterns: to make it possible for us to *feel* our thoughts, to find our way back to our own life energy, to create a context into which it is safe enough to integrate thoughts and feelings, and thus to bring us into contact with our spirituality and with the meaning of life.

It's important to develop a personality that has access to power and creativity as well as to vulnerability and spirituality.

Apart from other techniques the connected breath is a wonderful tool for reaching this goal.

### **Connected Breathing**

The beauty of using breathwork in therapy is that therapists can't breathe for their clients. The clients are very obviously responsible for their own breath and therefore for their own feelings. Using the breath, and later on in the process the connected breath, is one of the simplest and at the same time one of the most powerful techniques there is. As I support my client's process of learning to become aware of their breath, they learn to become aware of their body and their feelings. They learn to listen to themselves and to have respect for what is going on. They learn that it is safe to feel, and that it is safe to feel in someone else's presence.

As soon as they grow accustomed to feeling the breath and to feeling their own energy system, I start to guide them into connecting the breath. A breathing pattern in which the inhale is connected to the exhale is circular, round. It has the tendency to bring exactly those thoughts and feelings to the surface, that are not “rounded up,” not complete.

As I assume that a human being chooses a body in order to have life-experiences, I find it easy to see that life is about being lived completely and fully. As we live in a body, the only way to experience life is through our bodily senses. From birth and through growing up, events happen that are too painful for us at the time to feel and experience. In order *not* to feel the pain connected to those situations, we block the experience. We stop our breathing. We do not just block it in our minds. We also create a block in the body. We train ourselves to control with our breathing what we don't want to experience. This goes for the most happy and joyful feelings too: we can hardly stand them, and block them too by holding our breath. We become masters in suppressing feelings of any kind. Since breath produces a powerful connection between the body and the mind, between feeling and thinking, it is the tool par excellence for helping us solve these problems.

Everything that has been blocked in some moment in our lives *seems* to be “away”. In truth it is not away at all. It simply is hidden somewhere in our subconscious, waiting for an opportunity to rise to the surface so that it can be finally experienced to its full extent, truly felt, and thus integrated.

Feeling such a “hidden feeling” to its natural end will often hurt as much as it hurt in the past when we had to suppress it. The difference is that we now have our breath to guide us through the experience. We are not “small” any more. With our breath we can

create a context within which we can feel that we are bigger than the pain. We get the chance to feel through to the to completion, in safety, whatever we blocked in the past.

Technically, when we connect the breath the focus of attention is guided into the body. As the breath starts to unfold we meet all the "folds" that are in our way. You can say that the "folds" are the blockages in the mind and the body. We become aware of our physical sensations and the thoughts and emotions connected to them. These get more and more of our undivided attention, as we keep relaxing into what is happening. Focusing on our breathing helps us not to identify with what we are feeling and/or thinking. Focusing on our breathing and on relaxing also keeps us so occupied that our mind hardly gets a chance to judge and/or suppress anything. We don't have to drown in our feelings. We are able to breathe continuously whatever we think or feel and thus centre ourselves in "the here and now".

We start to notice that we are not our feelings and there is something in us that's "bigger" than all of our drama. We are enabled to observe what's happening from an aware ego position and to feel enough safety, in which we can integrate our past hurts and pains. We stop feeling like victims. There is a deep sense of peace the moment we can let go of our judgements. Deep inside us we know that we made a connection with our own true being. This is the process we call ecstasy when consciousness frees itself from limiting thoughts, judgements and convictions and we are no longer identified with them. We are able to "stand by" and perceive. Our bodies don't lie. We can feel the truth. The blocked energy starts to flow freely again physically and mentally. New possibilities of choice occur. This process may happen very quietly or with a great sense of euphoria.

It is extremely important that the therapist takes good care that not too much material becomes activated and that there is ample opportunity to really work through the content of the thoughts involved, so that the new insights can be integrated into normal daily life. He/she should be a master in breathwork and know how to use the volume and the "timbre" of the breath like you would use the volume control on a radio.

## **Therapy**

The moment our breathing starts to unfold and to flow fully and freely, our power to turn our thoughts into reality increases. Our power to create increases. This goes not just for our so-called positive, life enhancing thoughts but also for the negative ones, the ones that limit our life quality. This is why it's so important to work on improving the quality of our thoughts, and the transformation of our acting.

