

# *The Healing Breath*

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# MY EXPERIENCE OF BREATH

BY  
MARGOT BIESTMAN  
10/28/00

In this time of timelessness,  
I am everything and nothing,  
All at once.

All is simple,  
And deep—profound.

I am  
Breathing movement.

I am a medium,  
A living body,  
Between heaven and earth  
Through whom breath passes.  
As it comes and goes on its own.

I am transparent,  
Doing nothing,  
I am being breathed.

I sense my body—its matter.  
I am given this gift as a container for my soul and spirit  
In this life,  
My life-time.

I simply sense this breath  
Move through my body  
And out into the world and beyond.  
I am present for it.

I receive this gift from the higher power,  
God-given.  
My essence—my God within me  
Is connected to the God of all things,  
And I am called to respond,  
To say, “Yes,” to all the power I have,  
And all that I am.

I am less fearful of death,  
Because I sense that all becomes breath,  
When it is time for my body to die.

This is simple.  
Not an idea nor a concept,  
It comes not from imagination nor vision.  
It is my truth  
Of breath experienced.

# DRAWING BREATH: EXPLORING THE SPIRITUS OF WRITING

BY

GAYLE BRANDEIS

**Keywords** : breath, breathing, breath language, writing, creativity, inspiration, poetry, asthma, vowels, expression.

## *Inhale*

1978

I blow a circle of breath onto the back seat window of our family car, then write on the slippery surface with my ten-year-old finger. As the dark world whizzes by, light from a row of street lamps seeps through my words, turning them luminous, turning the condensed beads of my breath into stars. Dazzled, I smear them with my palm, then blow a new puff of air so I can write some more. My right hand is wet from all the moisture in my lungs, all the words that have shaped themselves there. In the morning, if the sun hits the window right, I can see some of those words glint on the glass, ghosts of my drawn breath.

2000

I watch my son and daughter play with a set of Blow Pens. The bright words on the box identify it as an “air coloring system.” The air my kids color is their own. They put the mouthpiece end of a pen between their lips, then blow. A fine mist of color sprays the paper. The kids form words, draw butterflies, fill in stencils, with subtle movements of their mouths and hands. They are literally drawing breath, their breath mapped out on the page in every shade of the rainbow.

I watch them blow and color, blow and write their names, and I think, this is what writing is...finding a way to let our breath live on the page. Finding a way to tint each exhale so the colors that live inside us can find their way out into the world. Dragging our fingers through the vapor of our lungs and seeing what shapes we leave behind.

Seven centuries ago, Rumi said “Here’s the new rule: break the wineglass,/and fall toward the glassblower’s breath” (p. 8). Here’s the new rule I propose now: break open a poem, a sentence, a word, and fall toward the breath of the writer. Just like glass, our words are shaped by breath and fire. Breath is an integral part of our language, intimately woven into our alphabet, our grammar, our creative process. Here, we will break open the goblet of writing and seek out the breath that swirls inside, the breath we as writers sometimes catch, sometimes free. The breath we draw, the breath we draw from, whenever we sit down to write.

In “Poem Out of Childhood,” Muriel Rukeyser instructs “Breathe-in experience,

breathe-out poetry” (p. 1). When I inhale here, I bring my own experience with breath to the page; when I exhale, I survey the ways in which breath informs our writing, from our oral roots, to the breath of inspiration, to the ways in which we can touch the breath of our readers. In echoing the pulse of our lungs, I hope to mirror the reciprocity between self and world that exists within the acts of both writing and breathing. “There is a furnace in our cells,” writes Diane Ackerman, “and when we breathe we pass the world through our bodies, brew it lightly, and turn it loose again, gently altered for having known us” (p. 6).

## ***Exhale***

In most cultures, the word “breath” is synonymous with life force, or spirit. *Spiritus* in Latin, *pneuma* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew, *prana* in Sanskrit, *ch’i* in Chinese, *nilch’i* in Navajo, all link breath with vitality, breath with the divine, creative, spark. John Fire Lame Deer, a Lakota medicine man, calls upon “*Woniya wakan*—the holy air—which renews all by its breath. *Woniya, woniya wakan*—spirit, life, breath, renewal—it means all that” (Abram p. 229).

According to Ojibway creation stories, Nanabush created the earth with his breath; in *The Holy Bible*, “the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed/into his nostrils the breath of life;/and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2.7). The Taoist treatise *Huai-nan-tzu* instructs that everything originally came from one “Primordial Breath,” which split into “the light ethereal Yang breath, which formed Heaven; and the heavier, cruder Yin breath, which formed Earth. The warm breath of Yang accumulated to produce fire, the essence of which formed the Sun. The cold breath of Yin accumulated to produce water, the essence of which became the Moon” (Parthan). By all accounts, we are made of breath; breath enlivens us, acts as conduit between ourselves and the elements, ourselves and the divine.

Brimming with such essential creative spirit, it is not surprising that breath has also long been connected to creative human expression, to Word. In the Ojibway myth, “when Nanabush blows gently, his breath is also the breath of language. Words become stories and stories become whole new worlds...To create meaning one must reach down inside and transform through the breath of creativity” (Echlin). The Navajo similarly believe “the four Winds of the cardinal directions are also called the ‘four Words.’ Since we speak only by means of the breath, Wind itself—the collective breath—is said to hold the power of language: ‘It is only by means of Wind that we talk. It exists at the tip of our tongues’” (Abram p. 233). Ogotemmel, a Dogon African wise man, also affirms “The life force which is the Bearer of the Word, which *is* the Word, leaves the mouth in the form of breath, or water vapour, which is water and which is Word” (Steinman, pp. 106-107).

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson writes about how ancient Greeks found their own connection between breath, spirit, and language:

For the ancient Greeks, breath is perception, breath is emotion. The *phrenes* seem to be roughly identifiable with the lungs in ancient physiological theory and to contain the spirit of breath as it comes and

goes...Words, thoughts, and understanding are both received and produced by the *phrenes*. So words are “winged” in Homer when they issue from the speaker and “unwinged” when they are kept in the *phrenes* unspoken (p. 48).

Our lungs are wings inside our chest, beating with each word we speak, letting us soar to dizzying heights. Our lungs are receptors for, and conductors of, pure creative spirit. Carson mentions that “such a conception is natural among people in an oral environment...Breath is primary insofar as the spoken word is” (p. 49). David Abram, author of *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, agrees: “In the absence of writing, human utterance, whether embodied in songs, stories, or spontaneous sounds, was inseparable from the exhaled breath” (p. 254). He contends, however, that breath continued to hold a place in early forms of writing, especially within the traditional Hebrew *aleph-beth*. The absence of written vowels in this system, he writes

has to do with the nature of the vowel sounds themselves. While consonants are those shapes made by the lips, teeth, tongue, palate or throat, that momentarily obstruct the flow of breath and so give form to our words and phrases, the vowels are those sounds that are made by the unimpeded breath itself. *The vowels, that is to say, are nothing other than sounded breath.* And the breath, for the ancient Semites, was the very mystery of life and awareness, a mystery inseparable from the very invisible *ruach*—the holy wind or spirit...It is possible, then, that the Hebrew scribes refrained from creating distinct letters for the vowel-sounds in order to avoid making a visible representation of the invisible. To fashion a visible representation of the vowels, of the sounded breath, would have been to concretize the ineffable, *to make visible a likeness of the divine.* It would have been to make a visible representation of a mystery whose very essence was to be invisible and hence unknowable—the sacred breath, the holy wind. And thus it was not done (pp. 241-242).

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., Greek scribes adapted the Hebrew *aleph-beth* for their own use, and, in the process, added written vowels to their symbology. This, according to Abram, had dire consequences. “By using visible characters to represent the sounded breath,” he writes, “the Greek scribes effectively *desacralized* the breath and the air” (p. 252). The absence of vowels, he explains, had “provided the pores, the openings in the linguistic membrane through which the invisible wind—the living breath—could still flow between the human and the more-than-human worlds” (p. 257). This all changed with the new Greek system:

It was only with the plugging of these last pores—with the insertion of visible letters for the vowels themselves—that the perceptual boundary established by the common language was effectively sealed, and what had once been a porous membrane became an impenetrable barrier, a hall of mirrors. The Greek scribes, that is, transformed the breathing boundary

between human culture and the animate earth into a seamless barrier segregating a pure inside from a pure outside. With the addition of written vowels—with the filling of those gaps, or pores, in the early alphabet—human language became a highly self-referential system closed off from the larger world that once engendered it (p. 257).

Once these written vowels entered human consciousness, the individual self became, for the first time, sealed inside the skull, cut off from the rich swirl of life. Words were suddenly severed from the landscape, from the senses; abstractions began to multiply in a rarified, unbreathable air, not the air warmed by the lungs, the air that teems with scent and song. Fortunately, writers have always found a way to punch through this new membrane, to let breath seep back into the language, to let our shifting selves seep back into the world, back into the Word.

## ***Inhale***

1987

I open my throat and let vowels pour out. The letter “A” buzzes from mouths all around me, filling the room with rich, multi-layered, vibration. I can feel the vowel burrow its hum down into my belly. A collective breath is taken, then “E” begins to suffuse the air. I feel like Rilke is in the room, coaxing all of us:

feel how your breath is still increasing space.  
Among the beams of the dark belfries let  
yourself ring out. (p. 127).

I am a member of Theater of Life, an experimental theater troupe grounded in meditation practice. We begin each rehearsal in silence, following our breath, until the director, Denise Taylor, asks us to chant vowels, extending each one the length of a full exhale. All of the vowels—A, E, I, O, U—have a different frequency, a different vibration in the throat. Each one fills my breath, rocks my whole body. I am amazed by the power of these vowels, how they expand to enter every bit of space in the room, how they saturate the breath with their pure open sound.

I think about how I use these vowels countless times every day—when I speak, when I write—but I have never understood their full power, their full breath-taking, breath-shaking, glory, until now. With each new letter, I can feel the walls I’ve constructed within my lungs, around my “self”, begin to break down. I can feel my self and the world flow together, a free and vital exchange.

## ***Exhale***

The holy wind enters us again and again, from the moment of inspiration, a word inseparable from the breath--its root, *inspirare*, literally means “to breathe in.”

Jane Hirshfield writes “All written work retains some trace, however faint, of this initial sanctity of the Word: the breath inhabiting Logos and the breath of inspiration are the same, each bringing new life into the empty places of earth” (p. 54).

Sometimes the call to write is felt in the breath first—a gasp, a catch in the chest. The breath fills us, and asks in turn, to be filled with language as we breathe back out. Helene Cixous writes “My body experiences, deep down inside, one of its panicky cosmic adventures. I have volcanoes on my lands. But no lava: what wants to flow is breath. And not just any old way. The breath ‘wants’ a form. ‘Write me!’” (p. 10).

Such volcanoes of breath open the channels for creative energy to flow freely through us. Allen Ginsburg discusses this sense of openness: “Inspiration is unobstructed breath, with that feeling of a hollow body, like the body as a reed, a kind of straight spine in a state of complete alertness and awake-ness and the air passing in and out of the column—the body becoming a column of air” (*Book Show*).

