

# **COLD WATER BREATHWORK**

BY

**Tilke Platteel-Deur**

**The basic rule is that clients should move into the water, inch by inch, waiting each time until the part of the body that is immersed in the water feels comfortable. Only then, do they move further into the water.**

**The principle of seeking the point where we feel comfortable and pleasurable in our bodies is the secret, which will produce the best results in a cold water session.**

## **SOME HISTORY**

Since the seventies, when Leonard Orr started to do rebirthing, cold water breathwork has always been a special aspect of it. Leonard often liked to experiment and to “stretch” the possibilities of the body-mind. Doing Cold Water breathwork in a mountain stream in mid-winter is definitely a challenge.

In an interview with Gunnel Minett in 1989, Leonard said: “Cold water Rebirthing has a tendency to dissolve our temperature trauma and other unpleasant experiences of coming out of the warm womb into the cold world. The deepest levels of pain in the human organism can be stimulated and realised through Cold Water Rebirthing.”<sup>1</sup>

## **HOLISTIC INTEGRATIVE BREATHWORK THERAPY**

My colleague, Hans Mensink and I have been teaching breathwork since 1979. Our vision was to put together a three-year training program for breathwork therapists. In 1987 we had reached our goal: From a five months course in '79 the work had evolved organically into the three-year training program we had been aiming for.

We have always been using Warm & Cold Water Breathwork in our training program, mainly because we want our students to experience this wonderful aspect of breathwork. We want them to experience as many varieties of the work as possible. We assume, that if a human being has come to know and accept his own deepest fear, frustration and pain, and is at ease with those feelings, he/she becomes really capable of supporting someone on his path to self-development.

To do breathwork in cold water totally differs from warm water breathwork and it is definitely not just the temperature, which is different. Whereas warm water breathwork is normally done in a form in which a facilitator (eventually together with a second person helping to carry and support the client) works with a client, cold water breathwork is basically done alone. It is more like a meditation that, during the first sessions, is supervised by another person. Later on this supervision may not be necessary anymore. It can be done indoors in a tub filled with cold water, as well as outdoors in a river or a lake.

We use the cold water breathwork for several reasons:

- It can be a wonderful experience of power, pleasure and bliss.
- It may trigger hidden, physical memories of temperature changes at birth and/or, near death experiences, which need to be integrated.
- It helps to regain a sense of appreciation for our bodies.
- It may lead to more mastery over the body-mind.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gunnel Minett, *Breath & Spirit*, The Aquarian Press, London, 1994

These are the most essential elements that must be taken into account in order to do this kind of breathwork well.

### **Physical preparation**

- The body
- The area for integration

### **Naked or not?**

- How people feel about their bodies

### **Psychological preparation**

- Deciding upon a theme
- Fear of cold water and how to go into the water

### **Being in the water**

- Temperature of the water
- The amount of time spent in the water
- Positions in the water
- Going beyond boundaries

### **Getting out of the water**

- The way to a place where one can relax
- Completion of the session and integration
- Dealing with large amounts of life energy

### **PHYSICAL PREPARATION.**

When done in a tub, the physical preparation is the same as for a warm water session. We have to wash and clean ourselves, especially when we are with a group of people using the same tub.

When done outdoors, we need to consider if it is necessary to wear a bathing suit for our own convenience and/or to not upset other people.

In both cases, it is useful to check the accessibility of the water because of the way one moves into it. I will explain this in detail in “Psychological Preparation”.

### **Preparing the area for integration**

The experience of Cold Water Breathwork can be extremely powerful. Especially when people have been in the cold water for a longer period they sometimes feel not just full of strength and proud about their accomplishment but they might –although this is not always the case- be shivering very strongly. Therefore, when done indoors as well as outdoors in open water, we need to prepare a place to finish the session after coming out of the water. A blanket and towels are practical and a necessity here. Normally, when we are outside lying down on the ground, it is less comfortable than on a mattress, but since the experience mostly is one of reaching into one’s power, this small discomfort does not seem to be a problem for people.