Hal and Sidra Stone, psychologists in the US, have done tremendous work with the development of the Voice Dialogue technique.\* This technique is based on the Psychology of Selves. Through becoming acquainted with them and their work I finally got an intellectual framework into which to put everything I ever experienced in breathwork. They define Consciousness not as a static state of being but as a process – a process of both perceiving *and* experiencing the different parts, sub-personalities or energy patterns out of which the psyche is formed. Each and every one of these parts has their own way of thinking, perceiving, feeling and acting. They are like real people with very different views of the world. The ego as the choice making and acting faculty in us is most often identified with one of these parts. This whole mechanism works so unconsciously that we don't even notice how we go through life proving that we are right in our so-called convictions.

When we no longer identify ourselves with one of these sub-personalities but become aware of them, we have the possibility of developing an Aware Ego that's in the process of becoming more and more conscious.

In their book "Embracing Our Selves" Hal and Sidra Stone say; \*\*

"We come into this world as unique human beings, each carrying our own "psychic fingerprint". At this essence level the infant is quite defenceless and vulnerable. However it has the potential to develop any energy patterns or sub-personalities one can imagine, the total sum of which will be the individual personality we soon come to know."<sup>1</sup>

We all learn that we have to establish forms of control over the environment in order to survive and to protect our vulnerability. This is what forming a personality is all about. The stronger the personality becomes, the more we separate from our essence and, at the same time, from our capacity to be close and intimate with other people. Understanding this concept and the dramatic effects it has on the way we live our relationships can help us tremendously in refining our therapeutic work. In conflicts in relationship it often happens that one part of us 'hooks into' an opposite part of the person we're dealing with, leaving us in total confusion about what's happening.

For example; A couple drives in their car to a dinner party. He has come home from work very tired. Since he is not in contact with his vulnerability, he tries hard not to give in to his feeling of tiredness and behaves in a withdrawn way, to his wife. She starts to feel guilty, without knowing why. As she makes a mistake in telling which way to take he immediately gets angry with her. She feels like a small child and even more guilty and she starts to cry. He gets furious. They both don't know what's happening to them.

Because most of our basic convictions originate from our early childhood, it's clear this whole process has a lot to do with the part we call our inner child. This child feels as being hurt repeatedly in the past. We therefore have to develop ways to become aware of it, take responsibility for it, care for it and protect it in a way that also honours the "strong parts" in our personality.

With the Voice Dialogue technique we can talk with the different "voices" or energies in us and discover that they all have a positive purpose. Even when their behaviour is maladjusted or difficult, they all want to make a contribution to the personality as a whole and therefore should be respected. When they are accepted and honoured, the different voices will no longer be denied by us, but respected as vital parts.

## **Spirituality**

As we use the breath and other techniques for integration we become increasingly enabled to get into contact with our essential being – the part in us that has access to our spirituality. Our creativity and our intuition also become accessible, and so does our true power in life. We start to feel the beauty of being touched and feeling moved. Our true love starts to flow freely. We begin to live more intensely and with more intention. The yearning most of us have for higher meaning and purpose in life begins to become satisfied. This longing, this need for purpose, is as much an instinct as hunger, sexuality or thirst. We see it exploding in our world today. \*\*\*

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What often seems to happen, however, is that people see the experience of spiritual energies as being identical with consciousness. The longer I work with the concept of the Psychology of Selves the more I realise that spiritual energies are just that, a system of energy. Because these energies are so important to us, as they bring us into contact with our life's purpose, they deserve to become well integrated in our personality. This means we become conscious of them, we can use and enjoy them but we are not in danger to misuse them through a "Guru Archetype".

It is just as important for the development of a more conscious and aware ego to discover and accept disowned energies that are not spiritual at all! If we do not deal with our instinctual energies we run the danger of becoming "sanctimonious" or hypocritical. If we "try" to be spiritual, we will have the tendency to judge whatever is not totally "spiritual".

As we are human beings living in a body our spirituality deserves to be grounded in our bodies, even in our lowest chakra. The lowest chakra is situated in our sacrum, our 'holy' bone! That is where our spirituality should settle. We then can manifest our spirituality in the simple little things in our daily lives.

We often discover that apart from a very vulnerable child there is a magical child in us that still has access to the invisible. A child that never forgot where it came from. A child that never lost its connection with God.

\* "Embracing Our Selves", Hal & Sidra Stone

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