Our bodies are wind instruments, ready to be breathed into by a greater set of lungs. In his study “Inspiration: Exploring the Experience and its Meaning,” Tobias Hart notes “In ancient inspired creativity, the Muses (by Hesiod’s account, they are nine daughters of Zeus who serve as the active force in infusing transcendent knowledge to humans) are described as whispering, breathing, or singing into the recipient” (p. 7).

Many writers still can feel stories swirling in the atmosphere, waiting to possess us, waiting for us to breathe them in so we can give them voice. In his poem “Breathing Exercises” Richard Godden writes:

With my hand up the back of my voice, which is theirs, I hear  
alive within the radius of this throat  
paseo, forum, pub. club, church and street—  
as through while walking through a frosted breath  
I had inhaled, on agitated air,  
the ghosts which were, are, might be yet in words (p. 39).

Perhaps such sentiment echoes ancient cultures in which air was considered “the unseen repository of ancestral voices, the home of stories yet to be spoken, of ghosts and spirited intelligences, a kind of collective field of meaning from whence individual awareness continually emerged and into which it continually receded, with every inbreath and outbreath” (Abram p. 254).

Like breath, inspiration has a rhythmic, reciprocal, nature—a fluid relationship between self and other, self and world—as explored here by Andrew Metcalfe:

My nostrils are filled with the breath of life that is the divine medium in which I live. The word inspiration hovers between breathing into the other (inspiring them) and breathing in the other (inspiring.) Inside and outside, activity and passivity, inspiration and expiration: inspiration overflows such categorical boundaries. As would-be annunciator, I become a tangle of angel and flesh, or ink and flesh; I cannot say if I possess or am



possessed by the thought which buzzes and grows inside me, demanding birth; I cannot say if I approached the world or it approached me; I became inside and outside, sender and receiver, Gabriel and Mary (p. 226).

This overflowing of boundaries, this ability to slip in and out between “angel and flesh,” inner and outer, lies at the heart of the creative process. Ken Dychtwald writes

Just as a breath is made up of an inhalation as well as an exhalation, and loving relationships are built on the ability to give as well as receive, true human creativity lies in the ability to experience the world anew each instant, to have each breath begin fresh, and to express freely and openly each passion of the bodymind. In the unrestricted individual, the balance of soft and hard, in and out, giving and receiving, expansion and contraction, defines the power and beauty of the thoracic region of the bodymind (Dychtwald, p. 160, quoted in Manné).

Breath is such a powerful metaphor for, and fount of, creativity, because it exists right at the nexus of body and mind. It is our only physiological function which is at once voluntary and involuntary, shifting between the two modes like an alternating current, dipping equally into both conscious and unconscious awareness. The breath can take us deep into our bodies, as well as up into our highest realms of thought, all the while reminding us how interconnected, how inseparable, these two paths truly are. As Gretel Erlich writes “This whole business of dividing body and mind is ludicrous. After all, the breath that starts the song of a poem, or the symphony of a novel—the same breath that lifts me into the saddle—starts in the body, and at the same time, enlivens the mind” (p. 176).

Allen Ginsburg also explores how the breath, through language, can unite seemingly disparate elements within us, just as the Taoist Primordial Breath holds both Yin and Yang within its infinite lungs: “You have thoughts which are mental and impalpable like heaven and then you have body, which is ground or earth. So when you speak, the breath comes out as a physiological body thing but it’s also a vehicle for the impalpable thoughts of the mind. So, you could say that speech joins heaven and earth, or synchronizes mind and body” (“Politics, Poetry and Inspiration”).

With each breath we take, we have the potential to find this union, to tap both the depths and heights of our own embodied intelligence. With each breath, we have the potential to be freshly inspired, filled with new creative *spiritus*.

## ***Inhale***

1984

I. Can't. Breathe.  
My worst. Asthma. Attack. Ever.  
I. Am. Six. Teen.  
My mother. Drives me. To the emer. Gen. Cy. Room.  
I hear her. Breathe. Oh no oh no oh no. As she watches. Me gasp. For. Breath.

In the E.R. I breathe. Into. A. Spirometer. It. Measures. The. Flow. Of. My. Breath. It. Bare. Ly. Moves. I. Think. Of. Spirographs. I played with. As a child. How sometimes. The little wheel. Inside the other. Wheel. Would slip. And the pencil. Would. Make. A lopsided. Circle. An awkward. Skip. Of the graphite. A mess. On the page. And this. Is how. My breath feels. In my lungs.

Later I am admitted into my own hospital room, a mask across my nose and mouth, breathing in oxygen and bronchial dilators, adrenaline pumping into my body through an I.V. When night falls, I can't fall asleep. I write poems all night long. One after the other. I can't stop them. Maybe it's the adrenaline turning me manic, churning frantic words out of my veins. Or maybe I'm just so happy to be able to breathe, so happy to have life flow, unobstructed, through my body again—in/out, in/out--that the words flow with this joy.

## ***Exhale***

Breath enters our writing in many guises. It especially loves to cloak itself in poetry. The same word means both “to breathe” and “to make a poem” in at least one Eskimo dialect (Finnegan p. 226). Edward Hirsch reminds us “For most of human history poetry has been an oral art. It retains vestiges of that orality always. Writing is not speech. It is graphic inscription, it is visual emblem. Nonetheless: ‘I made it out of a mouthful of air,’ W.B. Yeats boasted in an early poem. As, indeed, he did. As every poet does” (p. 5).

Robert Pinsky agrees: “Poetry is a bodily art: its medium is not words or lines or images or thoughts or ideas or ‘creativity,’ but breath, shaped into meaning in the throat and mouth” (qtd. in Perry p. 28). Rilke also exults in the organic poetics of breath: “Breathing, you invisible poem!/World-space constantly in pure/interchange with our own being. Counterpoise,/wherein I rhythmically happen” (p. 71).

Breath finds a way to become visible by inscribing its rhythms into our poetry. “Far from being artificial or unnatural,” writes Peter Viereck in his essay “Strict Wildness: The Biology of Poetry,” “poetry is your most physical expression, it's basic throb your body throb” (p. 8).

Formal poetry is especially attuned to the metric throb of our bodies. As Allen Ginsburg says “Nobody's got any objection to even iambic pentameter if it comes from a source deeper than the mind—that is to say, if it comes from the breathing and the belly and the lungs” (*Writers at Work* p. 257). Indeed, iambic pentameter is arguably the prosody most in synch with the breath. Viereck notes:

our old friend, our now oft-resented old friend, the iambic five-beat couplet...combines our external physique (two feet, five fingers) with our internal physique: pulse and lung. Pulse and lung, in turn, have a five to one relationship. One ta-TUM of lungs takes approximately as long as five ta-TUMS of heart (systole-diastole): five heartbeats per breath. In cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, the heart gets compressed five times for each mouth-to-mouth breath. Your very life depends on this fact: to save a

victim of drowning, the lifeguard breathes into his mouth once for every five heart-massages. (Would you want a free verse lifeguard?) (p. 9).

Mary Oliver also explains “The *pentameter* line is the primary line used by the English poets not for any mysterious reason, but simply because the pentameter line most nearly matches the breath capacity of our English lungs” (p. 40).

In the 1950s, poets not working with formal prosody (poets who, in fact, were consciously trying to break free from form) began to rediscover the connection between poetry and the breath. In his essay, “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson proclaims “Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (p. 613). He goes on to declare that “the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination” (p. 616).

Jack Kerouac argues that he, not Charles Olson, formulated the theory of breath as measure in both poetry and prose (although he says he formulated it in 1953, three years after Olson’s essay first appeared.) Jazz and bop inform his theory, he says, “in the sense of say, a tenor man drawing a breath, and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made...that’s how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind” (p. 83).

Regardless of who came up with the theory—a theory which, in fact, existed long before the 1950s; a theory which had been practiced, if not articulated, ever since poetry began—the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a wider public awareness of how the breath enters writing. Writers before and since have often spontaneously discovered this on their own, however. Haiku has been considered a “one breath” poem for centuries in Japan, while the French have said novels require *un long souffle*, “one long breath.” The connection between writing and the breath dawned on Natalie Goldberg during her Zen meditation practice:

I had been breathing since I was born, but now I noticed it. As I sat, my attention wandered all over the place—to a fly on my knee, to a memory of my grandfather’s hat, to a thought of chocolate—but my breath continued, physically there throughout the time I sat, and then, I realized in amazement, throughout my life. And I discovered breath had different qualities all by itself, without my controlling it. Sometimes it would be deep, at other times shallow. It felt like the measure of the line when I wrote poetry: short lines, staccato breath; long lines, I’m breathing way down in my belly. I saw, too, that my breath also determined how much I could write at one time, it made language physical, it propelled the sentence (p. 64).

Louise de Salvo realized how intricately her breath was connected with her writing after she was diagnosed with adult onset asthma:

...Before I got asthma, my sentences were as long as Virginia Woolf's; they went on for the better part of a paragraph; they contained lots of dependent clauses, lots of semi-colons.

After I got asthma, I start writing very short sentences. Like this. Then I start fracturing my sentences. Like this. A friend tells me that my new way of writing is driving her so crazy, she can't read my stuff anymore. I sound like a moron. A sixth-grader. Can't I, please, go back to writing the way I used to?

For a couple of days, I try. I pull some sentences together; try semi-colons, my by-now-unfamiliar friend. But it's impossible. My body, my breathing are different. So my writing is different. I'm not the same self I once was. Not the self who can take in enough air to exhale long, deep, complex, sentences. These sentences that chop and sputter their way through space are the only ones I can now write (pp. 151-152).

As De Salvo and Goldberg discovered, and as Kerouac attested, the breath has as much influence on the prose sentence as it does on the poetic line. Charlie D'Ambrosio says

we have all this language for discussing the line in poetry, the organization of poetry, the sound of it, the rhythms, the iambs, etc. What do we use in talking about prose? For me, it is the breath, because we talk in prose, get information in prose; we hear it everywhere. And it's breathing—a sentence, the punctuation, the commas, the semi-colons (the semi-colons being punctuation you usually find in novels, less often in short stories.) It seems to me the prose line is measured in breath. It's a control of breathing.

Like D'Ambrosio, the linguist Walter Ong postulates that “punctuation was first of all a system demanded by the exigencies of breathing in oral delivery” (qtd. in van den Berg). This is a long held belief. In 1616, Ben Jonson, in *The English Grammar*, explores how written punctuation arises from the spoken breath:

There resteth one generall Affection of the whole, dispersed thorow every member thereof, as the bloud is thorow the body; and consisteth in the Breathing, when we pronounce any Sentence; For, whereas our breath is by nature so short, that we cannot continue without a stay to speake long together; it was thought necessarie, as well as for the speakers ease, as for the plainer deliverance of things spoken, to invent this meanes, whereby men pausing a pretty while, the whole speech might never the worse be understood (Ibid.).