### **NAKED OR NOT?**

When done indoors, the same considerations about nudity apply here as with Warm Water Breathwork. When people feel awkward or shy about their body, they put on a bathing suit.

When they feel at ease with their body, they may do the work in the nude. Normally, the facilitator will not move into the water and will just stay dressed.

When done outdoors it is wonderful to be able to work in the nude. However, if there is the possibility of passers-by, it might feel more “safe” to wear a bathing suit. Furthermore, the air may be so cool sometimes that we have to get partly dressed, in order to not freeze in those parts of the body that are not yet immersed in the water.

### **Case history**

*Our training program takes place in a small town just across the German border. Close by, on the Dutch side, is a large river that has some side arms, which form a lake where the water is shallower and where there is a natural area for bathing. A little further along its coastline, there is a zone where the nudist people like to go for a swim. This is where we use to go for doing Cold Water Breathwork.*

*That afternoon we took our second and third year to do Cold Water Breathwork. It was rather chilly and there were no other people around. The students paired up and soon after, the breathers –forming a long line along the edge of the water- all started to move slowly into the water, their facilitators sitting on the shore. The breathers were mostly naked from the waist down. They wore all kinds of warm clothing on their upper bodies because of the cold wind. It was a rather funny sight. The further they went into the water, the more clothes they took off. At a certain moment a man walked by and was quite amazed at what was happening. Some of the people started to become annoyed by him, as he was observing them. I went over and explained what they were doing. He happened to be a yoga teacher and was not just understanding but also very interested.*

*If he would have been one of the ‘voyeur-type’, we could have had some difficulties.*

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION**

### **Deciding upon a theme**

For a first session, just the thought of having to go into cold water plus the low temperature of the water itself will bring up more than enough material to work with. Very often, material will come up that has to do with physical memories of cold and/or pain.

After having done several cold water sessions, one may prefer to choose a certain theme. You may also decide to do sessions on your own if you have gained some experience. In case there is a facilitator, he/she will be outside the water on the edge of the tub or somewhere on the shore; assisting the client to get his breathing rhythm well moving. When that task is accomplished, the breather is mostly working on his own with the facilitator present just in case he/she is needed: i.e. to take the clothes that are being discarded in the beginning or to hand over some towels at the end.

### **How to move into the water**

The way to move into the water is crucial for the results of a good Cold Water session. The client moves in, inch by inch, each time waiting -while breathing- until the part of the body that is immersed in the water feels comfortable. Only then, will he move further into the water. If this state of comfort is not reached, the breather will move back and start anew. This principle of seeking the moment where we feel comfortable and pleasurable in our bodies is the secret, which will produce the best results in a cold water session. To observe this basic rule is a necessity to do this kind of breathwork well.

Cold water breathwork is not about having to go in totally and float in the water. It is about respecting our own physical and emotional boundaries. Some people might finish the

part of the session that happens in the water, with just their lower legs immersed. Others might move in completely and float on their backs. Again, others will keep standing up feeling their power while being on their feet. Some will sit down in the water like a Buddha and stay in that position for a while. It is all OK, as long as they follow the rule to not move further before they do feel at ease. Of course it is fine to experiment a little and stretch our limits in a safe way.