## ***Inhale***

1973

The Dr. Seuss book crackles and sighs as my dad opens the cover and flips to the first page. I snuggle down under my own covers and wait for the story to start. “Fox” is the first word, and it gusts out, scented with Colgate toothpaste, between the small gap in my dad’s front teeth. I breathe in the sound, the word, the story, breathe in my dad reading it to me. The book is full of rhymes, full of tongue twisters, and I can feel Dr. Seuss slowly leading us both into hysteria, tumbling one crazy word after another into my dad’s mouth, into my ear—an unpunctuated rush of puddles and paddles and poodles and noodles--until we both collapse--laughing, breathless--against the headboard. After my dad leaves a minty good night kiss on my cheek, I pick up the book and read it to myself, Dr. Seuss’ words twisting my tongue, tickling my lungs, making me gasp for air all over again as I wait for a comma, a period, to save me.

## ***Exhale***

Just as the writer’s breath affects her use of punctuation, the writer’s use of punctuation affects the breath of the reader, whether we read in silence or speak the writer’s words out loud. Jane Hirshfield says:

When you memorize poems by other people and put them through your own body and voice, the very musculature of the person who wrote the poem enters your body. Your mouth moves the way that person’s mouth moved when he or she first “said” the poem by writing it—and that’s true whether the poet spoke it or wrote the words in silence. The throat and breath and larynx are always moving a little when words travel through us (quoted in Moyers, *Fooling with Words*, p. 96.)

Natalie Goldberg also notes “...when you take on the voice of a great writer, speak his or her words aloud, you are taking on the voice of inspiration, you are breathing their breath at the moment of their heightened feelings...[A]ll writers ultimately do is pass on their breath” (pp. 21-22).

The relationship between reader and writer is a deeply intimate one, reciprocal as breath, as Sven Birkerts explores: ‘Ree-durr—Rye-turr, Ree-durr—Rye-turr...passing along the very spirit breath itself, the long pneumatic hiss on which all meaning rides...Ree-durr—Rye-turr...The eerie, necessary, interchange—a surge of animated air as the one breathes in and the other breathes out’ (pp. 110).

Each semi-colon, each period, on the page, tells the reader when and how to breathe. As Pico Iyer writes, “The Gods, they say, give breath and they take it away. But the same could be said—could it not?—of the humble comma” (p. 93).

When we, as writers, are aware of the breath-wielding power of punctuation, we have more knowledge about how we can touch our readers’ breath. Mary Oliver notes that any line shorter than a pentameter “takes our breath”--“The reader is brought to a more than usual attentiveness by a shorter line, which indicates a situation in some way out of the ordinary. Tetrameter can release a felt agitation or restlessness, or gaiety, more easily and “naturally” than pentameter, and so on” (p. 40).

A line longer than five feet, on the other hand, Oliver writes, “suggests a greater-

than-human power. It can seem by its simple endurance—beyond ordinary lung capacity—grandiose, prophetic. It can also indicate abundance, richness, a sense of joy. Underlying whatever freight of language (statement) it carries, it emits a sense of an unstoppable machine” (p. 41).

Charles D’Ambrosio agrees: “Think about religious practices that involve the control, the studied control of breathing. Think about Yoga. By controlling breath, you’re trying to achieve some state. Well, a writer is trying to provoke a state in someone else through that handle on breathing.”

He goes on to say “It’s very intimate, and there’s an enormous responsibility. With long sentences, you’re pushing someone, you’re taxing them; you’re asking them to give over their rhythm for your rhythm, their breathing for your breathing. You have to know that you have the potential to get that close.”

## ***Inhale***

2000

The ultrasound technician squeezes clear goo onto my belly, then presses the rubber paddle down against my solar plexus. I watch the inside of my body swirl and pulse in grainy black and white on the screen. It looks like outer space, full of gauzy constellations, but it is not. It is inner space. My own undulating galaxy. I look for the planet of my spleen, the organ that may be enlarged, the reason for this ultrasound, but I can’t discern it in all this stardust throb.

“Hold your breath,” the technician tells me.

I inhale, let the breath expand my ribs. She pushes a few buttons on the machine, presses the rubber paddle deeper into my skin.

“You can breathe,” she says, easing the paddle up.

I let the air rush back out of my lungs, then ask “Do I have to hold my breath so everything will stay still?”

“That’s part of it.” She inserts a new film below the screen. “But it also expands your organs, lengthens them, makes them easier to see.”

She turns me onto my side.

“Hold your breath,” she says again, then points to the monitor. “Here,” she says. “This is your gallbladder. See how it flattens out when you inhale?”

I watch a black hole on the screen stretch into a river. I am amazed by how my whole body responds to breath, how every organ is affected by the rhythm of my lungs. What stories lie inside all these comets, these nebulae? How do the stories change with each breath I take, each breath I hold?

Although she is not supposed to say anything, the technician lets me know my spleen is not enlarged. I am relieved--one less reason for me to hold my breath in fear. One more reason for me to hold it in wonder.

## ***Exhale***

When we are in the thick of the creative flow, we often hold our breath. This is

different from chronic breath-holding that blocks the breath, inhibits it, resists fully embodied experience. “To breathe little is to feel little,” writes Alexander Lowen in *The Betrayal of the Body* (p. 153). As writers, this kind of breath-holding is dangerous; we need to breathe large, to invite large feelings into our bodies, if we want our work to be authentic, to have any lasting emotional resonance. John Lee, author of *Writing from the Body* agrees, “To begin writing with the full power of our body’s knowledge, we must welcome our life, our breath, and our emotions completely. We have only to begin breathing fully to show Life that we are serious about embracing her” (p. 22).

When we restrict our breath in our daily lives, it greatly restricts the scope of our creative expression. Lee explains “The message written by the tight chest, the stilted body, carries no *duende*, no darkness, no belly stretched wide by the breath. Such writing is a mere whistle. It rises up like a ghost, substanceless, with a mask for a face, and we do not believe it” (pp. 21-22).

The kind of breath-holding we experience while writing is a different sort – it marks an opening into rather than a closing off – it signals an entrance into the altered creative state, an entrance into awe.

James Hillman points out that the gasp – the quick intake, the holding, of breath – is our primary aesthetic response (p. 303). I posit that it may be our primary creative response as well. Our writing often takes our breath away from the very moment of inspiration. “[Writing] captured me...,” writes Helene Cixous. “From some bodily region. I don’t know where. ‘Writing’ seized me, gripped me, around the diaphragm, between the stomach and the chest, a blast dilated my lungs and I stopped breathing” (p. 9).

It is not surprising that as we tunnel into our subconscious, as we enter the deep currents of our stories, our breath changes accordingly. Joy Manné writes

The way the words of a language are combined to make meaningful utterances is its syntax. Breath is a language with its own syntax and structure...A change in our rhythm of breathing induces a change in our state of consciousness...Breath is a psychological language. It is the language that describes our state of consciousness. If dreams are the royal road to the unconscious, breath is the royal expressway (Manné, pp.5f).

For poet Maurya Simon, the breath is indeed an entrance to, as well as an exit ramp from, the depths of her creative process:

I think that what I do that is right when I’m getting in, and right when I’m getting out, is to take a deep breath. Maybe my breath does alter. It sounds very similar to a meditation practice. And there are some ways I compose myself in terms of breath. It centers my body, it anchors my body, it positions my body in a different way in space and time. I probably do that right when I’m going to get out too. Straightening, and taking a deep breath, and getting ready to remove myself from that place, physically and spiritually (Perry, p. 27).

This ritual of breathing before and after writing implies a suspension of breath

during the actual work. Annie Dillard writes of this process, and its importance, in *The Writing Life*: “Right now, you are flying. Right now, your job is to hold your breath” (p. 21).

Jonathan Kellerman details his own experience: “Occasionally when I’ve had a very strenuous day of writing, I’m almost short of breath...I must have been tensing up and I have to consciously relax my breathing. It takes a couple of seconds. It’s just that feeling of coming out of the hypnoidal state, of leaving one world and entering another” (Perry p. 28). Indeed a 1953 study, in which patients with tuberculosis were given experimental immobilizing lung-chamber therapy to allow their lungs to rest, found that “a certain number of these patients, and particularly those who could reach the most complete state of respiratory rest, automatically went to some degree into a kind of hypnogenic or hypnoidal state” (Christiansen p. 223).

The effects of holding the breath on mind and body are well documented in both scientific and spiritual literature. Neurologist James H. Austin, in his book *Zen and the Brain*, discovered that “amplitudes of EEG theta waves (associated with deep relaxation) increase while people hold their breath” (qtd in Yam). Candace Pert, a neurobiologist known for her work with peptides—“molecules of emotions” which she considers the defining link between mind and body--notes that changes in breathing will change the type of peptides that are released from the brain stem. She writes “By bringing this process into consciousness and doing something to alter it—either holding your breath or breathing extra fast—you cause the peptides to diffuse rapidly throughout the cerebrospinal fluid” bringing mind and body into a fluid balance (pp. 186-187).

Conscious holding of the breath has long been a method used by mystics to enter an altered state of consciousness. Bjorn Christiansen, in *Thus Speaks the Body: Attempts Toward a Personology from the Point of View of Respiration and Postures*, writes:

Dealing with the relationship between respiratory arrest and changes in self-image and ego-identity, one is of course immediately reminded of the Yogis self-induced trance following specific breathing exercises. “...a kind of reverie...inevitably becomes real when relaxation follows upon pranayamic breathing.” Behanan (1937) states, “Literally, pranayama means a cessation or pause in the movement of breath, i.e. *prana* meaning breath and *ayama* pause” (p. 223).

When our writing takes our breath away, we enter a sustained pranayama, a vibrant, fertile, pause. In her poem “Why I Dance”, Peggy Hong writes “After the exhale and before the inhale is where/the answer lies. I wait here and listen.” We often inhabit this pause as we write. We do not block the flow, the rhythm, of our breath; we pull it in, suspend it, dive deep into ourselves for an answer before we breathe out again. “All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath” writes F. Scott Fitzgerald. Even John Lee, who emphasizes the importance of full, open, breathing, agrees “To find our truth, we must be willing to go under: to dive deep into ourselves and come up gasping, clutching something precious in our fist” (p. 28).



## ***Inhale***

1986

I close the door behind me in the sensory deprivation tank and lower myself into the shallow salt water, warm as blood. I lean back; my hair fans behind me like a mermaid; the saline holds my naked body in its buoyant embrace. I am weightless, suspended in darkness. My eyes disappear into the absence of light, but my other senses are not deprived. I smell salt, can taste it against my palate. My skin is alive, caressed by the gentle rocking of the lush water. My ears receive each throb of my heart, each inhale and exhale of lung. The whole tank soon becomes a chamber of breath. I feel myself riding my breath, my body rising and falling like waves. At some point, my edges seem to dissolve and I become all breath. No skin, no bones, no “me”--all that is left is rhythm, the whole world expanding and contracting in sweet soft shushes. “The universe,” Gary Snyder reminds us, “...is a vast breathing body” (p. 118). It is a feeling I recognize--the same selfless, rhythmic, spaciousness I sometimes enter when a poem decides to breathe itself through me.

## ***Exhale***

To invite *spiritus* back into our writing, to open ourselves to the holy wind of inspiration, we must let go of our egos, let the vowel “I” seep back out of its brittle written shell. As F.M. Alexander writes, “I see at last that if I don’t breathe, I *breathe*” (quoted in Douglas-Klotz).

Our breath reminds us that we are connected to the landscape, the atmosphere, connected to each other. It reminds us that even though we each have our own unique voice, even though we each have rich inner lives, we are not separate from each other, from that which surrounds us. We breathe in millions of air molecules a day that have passed through endless lungs and leaves. “At this moment,” writes Diane Ackerman, “you are breathing some of the same molecules once breathed by Leonardo da Vinci, William Shakespeare, Anne Bradstreet, or Colette” (p. 236). We add ourselves to this splendid mix when we breathe back out, all of us part of the same pulsing, breathing, tide. No one’s breath is more important than any one else’s. We are all bonded by the invisible, life giving, wind. Our voices swirl in chorus on its currents.

In her poem “Fire,” Joy Harjo writes

a woman can’t survive  
by her own breath  
alone  
...  
look at me  
i am not a separate woman  
i am a continuance  
of blue sky  
i am the throat

of the sandia mountains  
a night wind woman  
who burns  
with every breath  
she takes (pp. 3-4).

When we acknowledge this connection, we clear the path for some amazing writing to burn through us. “It is not I who speaks but the wind,” Marge Piercy reminds us. “Wind blows through me./Long after me, is the wind” (p. 117).

## ***Inhale***

2000

Every night before I go to sleep, I listen to my son and daughter breathe. Their breath is my lullaby—I can’t fall asleep without hearing it. I am inestimably soothed by the couplets of their lungs. I remember when they were each babies, sometimes I couldn’t tell whether or not they were breathing. I would put the flat of my palm against their small backs until I could feel the subtle rise and fall. My touch often woke them, their squall of shock sweet to my ears. I was always so happy to know their lungs were full of good fierce breath.

Now they breathe loudly as they sleep—they honk and snort, and sometimes sigh. I follow each throaty sound with great pleasure, breathe it deeply into my own lungs. I think of the ancient Keres blessing, translated by Paula Gunn Allen:

I add my breath to your breath  
That our days may be long on the Earth  
That the days of our people may be long  
That we may be one people (quoted in DeSalvo iii).

The breath connects, blesses, all of us. It is my favorite song in the world, this breath, this song we all sing--Inhale: *I am*. Exhale: *Alive*. It is the only song we really know, the only song we really write, the song our bodies keep belting out into the darkness, over and over, again and again: *I am. Alive. I am. Alive. We are. Alive. We are. Alive.*

## ***Exhale***

Our living breath is made all the more precious by our awareness of our own mortality. Breath frames our time on this earth--we take in our first breath right after we are born, we give out our last breath right before we die. In between these two breaths, our lives are governed by the dance of inhale and exhale, a rhythm that we know will one day expire, literally breathe itself out and away. Robert Hass reports

I was doing a radio call-in show up on the Oregon coast, and all sorts of

people called in to recite poems they'd written at one time or another in their lives. One old man called in with a poem that he entitled "Thinking About Cole Porter on Wake Island"—the only poem he'd written in his life he wrote when he was a Marine in the Second World War. And this prompted a guy from the local state prison to call and say: "I'll tell you what poetry is. If you say *anything* and know it's your breath and that you have this *one* life and this is the *only* time this breath is ever going to pass through your body in *just this way*, I don't care if it's a laundry list you read, it's *poetry*." And I thought, that's pretty good: poetry is mortal breath that *knows* it's mortal (quoted in Moyers, *The Language of Life* p. 194).

This breath that fills our bodies, this breath that fills our alphabet, our grammar, our creative process, this breath that connects us, operates against a backdrop of its own silence. Silence that rises like yeast in the pause between each inhale and exhale, silence that hums itself out towards infinity. Silence that will one day claim us as its own. It's no wonder we wish to turn our living breath into luminous swirls of language; it's no wonder we wish to color our breath, draw it on the page, while we still have breath to draw.

"Against the silence," writes Bob Shochichis, "we move, we create. We breathe. Exhale" (p. 137).

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Gayle Brandeis is a writer and dancer living in Riverside, CA, with her husband and their two children. She holds a B.A. in "Poetry and Movement: Arts of Expression, Meditation, and Healing", a major she created at the University of Redlands, and will receive her M.F.A. in Creative Writing/Fiction from Antioch University in June, 2001. Her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies and have received several awards. *FRUITFLESH*, her body awareness guide for women writers, will be published by HarperSanFrancisco, January, 2002.

# THE BREATH

## BY WILFRIED EHRMANN<sup>1</sup>

Prana is a holistic term which is often considered to refer to something esoteric. A term is described as holistic when it cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts or to discrete elements but gives access to a greater whole. This article tries to show that holistic terms are essential in psychotherapy and that *the breath* is one of these important terms.

Recently I asked myself the question: What makes breath therapy specific in the wide range of modern therapies? Many of them use breathing in one way or another and combine it with other methods. Is breathwork only a subsection of other more evolved techniques or has it something complete of its own to offer?

Apart from the techniques of the various breathwork schools (e.g. Rebirthing, Vivation, Middendorf, etc.), the specific context breathwork can offer to the world of healing methods is the concept of Prana in its manifestation as The Breath. Breath therapy focuses on The Breath as a unique power and works towards the experience of this power. Thus we differentiate between The Breath and *breathing*, something we do more or less consciously all the time, and we also differentiate between The Breath and *the physiology of breathing*, which can be described in scientific terms (gas exchange, etc.). So we say that while breathing, we use a power which is not the power of the nerves, muscles and tissues that serve the breathing process, and which is also not the energy that comes to our body cells through metabolism, although these processes are necessary parts of the power of The Breath. The power of The Breath reaches far beyond these levels and works both within and around our body – as an interactive system working within our organism as well as in our external communications. While breathing, consciously or unconsciously, we incorporate The Breath into the physical realm. So we need to breath in order to give existence to The Breath, but without The Breath, breathing would be a mechanical process like using a bicycle pump. Just as music does not become music through our pressing the keys of a piano, but rather through the invisible and inaudible connections which are woven into our various actions as we touch the keys, in the same way every breath indicates an underlying power as soon as we pay attention to it. And this is The Breath which adds to our breathing a life giving and life enhancing quality. As soon as we enter consciousness of our breathing we meet The Breath as a noun, as a substantial essence which is beyond our control.

## SOUL AND BREATH

This is why so many languages use similar or synonymous words for soul and breath. We can talk about the experience of the breath in the same way as we can speak about experiencing our soul. When we act as therapists, we start with the assumption that there

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are inner forces which give shape to lives although they are invisible. And we also assume that these forces can be influenced and changed, and that indeed these transformational processes are goal-oriented, directing us towards the reinforcement of life and towards opening to mindfulness and love.

We use holistic terms like soul or breath (or *prana*) because we want to express that we need an inner unity behind all our roles, all the parts of our personality, all our behavioural patterns, and that all these partial aspects of ourselves would lose any meaning without this inner union. We cannot understand the nature of a feeling without assuming that we have a soul which finds its expression in this feeling, and at the same we cannot understand what goes on when someone breathes if we do not assume The Breath as the acting reality “behind the scenes.” Mainly, or maybe only by experiencing The Breath, we experience the wholeness of life and our connection to this wholeness. So it is The Breath which builds the bridge from physical processes to processes of the self and to processes of the universe. This way The Breath gives us the basic understanding of our being in time.

There is another connection between the soul and The Breath, as there are many traditions which state that The Breath manifests the activity of the soul. Starting from the breath<sup>2</sup> of life at the beginning of mankind in the Bible to the perception that the soul leaves the body with the last exhale when someone is passing away, we have innumerable images which underline the inner relatedness of breath, soul and spirit. As we know, any change in our inner state manifests in changes of the breathing. And the free flow of The Breath itself is the expression of the life forming soul (*Prana*) which we can experience directly and convincingly in a breathwork session.

## BREATH THERAPY

By using the concept of The Breath as life force behind or within our breathing, breath therapy has its own unique and authentic approach in the field of therapies. Observing and guiding the breathing plays its role in many therapeutic methods, sometimes more centrally, sometimes on the periphery. But we can speak of breath therapy only when The Breath as such is being recognised and acknowledged as the power which changes, resolves and heals. Breath therapy is about bringing The Breath into action by opening the space in which it can unfold its healing power. The various approaches of breath therapy only differ in the means (like focussing more on inhale or exhale, on chest breathing or diaphragm breathing, or variations in rhythm etc.) and various theoretical frameworks which are provided for this power to unfold.

Reichian bodytherapy and bioenergetic therapy usually work a lot with breathing. But they are not breath therapies in my understanding as the “flow” or the “orgone energy” which were described by Reich and Lowen is not the same as The Breath, and the success of the therapy is not ascribed to it. The bodyworkers in the tradition of Reich and Lowen use many other techniques to loosen up the body or to release emotions. Utilising breathing as an additional method does not qualify for breath therapy. I wonder if Holotropic Breathwork can be called a breath therapy in this sense as it uses the breathing

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<sup>2</sup> “and (God) breathed into his (Adam’s) nostrils the breath of life.” Genesis 2:7. Holy Bible: New International Version. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978.

mainly to charge up at the beginning and to enter the process but does not rely on The Breath to gain transformation. The role of other factors like music and bodywork is considered as equally important.

In breath therapy, the client enters the space of The Breath. Here breath therapy shows a way to become conscious of its power so that it can serve as a support for and aid to development, as resource for empowerment and joy of life. The first door to this space is becoming conscious of our breathing. By this we connect to our Breath, and by the Breath, we connect to ourselves, to our inner core.

Being able to observe oneself with clarity and awareness in the present moment is probably the most important basis of therapeutic work. *I breathe, therefore I am* – and all the things that create worries, fears and distortion step back, even if it is only for a few moments. We set a difference in our self experience which takes away the power from all the dramas and offers us participation in the flow of life. The Romans used to say: *Dum spiro spero* – as long as I breathe, I hope. So it is The Breath that carries, supports and transforms us on the deepest level.

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### **About the Author**

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**TRANSFERENCE AND COUNTERTRANSFERENCE:  
A PRACTICAL REPORT ON A SEMINAR  
AT THE *GLOBAL INSPIRATION CONFERENCE 2000***

**BY  
WILFRIED EHRMANN**

**Keywords** : transference, countertransference, breathwork.

**INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between therapist and client in breathwork is theoretically widely unexplored as if it were of no importance in this approach. We know from other therapeutic approaches about the crucial effects of this relationship for the development of the therapeutic process. These effects are mainly described by the terms "transference" (projections of the client onto the therapist) and "countertransference" (projections of the therapist onto the client). Positive counter/transference means feelings of appreciation, acceptance, idealisation and so on, negative counter/transference contains feelings of rejection, disapproval, hatred and so on. The main quality a breathworker has to perform is empathy. But especially the elements of negative transference can only be detected and reflected by using analytical abilities as well.