### **Case history**

*Karen has been doing Cold Water sessions many times and until now, she has never been able to put her wrists into the water. She also encounters this problem when she goes for a swim in the ocean. It does not come up in a pool where she normally will dive into.*

*She is standing, waist deep in the tub. Her whole body feels comfortable. This time I – knowing about this particular problem- ask her to move her hands very slowly into the water with the fingers first, while keeping her breathing rhythm up. Although she tries hard, she does not succeed because the same sharp pain, she knows so well, starts happening again. Exasperated she puts her arms on the edge of the tub, her wrists just touching the ledge where the tiles are a little sharp. Suddenly her breathing rhythm changes dramatically. She becomes very upset and screams. I tell her to keep breathing, which she manages to do. Her whole body seems to struggle but she keeps breathing while tears stream over her face. After quite a while she calms down and quietly lets her hands move into the water. She smiles and seems very peaceful now.*

*When I ask her what has happened, she tells me how she re-experienced the moment that she, when seven years old, nearly drowned while she was skating on a lake. She drove into a hole and tried frantically to get back on the ice, which kept braking under her effort. After someone pulled her out, her wrists had been badly scratched.*

*By breathing into this physical memory in a relaxed way and not acting out her feelings, Karen was able to integrate what had happened to her in the past. The problem with her wrists while bathing in the ocean vanished after this session.*

## **BEING IN THE WATER**

### **Temperature of the water**

Cold Water Breathwork can be done even in very cold water, although the air temperature should not be below zero to avoid hypothermia of the parts of the body that are not immersed in the water.

Most people have experienced a temperature shock at birth. Fr. Leboyer describes in his book “*Pour une Naissance sans Violence*”<sup>2</sup> about the aggravation a child suffers at birth. His eyes suffer from the stark light after the soft glow he has been accustomed to in the womb. His ears protest against the harsh sounds, so different from the muffled sounds he could hear inside his mother. (This is something I experienced last week again very clearly while looking at my new-born granddaughter.) His skin writhes as he experiences the transition from the temperature inside (37 degree centigrade) to outside, which will be at its best 22 degree centigrade. In most cases, when born in a hospital, he will be weighed on a cold metal scale and washed with water that is also experienced as “not warm enough to be comfortable”. All these, mostly suppressed, experiences are stored in our memory and may come up during Cold Water Breathwork.

Moreover, in the course of living, many people have suffered injuries in one form or another. The scars we carry along may hardly ever border us. In Cold Water Breathwork, they

---

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Leboyer, *Pour une Naissance sans Violence*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1973.

often will be activated and we have the chance to integrate the injury, the pain or whatever feeling that has been connected with it.

### **Case history**

*I am moving into the tub very slowly. It is a tub, which is normally used to cool off after a sauna, so the water is cold, about 16 degrees centigrade. When my legs are totally immersed, my crotch touches the water. I feel a sharp pain like being cut. In that moment, the baby of one of the other participants of the training starts to cry. This triggers the memory of the birthing process of my eldest daughter whose delivery was difficult. The doctor had to perform an episiotomy, in order to get her out. Although he had told me that I would not feel anything, which I actually did not at that moment, I can feel it very clearly now.*

*I am amazed at how this memory has been stored in my body. I feel anger and a deep sense of frustration of not being able to deliver my child just by myself. My breathing speeds up and deepens and in a couple of minutes, the pain dissolves. I notice how my whole pelvis relaxes more than ever before.*

Like in normal breathwork, if we keep relaxing into all the different feelings that come up while breathing connectedly, we are able to “breath through” the sensations. The body-mind will relax and begin to reconnect itself with our original sense of power. This relaxation will be experienced as a deep “saying yes” to the feelings that were previously suppressed. This will lead to accepting and integration of the experienced feelings as well as the connected thoughts.

### **Case history**

=====*I am waiting for a case that I hope Tabita Suter from Zürich will send me. She did a session once in the mountain stream that I talked about in the beginning.*=====

### **The amount of time spent in the water**

The amount of time, in which a person feels comfortable being in the cold water, varies greatly. Some people will start to shiver after a short time, just having put their feet in. Even when they get out of the water and start the process all over again, they may not be able to stay in long or move in far. There is nothing wrong with this; A session is also “successful” if someone just goes in up to his calves. The sensations some people feel may be too strong for them to integrate while staying and breathing in the water.

Others will reach more strength and comfort with every breath they take and will immerse themselves completely. They may even float and feel blissful and have a serene smile on their face.