I think that thorough awareness of the elements of the therapeutic relationship can substantially enhance the quality of breathwork, and that it adds to the deepening of the therapy when transference and countertransference are taken into account by the therapist. For this reason I think that breathworkers should develop more sensitivity in this area.<sup>1</sup> To improve awareness of this issue, I decided to use the forum of the Global Inspiration Conference for a practical experiment. The setting of the workshop which is described below obliged the participants to act as therapists on an empathetic as well as an analytical level.

**1. The Setting**

I offered the workshop at the Global Inspiration Conference 2000 at Centro D'Ompio in Italy. It was called "The Healing Relationship: Transference and Countertransference in Breathwork". This paper is a report of that workshop. All quotations from participants are in italics.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wilfried Ehrmann, 'Transference and Countertransference in Breathwork,' in *The Healing Breath* Vol. 1, No 2, May 1999.

## **2. The Participants**

The participants were eight women from different countries – all trained as breathworkers. Breathwork trainings differ in length and content, standards are not agreed and vary with both country and trainers. It was not possible to compare the participants for length of training or experience.

The general language was English, with one woman only speaking Spanish. Translation was no problem, as she happened to meet a woman as partner for the breathwork session who spoke Spanish as well.

## **3. The Procedure**

These are the steps that defined and began the seminar.

1. The leader explained briefly the dynamics of relationship in therapeutic work and answered any questions that arose in relationship to that.
2. The participants were asked to stand up and walk around the room without speaking to each other, and at the same time to become aware of their contact with the other participants they met with while walking around.
3. They were then asked to stop and to stay in eye contact with one person who was right in front of them at this moment and who would be their client for a following breathwork session. Thus the process of finding a partner had an arbitrary element to reflect the situation in reality which does not permit therapists to choose clients according to their personal sympathy; rather they are confronted with the people who come to them.
4. Without speaking to each other, the participants were asked to write down their first impressions of each other during this meeting on a piece of paper which they could choose to turn in to the workshop leader at the end of the workshop or not to.
5. Then they were allowed to talk to their partner about only what seemed necessary for starting the breathing session. They were to choose who would go first for the breathwork session.
6. The "therapists," i.e. those participants who had decided to accompany the session, were asked to keep up their empathic (more emotional) and analytical (more rational) attention at the same time during the session. They were to take notes on and give a description of the session from the analytical perspective at the same time as accompanying it.
7. Two breathing sessions were protocolled by the therapists, each person having a turn to be the therapist.
8. Each participant wrote down what they experienced during their own session.

At the end of the workshop, seven participants handed their protocols over to the leader for an evaluation.

## 4. The limits of the situation

### Limitations of time

Due to lack of time, a final evaluation and sharing could not be done after the exchanges of sessions.

### Limitations of circumstances

The insights into the elements of the therapeutic relationship were limited in this setting by the following circumstances:

1. The workshop took place on the 6th day of the conference. Some of the participants had therefore already met each other, established relationships with each other and even shared exercises in other seminars. It was thus not possible to collect genuine first impressions and so "the first impression" (Section 3, No. 4) was a fiction.
2. The workshop leader was in the room during the breathing sessions as well as to present the rules. There was, therefore, another level of transference possible, namely that between the therapists and the seminar leader, even though the seminar leader had explained at the beginning that he would not interfere in any way into the facilitation of the sessions. Finally, there is a difference when someone is facilitating as therapist with a person who was one's therapist before and vice versa.

Despite these circumstances, we can derive some interesting insights from the reports of the participants which will be summarised in the coming text.

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRANSFERENCE

It was noticeable that, as a general tendency, elements of negative transference like mistrust, emotional distance, reluctance and resistance resolved themselves during the sessions and gave way to a positively influenced relationship.

The setting and the nature of the process in a breathwork session play the important role in this development. When the client lies beside the therapist who is sitting at her side (which was the position assumed in every session in this experiment) while she slips into a deep non-verbal realm of experience, there is a strong bias towards a mother-child-transference situation. This form of nourishing support and caring emerged in nearly all of the cases, especially towards the end of the sessions.

It is interesting to notice in this context, how obvious it is that the non-verbal parts of a breathwork session particularly create a level of trust and mutual understanding, and this contributes to and enhances the supportive atmosphere I described above. Due only to the fact that there is hardly any verbal exchange and communication, a non-verbal exchange of information develops, which is built on a kind of trust which allows more closeness than is possible in a more formal verbal setting. Here are some examples:

*"I used my supporter as the wonderful and supporting mother that totally cared for me when I was sick and feel gratitude for having chosen this partner as my 'mother'."* (client)

*“I feel love as suddenly her breath is connected and relaxed. I feel happy.”*  
(therapist)

*“When I’m totally concentrating and not disapproving of myself I feel great acceptance and warmth for the client.”* (therapist)

*“I feel it is important for me to be very conscious and present not to hold a space for her. She is very still – I feel this is good.”* (therapist)

The atmosphere that this positive transference creates is an important advantage in the relationship dynamics of breathwork. Of course this advantage has its shadow. It is difficult to deal with negative transference when you are the client and you receive so much pleasant attention.

Most of the other issues that came up in this setting, in which the element of self-observation was important, also concerned the area of mother transference and countertransference, i.e. the client projects an image of a good mother onto the therapist and the therapist asking herself to be the good mother. Therapists were inclined to ask themselves, “Am I attentive and empathic enough? Should I leave the process to develop on its own or should I interfere more? This shows that this setting which is so much formed by the non-verbal level creates a lot of insecurity because the therapist can never be sure whether the things s/he either does or omits are received well by the client. The therapists receive no feedback during the session besides what they can learn from their observation of the breath. This insecurity may mirror experiences that come from the early mother-child relationship. Where is the mother who always knows exactly what the child needs? And which child would not feel this insecurity? It is, thus, very easy for therapists to lose their inner connection to their feelings, their intuition and their knowledge of what is appropriate and what is not.

## **INSECURITY IN GIVING**

Giving in therapy is an important field for transference issues. Even though we know the concept of the “healing presence” – breathwork lore says “It is enough for the facilitator to be present with loving and caring attention”<sup>2</sup> – the therapist will become insecure if s/he cannot receive feedback from the client. If there is a verbal setting the therapist constantly receives spoken feedback about whether the client reacts to what he says or does and how s/he reacts. In a non-verbal breathwork session however, the number of levels is reduced on which feedback can be observed. The result is that this creates insecurity in the therapist especially in breathwork sessions in which one cannot see from outside what is going on.

*“Had no clue as to what was happening to her, if anything. Notice that I feel more worthy when I am required to intervene with either support, affirmations, talking,*

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<sup>2</sup> Wilfried Ehrmann, ‘Heilende Präsenz’ (Healing presence) in Erste Österreichische Rebirther Zeitung, Heft 2/92, Wien 1992, S. 3-4.

*touching etc. but today my intuition guided me to just sit quietly and offer a safe space to breathe. Felt a bit useless though.”*

*“I should be doing more and am critical of myself for not intervening more. Is it correct not to intervene or am I holding back?”*

*“It seems as though there would be more rapport when I come closer but I do not know if she takes up my messages.”*

Children easily get the feeling of giving too little. The difference between the quantity of things parents give to their children and what children are able to give back in return quite naturally creates insecurity and guilt feelings in the children. In cases in which there is a permanent atmosphere of resentment coming from the parents because they think that they give so much and that they get so little in return, it is difficult for a child to build up a stable feeling of self esteem – a self esteem which lies in the ability to see realistically what the right balance of giving and receiving is.

When there is a small flow of mutual feedback in breathwork sessions, this childhood atmospheric feeling which suggests that there is always something we might do in a wrong way or that we might do too little or too much can come back. As therapists we are in the role of a parent and often take over the insecurities of our parents in their way of dealing with us. We can feel simultaneously the child's perspective facing the parental attitude of responsibility and the parents' fear of being incompetent and making mistakes.

## **EXPRESSION OF THE BODY**

When there is a lot to do in a session, it is "easier" (we also could say, it is easier to avoid the issue mentioned above). So the following remark comes from a session which had a lot of physical expression and which thus permitted the therapist many interventions:

*“I felt o.k. with all the physical manifestations – I had not realised I had become so competent!”*

*“I feel safe because I could give her a new perspective and precious confirmations.”*

Therapists are inclined to believe that the more the therapist can do, the more competence and safety she can feel. If she is able to intervene more it is easier to reduce her uncertainty about her (in)competence than when she is only sitting quietly, in an attentive and empathetic mood. But when we have a look at clients reports, it becomes clear that these doubts and self confirmations are internal processes in the therapist which have little to do with the client's actual experiences:

*“She was there, supporting, guiding me when I got ‘stuck’. I had a very good breathe – I felt completely safe and supported. It was easy to surrender to what was coming up.”*

*“I was feeling quite safe and well looked after, cared for. I could relax and trust her.”*

*“A great healing experience.”*

*“As a client I felt nurturing from my rebirther as if she were an enveloping presence like a womb or a good mother.”*

*“Towards the end I realise that I am cared for, protected and respected.”*

## **POWER AND POWERLESSNESS**

A variation of the issue about the right degree of giving in therapy comes up when the client does not follow the instructions of the therapist:

*“First observing, supporting, analysing. I see she is in a rebellious mood. I try to support her but it seems that unconsciously she wants to hold on to her suffering. She hardly breathes and does not follow my instructions. I get tired of trying to help her and I get a little angry and frustrated. I ask her if she wants to do it her way. YES. I take away from her some of my attention. ... I get fed up of what I perceive as her not wanting to let go and surrender.”*

*“I give her a suggestion but she does not seem to react ... I think that maybe there is another similarity with my parents: respect and cold love.”*

Here we notice issues which have to do with power. When children do not follow the parent's advice, parents often react with a resentful attitude: “When you do not take what I want to give to you. I cannot do anything more for you and you can stay so you just have to live with the way things are.” “I give my best and you can see for yourself what to do.” It is often difficult for parents to take back tendencies towards giving and thus to leave space for the development of the child's autonomy. Consequently it is difficult for the child to find her own way to take action by herself. She has to transform the good things she has received so far (e.g. mother doing up her shoes) to something “bad” or aggressive (e.g. “I want to do it! I don't want you to do it!”) in order to be able to achieve doing it by herself and develop independence and autonomy this way. When the parents react with resentful withdrawal, insecurity and guilt feelings will build up in the child. These can be compensated for sometimes by a syndrome like “Now I'm going to do it the way I like (and the way that hurts you!)” And the resentful withdrawal is introjected at the same time so as to be ready to be acted out in situations in which we cannot push through our will even though we think it is for the best of our fellow beings.

The dynamics of a breathwork session are predominantly determined by the client's process. Thus it happens quickly that we come into the non-cooperative pattern just mentioned. As therapist, my means of influencing the process are very limited. Even though my intuition and experience say that the process should take another direction (“I wish she'd breathe through her mouth. Why? If she did she'd get on with it.”), there is

little I can do to get the client to get on with it. Her process has priority and does not want to give way to my will. It can happen that the client takes up my instruction and breathes through her mouth for a while but she soon returns to her process which at that moment is breathing through the nose. How does it help for the therapist then to hold on to her better insight?

*“I take away from her some of my attention” and withdraw into my inner resignation: “There are moments in which I feel ... tiredness of giving love and support and it not being received.” ... “I feel a bit distracted and wish it would be over soon.”*

Trusting the wisdom of the process means also to take back one’s own ideas when they are not received and accept and ground oneself in the fact that the client can only take up what is in tune with her process at the given moment. In the cases when she does not accept what I want to offer her, then what I am suggesting is not appropriate in this phase of her process. This does not mean that I am wrong in my intuition as therapist; it does mean that I did not fully enter the reality of the client (empathy) who, at that moment, is not able to catch up with my intuition. There is no need to blame oneself for not being fully empathetic all the time as it is the nature of a therapeutic process – and therefore of the therapists task – to switch between empathy and challenge.

## **TWO EXAMPLES OF THE MUTUAL DYNAMIC OF CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE**

### **Issues of closeness and distance**

One pair describes parallel experiences concerning the issue of closeness and distance.

A has the following sensations in the first contact with B: *“tightness in my stomach and tight and tingling feeling in my throat. Desire to move further apart.”* This issue continued from the first encounter (Procedure No. 2) through to the beginning of the session she (A) is facilitating as therapist:

*“Feeling very disconnected from the client – operating from an intellectual perspective only. Drifting off and spacing out at critical points when she is going into an emotional episode.”*

Following B’s report about the first contact she had with A, we can understand the reason for A’s need for distance:

*“She is Irish like my father – although he is a man I have never met. Yes, again my mother was also Irish and expressed a lot of fear in her body.”*

B sees in A her mother’s fear and she becomes distant to protect herself from it. Perhaps she also protects herself from the unknown area that is connected with her father. Members of a family who are not known to a client often carry an aura of fascination as

well as uneasiness. When we recognise this happening in a client, and draw the client's attention to it, it can bring up a lot of fears and wishes. Whether the observation that B (as therapist) made at the beginning of A's session as client:

*"She is frightened, I need to help her relax and to reassure her"*

comes from her own fear

*"My body is tense, I need to relax too."*

or reflects A's reality cannot be decided here as we do not have further information.

In A's case, the aura of distance can be connected with her first impression and be manifesting in the session as a result of it when she describes how she creates distance in the form of not being concentrated. She writes from her role as B's therapist:

*"I keep drifting into my own thoughts and thinking. I should have something to write down here rather than concentrating on my client. Much higher degree than average amount of spacing out."*

Perhaps there is another reason for this kind of distance as A discovers in B's body shape a similarity to a former friend:

*"Critical of her body shape, that it meant she was clingy and not responsible for herself – this was because she looked like the friend from the past who was very clingy etc."*

An observer might ask how these observations of clinging are related to experiences with A's parents but this would require further investigation.

## **Closeness, Distance and Emotional Openness**

There was another pair, C and D, who played with the issue of closeness and distance in the context of emotional openness. C noticed when meeting D:

*"Always this little smile. Impenetrable. Feeling a bit frustrated and useless. Feel she did not let me in ?! Had no clue as to what was happening to her, if anything."*

This is what D observed when meeting C:

*"Acceptance without much warmth – possible connection to my mother ... Something in her does not wake up moving closer."*

Thus we hear D's thoughts on a possible mother projection. D writes with regard to her own breathing session that she felt cared for and respected but without too much



warmth. C on her side experiences D as “*impenetrable*” as her client. Both describe their sessions as quiet and relaxed and D also notices the correspondence of the issues in the pairs of the group:

*“I think of the pairs that paired up in this group that we attract us in a similar state: two are screaming, two are crying, and the two of us in the middle are sleeping.”*

## **Emotional Distance and the Facilitation of a Breathwork Session**

What effects can the experience of emotional distance have on the facilitation of a session? In both of these cases the effect was caution on C’s side as well as D’s so as not to interfere too much in process of the other.

*“I am a bit concerned because it looks like as if she would fall asleep. I doubt whether I should tell her more or not.”(D)*

The emotional distance is obvious to both but they do not find the space to talk about it in this setting. So they decide for a careful treatment without using too much pressure as the trust for a more risky intervention is missing. And both are left with a doubt at the end if they have done the right thing. It would be interesting to explore the dynamic and the projections in this relationship deeper to bring the therapeutic process to a good end in this case.

## **SUMMARY**

Every session writes its own story into which both the client and the therapist are woven. Especially in breathwork they easily dive together into a mystical realm in which they become hikers – people who walk together on a path – connected by the rhythm of the breath. This sharing of a path generates a strong healing power and a tendency to remove the role differences between the client and the therapist. Not all the treasures, however, can be brought to light on this way. If the therapist tends to drift into trance too easily, she loses the right distance from what is going on and important insights will be missed.

The therapist should be especially careful about the temptation towards a positive mother transference. This form which is strongly anchored in the setting of a breathwork session offers the space for a lot of healing as the lack of the love of a mother is the root of many problems. But the growth of the soul also needs a look at the issues of building up boundaries with regard to the love of the mother and also to ambivalent forms of bonding with the father, and it is important to give space to these issues in breath therapy as well as in other therapies. The technique of deepening the breathing opens up the client in breathwork to feelings from the realms of early bonding ambivalence as became clear in the protocols. It also became obvious that it is difficult to let these issues arise in the relationship of therapist and client and to work on them in this context in the breathwork setting. We thus have to find ways to work with these issues in the relationship between

therapist and client in breathwork too.

We can underline the necessity of connecting the two levels of relating in breathwork: empathetic vibrating and analytical reflection. The latter quality especially needs a constant sharpening of their skills by breath therapists who are predominantly trained in intuitive abilities. Analytical reflection helps a lot to conceal one's own blind spots and this impedes the client's growth as much as the therapist's. If and how far these analytical insights are brought into the therapeutic process depends on the therapeutic intention which can vary from seeing the context of transference and countertransference as crucial for any success in therapy to taking up this context only in cases where it cannot be avoided.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **About the Author**

Wilfried Ehrmann, Ph.D., was trained as a breath-therapist by Leonard Orr and Seth Bartlett. He is a qualified psychotherapist trained in Rogerian counseling, Gestalt, energy and emotional work. In 1991 he founded and chairman of ATMAN, the Austrian Association for Integrative Breathwork and Rebirthing. He is the chief trainer in the ATMAN-trainings project for integrative breathwork, and the International Breathwork Foundation co-ordinator for Austria. Wilfried is the author of many articles on Breathwork.

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# RONNIE LAING AND REBIRTHING

BY  
PETER WALKER

I first met Dr Laing in the seventies, when I staged and promoted a series of seminars entitled 'Our Approach to Psychiatry' on behalf of Laing's Philadelphia Association. This was a four night event featuring: R. D. Laing: 'My Approach to Psychiatry; Frederick Leboyer 'Birth & Rebirth;' Francis Huxley 'Embryos and Ancestors. ' Hugh Crawford, John Heaton, Francis Huxley, R. D. Laing and Leon Redler: 'Our Approach to Psychiatry. '

At the time I was particularly impressed with Frederick Leboyer's film 'A Child is Born. ' Leboyer, as you probably know, changed the face of modern obstetrics after re-experiencing his own birth during an intense period of heightened awareness, and his film showed how, given the right circumstances, a baby can be welcomed into our world. Equally impressive, perhaps even more, was a film Dr Laing made with a remarkable woman called Helen Brew, entitled 'Birth With R. D. Laing. ' Unlike Leboyer's, Laing's film showed a standard hospital birth with interventions like premature cord cutting, separation from the mother etc all filmed from the baby's point of view. Although shocking everything Laing showed was endorsed by women telling of their own experiences.

## First Encounter with Laing's Rebirthing

My first encounter with re-birthing was at Paul and Carole Zeal's home in Maida Vale, London.

I had been invited to attend and I watched while a number of people were 're-birthing' on a long red carpet. I learnt later that the method used was first pioneered by Elizabeth Feher,<sup>1</sup> a practising psychologist in New York. I was subsequently invited to experience this and was included in a group supervised by Ronnie at his home in Eton Road.

My re-birthing required me to go onto all fours and curl into a foetal position. Once in this position a group of five attendants then gathered around. Four held my limbs in the position I'd assumed and one held my head with my chin tucked in. It was then 'up to me' to get myself out of this position in any way I chose. At first this was not to uncomfortable but the attendants breathing in harmony with each other slowly 'pushed in' until I felt compelled to push back. My struggle for release lasted for something like twenty minutes and during this time I was forced to use what felt like every muscle my body until I finally emerged, exhausted. After a short initial period of intense relief and sleep there followed a physical feeling of lightness that continued for about three weeks. Over the following months I lost count of the number of times I was 're-birthing' using

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<sup>1</sup> Feher, Leslie (1980), *The Psychology of Birth*. The Foundation of Human Personality, Condor, Souvenir Press.

this same technique, but by now Ronnie had formed a hard core group of some fifteen yoga teachers and practitioners who met once, twice or three times a week to practice as attendants and to experience fully what it was we were going to do with others. Arthur Balaskas was a leading figure in this group an energetic and generous man Arthur was my good friend as well as my yoga teacher. Also as a group we practised yoga and met frequently with our partners and children to sing and dance and holiday together. (Laing was an excellent pianist and both Ronnie and his second wife Jutta were extremely hospitable).

### **Laing's method: Ronnie's Introduction to The Day's Events.**

During this time a one day workshop for large groups of participants had been developed, and this took the form of:

Group introductions with everyone walking together to music. All walking the same way and then varying directions quickening the tempo and interweaving. Slowing down starting and stopping to shake hands and then stopping for an embrace.

Loosening up with a little arm waving, jumping and shouting, followed by some one to one games like, trying to pull each other off balance from your spot, standing 'palms to palms' with a partner moving arms and hands in all directions while trying to maintain palm to palm contact, the same trying to maintain contact with the fingertips and so forth, followed by some soft yoga or stretching techniques, and a brief meditative period of rest and a break.

Following this our group would divide and direct and participate in a variety of trust games which we had rehearsed to a very high standard, such as one to one spinning with a partner around our neck and shoulders, two to one with one in the middle falling forwards and backwards and being caught (almost horizontally), or as a group throwing a willing participant high into the air and catching them, or letting them stand in the middle of a circle and fall anyway and be caught.

Following a quiet period of rest our group would then begin re-birthing the group participants Dr Laing would supervise over the whole event. After an initial period of rest participants would be invited to share their experiences of the day.

### **Laing's influence on pre and perinatal psychology**

As a result of these and other experiences around Dr Laing many members of our group also became involved pregnancy, birth and early childcare. Included in this Arthur wrote a number of books including (with his wife Janet) *Active Birth*. Janet Balaskas continued to write numerous books around this subject, and organised and developed the Active

Birth Centre([www.activebirthcentre.com](http://www.activebirthcentre.com)).