### **Case history**

*Jan is a small man who feels rather insecure about himself. Especially his father has often told him that he is a weakling and that he will never be a “real” man because he is not tall. His basic thought pattern seems to be “I am not good enough, no matter what”. Because of this belief, he often will go to an excess as to achieve more than he is actually capable of, just to prove that he is OK.*

*When he starts moving into the water, he is breathing in a rather forced way. He takes his inhales in a jerking manner and he does not relax his exhales. His facilitator guides his breath into a more relaxed rhythm. However, every time that he wants to move in a little deeper into the water, his breathing gets strained again. (When he would follow the basic*

rules he would not be moving in farther into the water before he felt at ease with the temperature.)

*It fits his particular frame of thought to try hard to get deep into the water, to prove that he is as capable as he considers the others to be. Nevertheless, Jan feels so cold that he cannot move in more than a couple of inches. So, there he is, his calves in the water, freezing and being very frustrated about himself. His facilitator keeps telling him that he is doing well and that, what is happening is exactly what should happen. Finally, he starts to shiver uncontrollably. He tells us how ashamed he feels about the situation. After a while, we decide to take him out of the water to do the integration work snugly rolled up in a blanket.*

*Then, again after a considerably amount of time, Jan starts to cry. The memory of his father judging him, fills him completely and he begins to really **feel** (as opposed to just thinking about it) what an enormous influence those judgements have had in different areas of his life.*

*As he keeps breathing and relaxing more and more into the depth of his pain, his crying subsides and he starts to get into contact with a deep, but helpless, anger against his father. He also begins to feel how he has been longing his whole life for acknowledgement, love and acceptance for just being who and how he is. Suddenly his expression changes; he tells us that he understands why his father acted the way he did, and that he wants to forgive him. He relaxes even more and by the soft expression on his face, we can see that integration is taking place.*

*If Jan had forced himself to go deeper into the water, not listening to what his body was telling him, he would have missed the opportunity to integrate one of the most important thought patterns he has held dear throughout his life.*

*In the next training, Jan reports that he feels more secure about himself. His self-esteem has improved and, may be even more important, his relationship with his father has changed dramatically, just by itself. During their last encounter, Jan never felt judged or rejected!*

### **Case history**

*Over the last few years, Irene has already done several Cold Water sessions. Today, the weather is bleak and there is a rough wind. Irene moves slowly into the water, breathing steadily. The deeper she moves in the more clothes she takes off. After about twenty minutes, she is immersed up to her chest. She is standing there with her arms high up in the air, the wind blowing through her hair. She stays that way for quite some time. Then she walks in even deeper where she cannot stand any more. She turns on her back, floating in the water for about 15 minutes. When she comes out, her face looks radiant and although her skin is cold, she tells me that she is feeling warm. She walks to her place to lay down, without support and with the air of a queen. She feels full of power and is proud about her achievement. Her self-esteem has heightened.*

### **Positions in the water**

As we have seen from the examples before, a person can behave in countless ways in the cold water. One may choose to stand up during the whole time spent in the water. Others may float.

In 1998, we had a pregnant woman in the third year. The weather was again rather cold and rainy. (Yes, this 'gorgeous' Dutch weather!) I remember vividly how she was sitting in the shallow water like a Buddha, quiet, serene and at peace with herself.

### **Going beyond boundaries**

Cold Water Breathwork seems to carry in itself the tendency to tempt people to go beyond their normal boundaries. There is an element in this type of breathwork of wanting to prove to oneself the capability to test one's limits, to go deeper, to stay in longer, etc. (All of this "wanting to prove oneself" is not necessary to produce a good Cold Water Session.)

As long as a person stays with the rule, not to move deeper into the water than when s/he feels comfortable, it is safe to experiment. Because the breather is totally in his own authority concerning the pace of the session, *he* decides what to do and how to do it. Apart from this, the cold water has a deep grounding effect. A person who normally may be a little "zweverig" will become very compact by being in the cold water.