I began to teach postnatal yoga groups and baby-massage ([www.gn.apc.org/baby-massage](http://www.gn.apc.org/baby-massage)) and have continued to teach and write and produce videos on this subject up to the current day.

## **About R. D. Laing**

*R. D. Laing was a unique and gifted healer to whom people from all over the world would come in their 'hour of need'. The influence of his life and work still continues in this world in many ways, some recognised and some not.*

## **About the Author**

Peter Walker lives in London and is married with four children. He works primarily with mothers and babies and babies with special needs. ([www.walker@gn.apc.org](mailto:www.walker@gn.apc.org))

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Adrian Laing, R. D. Laing: A Biography.** New York: Thunder's Mouth Press. 1994.

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**White, Mike Grant CMT, NE. DD, Breathing Specialist, Secrets of Optimal Natural Breathing™: Safe, Easy Ways to Improved Respiration Without Drugs or Surgery,** Balanced Breathing Press, 181 Bryson Avenue, Bryson City, North Carolina 28713, USA.

**Breathing Tapes by Michael Grant White**

**Adrian Laing, R. D. Laing: A Biography.** New York: Thunder's Mouth Press. 1994.

This is a biography of R. D. Laing by his son.

R. D. Laing was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst an extraordinary and fearless innovator in his field. He wrote *The Divided Self*, which was published in 1960 (London: Tavistock). It was a book so far ahead of its time that the British Journal of Psychiatry only reviewed it in 1982. Among many other books and articles by Laing are *Self and Others* (London: Tavistock, 1961), the classic *Interpersonal Perception* (with Herbert Phillipson and A. Russell Lee, London: Tavistock 1966), the book of poems about relationship, *Knots* (London: Tavistock, 1970), *the Facts of Life* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), and *The Voice of Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1982) in which he set out the psychological relevance of intrauterine experience and the application of phenomenological analysis to prenatal life. (p. 209f)

Laing experimented with LSD in his therapeutic work with the permission of the British Government! He was not in favour of taking powerful hallucinogenics in unsupervised or unsafe environment. He explored the controversial question to what extent Schizophrenia is caused through a family context in *Sanity, Madness, and the Family* (London: Tavistock, 1964). He held the highly controversial idea that "madness is a natural healing process with an identifiable beginning, middle and end, if allowed to

take its natural course, without intervention.” (p. 102) He opened his own home to people in need and ran residential homes to which they could come and live in like a family, and with unconditional acceptance.

He remembered his own birth (described on p. 166), and had heard stories of their births from many clients in analysis. Influenced by that and by natural births he had witnessed in Sri Lanka in 1972, he claimed most controversially that “the baby, before and during birth, is a human being more alive, alert and capable of feeling pain than most adults.” (p. 166) He was generally concerned with the effects of pre-natal life on the adult, and wrote about this in *The Facts of Life*. During a tour of the USA, he experienced, “a rebirthing ritual enacted together with a rebirth-midwife, Elizabeth Fehr,” which he described:

Last winter I had a weekly session in the evenings to which about 40 to 50 came in which we cultivated a rather simple ritual which started off as what we called ‘re-birthing’. We found it increasingly easy as a number of people stand around one person at a center spot to just give the word ‘go’. People would start to go into, God knows what, all sorts of mini-freak-outs and birth-like experiences, yelling, groaning, screaming, writing, contorting, biting, contending. A lot of physical handling might ensue and a lot of energy would be released and redistributed. I should mention massage, bodily sculpture, improvised games, etc., are all part of our ordinary ongoing culture: wearing masks, dancing... (from a 1974 interview with Claude Steiner and Spence Meigham. Laing, p. 180).

Laing adopted Fehr’s method of working. His theory behind the therapeutic value of rebirthing was,

Within each person’s muscular system there are locked up countless experiences and feelings of fear, pain, despair, hatred, sorrow and pity. By undergoing a reconstructed birthing experience, with human beings as the simulated womb, closing up tight, a person could fight ‘free’ of the enclosure and by so doing, experience ‘not exclusively a rebirth scenario but a more a physical realization of one’s existential impasse.’ (p. 210)

Rebirthing became an important part of his life. He used various exercises to warm up prior to the rebirthing sessions:

Various forms of encounter therapy including ‘body sculpture’ (a game whereby one person directed another into a posture designed at the other’s whim, often to hilarious effect); ‘the gauntlet’ (in which an individual would walk between two lines of people to the spontaneous reactions of the others, ranging from boos and hisses to cheers and whooping); ‘trust games’ (a person closed her eyes and fell forwards and backwards, relying on those in front and behind to prevent her from falling’; another game entailed being thrown in the air and caught by the others); ‘bustling’ (participants were told to walk amongst each other as if caught in a city rush-hour) ... (p. 205)

Laing took a leading role in an uncompromising documentary, called *Birth*, which took “a critical look at childbirth practices in Western society.” The film showed “how the process of birth is conducted on the false premise that a new-born baby could not be fully sentient.” It showed “a new-born baby in extreme physical distress being

circumcised without an anaesthetic.” (p. 190) It picked up awards for “the Best TV film: Melbourne Festival 1978, and the Best Documentary of the Year: Feltex Award New Zealand 1978 – and the Royal College of Obstetricians in the UK were ‘too frightened’ for the film to be broadcast on national TV and prevented this from happening. (p. 190f)

I’ve concentrated on R. D. Laing’s rebirthing in this review. He was a fascinating man and this is an interesting and insightful biography. It is a great achievement on behalf of the son of a famous father to take such a compassionately objective view.

I thank Adrian Laing for his generous permission to quote liberally from his book.

Joy Manné, Ph.D.

**Dina Glouberman, *Life Choices Life Changes: Develop Your Personal Vision with Imagework*. London: Thorsons, 1995. (1<sup>st</sup> ed. Unwin Paperbacks, 1989)**

Imagination is the ground of our being. Whatever we create in our lives, ... begins as an image in our minds. Deeply held symbols of which we are not necessarily aware, structure our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions. ... Most of us choose our life rather the way we choose a new suit. A limited number of styles and sizes are available on the rack, changing somewhat from year to year ... The purpose of image work is to help you to create for yourself a truly *haute couture* existence – a life that is made to measure for you, that fits you as you are rather than as you feel you should be, feels good as well as looks good, enhances your natural gifts, and makes your unique statement to the world. ... In a sense, imagework could be considered a psychological equivalent of Yoga” (p. 2)

Thus begins this beautifully written, wise book.

The first part of this book concerns “The Theory of Imagework.” We think in images and in words, “Words are our socially structured way of thinking logically, analytically, and realistically, and of communicating effectively with others Images are our personal idiosyncratic way of thinking intuitively, holistically, and metaphorically, and of communicating effectively with ourselves.” (p. 4) Glouberman has chosen the term “imagework” to avoid any accent on visualising and so putting off people who cannot visualise; she herself does not see vivid pictures. (p.5) (p. 10) Learning the language of our natural imagework will enhance every aspect of our lives, from relationships to clothes-buying! (pp. 11-17)

Imagework is basic to many if not most forms of therapy as practised today Glouberman acknowledges her influences: Freud, Jung, Gestalt, NeuroLinguistic Programming, Silva Mind Control and David Spangler. Imagework is a bridge between consciousness and the unconscious. (p. 24) It brings to the fore the assumptions or mental attitude that lies behind the event that our conscious mind may be grappling with.” (p. 30f) The autonomic nervous system responds well to images which is why imagework is effective in healing. (p. 25) Imagery facilitates change because “when we create images ... we are experiencing what we are imagining.” (p. 50) Glouberman explains, “A good



way to think of it is that energy follows thought – what we do follows in the pathway or fits into the thoughtform created by our imagination.” (p. 50) Where so many people these days are fanatics of the doctrine that “thought is creative,” Glouberman says: “The world we meet as fate is as responsible for our images as our images are responsible for our world. The world therefore must be seen as a partner in the imagework process.” (p. 51) This is healthy realism.

The second part of this book is called “The Practice of Imagework: Basic Course.” Here the basic technique is explained, including how to work alone as well as how to work with a partner or with a group. Respecting and appreciating the source of the images that arise is an essential part of this work. There are exercises for attaining the state of relaxation for the imagework, and exercises in going to sleep. There are brief case history examples of imagework to find answers to problems such as writer’s block, a tense jaw, the cause of body aches and pains, and longer case histories that illustrate in detail the use of the method and variations. A process similar to Voice Dialogue, or to the Gestalt method of using two chairs is done with the image. There are chapters on “Improving Relationships,” “Resentments, Rejections, and Mourning,” and working with the Inner Child. Here there is a very interesting exercise on “creating a healthful past:” giving the Inner Child the experience she would have liked. (p. 159) There are chapters on “Making Life Decisions” and “Carrying Through Life Changes.” In every chapter there are shorter case histories, and one very long example. The technique is well taught.

Part three is about “Expanding The Practice Of Imagework” with chapters on “Health and Illness,” “Dreams as Turning Points,” choosing different roles to play in life, “Understanding Time and Money,” and “Beyond the Personal Self” in which we are taught how to contact wise beings, creating one’s own House of Truth. There is a chapter on improving skills.

All through the book there are charming illustrations.

This is a well-written book that explains an excellent technique coherently, and with simplicity and grace. When I had my school of Personal and Spiritual Development, I used it as a text book. It is still the best I know in the field.

Joy Manné, Ph.D.

**Duncanson, A., (ed), Birth of a Rebirther: Stories Of Personal Growth From The Binnie A. Dansby Rebirther Trainings In England, Germany And Denmark. Stockholm: Archie Duncanson, Sættfrö Verlag, 1996.**

This is a truly remarkable collection of articles on Rebirthing. They are by – as the title says – the students in Binnie A. Dansby’s training and their intention is to tell how rebirthing is taught in the training and what rebirthing has meant to the writers in their lives. This book is intended “as an introduction for our friends, families, therapists and others.” This aim is fully accomplished and far more than that. It is not only an essential text book on rebirthing breathwork, but an essential bedside book for every breathworker!

The accent in Binnie’s training is on “birth, safety, support and innocence.” (p. ix). She appreciates the writing process,

“The assignments for participants in the training include conscious contact with people in the training, regular rebirthing sessions and written reports about sessions given and received. All the assignments are designed to deepen and enhance the experience of the individual participants, not to be judged by those supervising. In order to heal the deepest archetypal thoughts, “I am alone and separate,” ... “I have to do this all by myself” ... “:It is not safe to express myself”, we must push beyond our life set-ups and patterns, with keen awareness. The importance of writing about an emotional, transformational experience ... cannot be emphasised too much. The writing brings it more into form and further away from the possibility of denial, enhancing every aspect of the process. In a broader context, each person begins to find ease in writing about sessions for the purpose of record keeping, moving towards more professional practices from a personal experience.” Binnie Dansby (p. xii)

As someone who tries to promote knowledge of breathwork through the printed word, I am encouraged both by this attitude, and by the quality of the writing in the collection.