This, *sich auseinander setzen*, with the temperature of water and weather gives people an ample opportunity to move into a space where they feel their own power, and sometimes their spirituality, in a way they never experienced it before.

### **Case History**

*The weather is cold and windy with clouds, which are chasing each other along the firmament. Sometimes a watery sun peeps through. Annette moves slowly into the water until she is waist deep. She seems to be doing fine. When she comes out of the water after a while, she tells me about her experience.*

*"I have been experiencing a deep connection with the four elements. My feet were firmly planted in the earth. The wind was blowing about my face. The water splashed around my hips and although the water felt cold to my body, inside of me I sensed a tremendous heat. It was like a fire. Because of these strong sensations, I became -for a short time- a little dizzy. It nearly caused me to trip over backwards and lose my footing. Nevertheless, by keeping the breathing rhythm steady, I could "be" with what happened and regain my balance. It was very easy to guard my physical and emotional limits and not go past them. This had been a worry of mine before I started the session. All in all, it has been a session in which I felt totally connected with God."*

### **GETTING OUT OF THE WATER**

#### **The way to the place to relax**

When the breather decides to come out of the water, the facilitator just needs to be there with towels and a blanket to support him -if necessary- and guide him to the prepared place to finish the session. Normally, the breather will feel powerful and will easily walk on his own. Sometimes, the shivering may be so strong that s/he needs some extra support. This shivering may look like weakness but this is not necessarily the case. Therefore, the support should be given in a way that is felt as an honouring for the achievement of the client in stead of "helping" the client. Energetically this makes a lot of difference.

It is very seldom, but sometimes it happens that the facilitator has to summon the client to come out, if s/he overestimates her/himself and threatens to become hypothermic.

#### **Completion of the session and Integration**

When the client lies down it is much easier for the facilitator to guide the breathing and eventually to use other techniques to help the client to reach integration. However, I strongly recommend focusing on maintaining a relaxed breathing rhythm. Although, as I have pointed out before, Cold Water sessions can be conducted in a thematic way, the working with the elements is so powerful that guiding the breath is mostly sufficient to come to integration.

The connected breath will help relaxing into the feelings of the body; like i.e. the cold or whatever feeling is there. By playing with the rhythm and the tempo of the breathing, the client enhances his possibilities "to stay with" the sensations, to "carry" the experience in his body. In other words, to stay conscious with what is happening.

Consciousness is experiencing what is happening in a given moment, *as well as* being aware of it and observing what is happening. The connected breath supports us enormously in keeping a position of awareness and at the same time experiencing our feelings. Especially when there are strong physical sensations in the body, we need a tool to simply “be” with those sensations, to not drown in them. Then, we can observe how the breathing will relax increasingly. We will see that the body gets more comfortable and warmer. Eventually we will connect with that wondrous inner force that is the source of our being.

### **Dealing with large amounts of life Energy**

It may have become apparent that Cold Water Breathwork is “a not very ordinary” technique, which is not exactly commonplace. Although, through the case histories, it will also be clear that it might lead to experiencing large amounts of energy and to a sense of mastery over the body-mind. To confront ourselves with the elements, to not only survive them but gain strength out of them, gives us a feeling of power. This kind of power and liveliness is a sensation that often got lost to us during growing up and in the course of our normal daily lives.<sup>3</sup> For those of us who are afraid of trying to walk on fire, Cold Water Breathwork is a great first step to challenge ourselves, to test and/or change our boundaries and to overcome our fears.

It can reinstall in us a feeling of being one with nature. This, combined with a sense of power on a physical and emotional level may reconnect us with our sense of true self and of our spirituality.

---

<sup>3</sup> Tilke Platteel-Deur, *Hot Water Breathwork*, The Healing Breath, vol. 3 1999.