As in all specialisations, there is a jargon in the personal development movement. There is an excellent glossary at the beginning of this book where important terms are defined: e.g. “to be *activated* or *in process*: when an old memory or traumatic situation is touched upon by a current event, and the old feelings and thoughts come back, sometimes quite inexplicably.” “to *move through* feelings: *to keep breathing while still feeling the feelings. The feelings then pass, like the weather, and you are ‘through’ them.*” (p. xiv)

I said that this was an essential text book on Rebirthing and these are my reasons: It is written with clarity, and without hype. The principles of Binnie’s approach are clearly set out. (p. 3) Many of the articles contain clear accounts of what Rebirthing is and each gives a different emphasis. That is wholesome: it shows that there’s been no indoctrination! The rebirthing technique that Binnie uses is clearly explained by Karsten Bruun Qvist (KBQ), especially the use of affirmations throughout the sessions which characterises and makes Binnie’s way of rebirthing. (KBQ, p. 6, Morten Birk Cristensen, p. 72) This method permits the rebirthee to work on chosen subjects during a session. (KBQ, p. 15) There is a wholesome concentration on the present: “Rebirthers prefer to put the focus on the present situation, and on your ability to choose what to think and what to do right now, because the present moment is where your power is.” (KBQ, p. 11) The use of affirmations is a mental training towards positive thinking, “I am using rebirthing more or less continuously; it is becoming an automatic function of the mind to generate and repeat affirmations whenever my consciousness discovers that now my thinking is not as positive as it could be. And whenever I discover that I have stopped breathing, I will choose to breathe consciously for a while. Also, in this situation, I will try to remember what made me stop breathing.” (KBQ, p. 13) A continuous process of awareness has been taught and made possible. Per Wändell (PW) sets out the task of the rebirther very clearly (p. 75)

There are good accounts of how Binnie works with anger, and the way she teaches listening (Tamara Himmelstrand, p. 19). Many case histories including accounts of warm and cold water sessions as well as of “dry” rebirthing all of which are clear and include elements of technique as well as reports of feelings and of the development of the individual processes. In the accounts of processes there is a recognition that the rebirthers

and rebirthers are in process together – an important detail to recognise. This is the classical transference and countertransference that exists in all forms of therapy. There are sessions where relationship issues are worked on and an excellent description of a session whose subject was guilt by Helena Gemmel (pp. 91-94) The sequences of affirmations worked with during four individual sessions show how this is a way of working with existential problems (Claus Haupt, pp. 95-101): the simplicity of the method should not prevent recognition of its profundity. There are many accounts of pregnant women contacting and communicating with their babies, and also accounts of water births – Binnie is a leader in the field. There is a technique for separating feelings from thoughts, so that one has more freedom to choose one's thoughts. (Jimmy Hansen, p. 127)

Binnie has created a beautiful Forgiveness Process, described as a “deepening” or meditation:

You sit with closed eyes, with your breathing connected, thinking of your heart space and letting your parents and yourself as a little child of four or five years come in, one at a time, your parents being at what age you find appropriate for the moment. You are then to see what they need the most at this moment and then give them that, thus referring to the words forgiving.” (PW, p. 76)

Often the problems in session arises from the person's of birth experience: rebirthing is largely a birth trauma therapy. However, the original traumatic experience is not necessarily the birth, but may lie in early experiences: e.g. the separation from the mother at birth (PW, p. 75)

Many sessions also show that analysis, as classical as in psychoanalysis, is an integral part of the work. Someone has slipped a disc. She looks at the question “what actually slipped?” (Silke Wittkuns, p. 34)

There is a lot of fun as well as all the wisdom: Karsten Bruun Qvist rebirths herself through a horror movie as a way of confronting her fears. (p. 10) Rosy Aronson expresses what many breathworkers feel at the end of a session: “I felt totally healed. I almost paid her for the session – that's how grateful I felt.” (p. 103) Archie Duncanson publishes “Confessions from a Group Leader's Diary,” (pp. 191-199. Group-leading skills are an essential part of many rebirthing trainings.

There are retrospective accounts of the training. There are poems. The spiritual part of the work is honoured throughout.

And yet I have some quibbles: how could you trust this review if I didn't?

There are almost no references to other work or theories. Although there is evidence that students understand projection, transference and countertransference, there is no evidence that they are able to locate themselves in the history of therapy / psychotherapy / personal development. Students are working very well in both the personal and transpersonal realms, but show no awareness of the body of knowledge on this subject. I think this keeps rebirthing from weaving itself into the body of theoretical knowledge in therapy, and so from taking its rightful place in that world. It therefore limits the contribution of this so excellent book. Where there is a reference, e.g. to Louise Hay (p. 5) it does not say which book.

There are some comparisons between Binnie's way of working and that of some other well-known trainers, particularly regarding the use of affirmations, presented with

the argument that Binnie's is "better." I do not doubt that Binnie's way was better for the writer, but unless there is research to support this personal experience and opinion, these arguments come from unresolved competitive urges and perhaps, too, unresolved problems with previous trainers, and fit uncomfortably with the otherwise positive and constructive tone of the book.

Where the accent is on "thought is creative", a rebirthing dictum with a basis going back to psychoanalysis (the repetition compulsion), and I think this is a useful way of working on a personal level: yes, we can control our attitudes; there's a harshness in this idea on the global level: have the victims of the recent Indian earthquake (Jan, 2001) really brought this on themselves through their thoughts? Certainly, those who can think most positively in awful circumstances will be survivors – but where is the place for modesty, compassion and humility in this?

Finally, the training is 3 years long and there are accounts from each year. Yet on p. 24 there is a reference to a 4<sup>th</sup> year. It would be good to see the structure of the training set out in detail. This would serve as an example to, and hopefully inspire, many other teachers at present teaching shorter rebirthing trainings, and that would be a good thing.

This is obviously an excellent training which treats rebirthing as a real profession and a real career. This is reflected in the previous qualifications of its participants: midwives, GP's, social workers, engineers, unemployment counsellors, ex-insurance managers, translators, etc., and in the quality of papers in this collection. One can only congratulate Binnie A. Dansby for taking rebirthing along this route. Moreover, at a time when people are trade-marking their methods – however obvious they are! – keeping secret their techniques, terrified of sharing for fear of losing students (and making compromises on standards for the same reason), this is a generous, generous book.

The Buddha said he was a teacher with open hands – he concealed nothing from his students. Binnie follows this excellent example. Nothing is concealed from the reader. Hence I say again, this is an essential text book on rebirthing.

Joy Manné, Ph.D.

### **Humphreys, Dr. Tony (1998), *Myself, My Partner*. Ireland: Gil & Macmillan.**

Tony Humphreys is a consultant clinical psychologist, university lecturer and seminar leader. He is very well known in Ireland both as a mainstream psychologist and, increasingly, in the self-development sector. His other books include *The Power of 'Negative' Thinking*, *Self-Esteem: the Key to Your Child's Education* and *A Different Kind of Teacher*.

This book is about intimate relationships but right from the introduction Humphreys makes it clear that the pattern an intimate relationship takes has its roots in the individual needs of each person involved, and that these needs are intimately related to each person's interaction with their own parents and family of origin. He says about couple relationships that "Whilst it is important for each partner to provide resources, allow freedom and give support for the meeting of their individual physical and spiritual needs, couple relationships are far more about the fulfilment of the individual psychological and social needs of partners." (p. 6-7) "...each partner's behaviour is often

a mirror of what the other partner needs to do to attain greater maturity and emotional security.” (p. 6) And this need for emotional security is often rooted in the early relationship with parents. Thus the book has three parts sandwiched between the very brief introduction and a conclusion. The central three sections are devoted to relationships with parents, relationship with self and finally relationship with an intimate partner.

In the section *Myself, My Parents* he links adult behaviour patterns to what they learned growing up through their parents example. He cites various behaviours that are often absorbed by children who, much to their own horror, grow up to sound exactly like their parents. Neglect or conditional love leads to damage to the sense of self with repercussions in later relationships. Central to growing up is the breaking of the bond with parents and Humphreys describes this as leave-taking. “The greater the conditionality or neglect within the family, the greater the difficulties in separating out and becoming independent.” (p. 37) He documents various kinds of leave-taking including premature leaving, not leaving, purely physical leaving, rebellious leaving and enmeshed leaving. Key features of the effects of each are listed. Enmeshed leave-taking he describes as the most common of all and people who remain enmeshed with their parents “allow their parents to continue to live their lives through them and will accept intrusions on their couple relationship.” (p. 34)

In Part 3, *Myself, Myself*, Humphreys focuses on the relationship with self and how that will influence future couple relationships. “How you see yourself is a highly significant issue because it determines not only the kind of partner you choose but also how you conduct yourself in the relationship and how you see and what you expect of your partner.” (p. 49). He defines self-esteem as the gap between self image (internalised definitions by others of you) and the ideal self (expectations of how you should be). “In order to attain a sense of your worth, independent of behaviour, you need to rise above and free yourself of the limiting behavioural definitions carried in the trilogy of self-image, ideal self and self-esteem.” This, Humphreys believes, is the responsibility of each adult but if it is not attained before entering the couple relationship, each partner can find themselves defined by how the other person sees them and labour under the expectations the other person has for them. In other words I must fulfil myself and attain a connection with my sense of self beyond the internalised expectations and definitions of others or I will take my limitations into the couple relationship and recreate familiar patterns there. Behaviours we use to protect our ideal self and our self-image and perpetuate them are listed in easy to recognise form.

Ideally each partner should have a strong identity, a sense of who I am. When that is strong the urge to control the behaviour of the other is reduced. The need to control arises when the behaviour of one partner causes a vulnerability in the other by threatening their self-image. The partner who knows and accepts him/herself will have resolved the insecurities of relying on self-image rather than on a true connection with self. This section is full of lists of behaviours and their underlying messages, suggestions about the kind of roles people can take on and tips on how to hold fast to your own identity. Here one of the underlying messages of this book – taking responsibility for ourselves and our behaviour - is articulated very clearly. “The owning of all your behaviours as being about you (and not about your partner) is as important as seeing your partner’s behaviours as being about him.” (p. 78).

In the section *Myself, My Partner*, Humphreys charts the stages in the development of a couple relationship and as is his style, he gives lists of behaviours that characterise each stage. As the couple move closer they unearth each other's vulnerabilities, the vulnerabilities that date back to childhood and relationships with their parents. With the vulnerabilities come protective behaviours. Sometimes couples split up at this stage, some work through, and some marry in the hope that things will change after the wedding. He gives very clear accounts of the dovetailing patterns that arise in relationships and the amazing way couples choose each other based on a complex mix of needs, past history and unresolved parental relationships.

He goes on to describe the kind of things that can happen when two people who have not attained a health level of intimacy with self, enter a relationship where they need to employ behavioural strategies to protect against the vulnerability their partner unearths. Again there are lists of behaviours. "Blaming...means you do not have to look at yourself or take on any responsibility for how you feel. Consequently you do not have to face your own vulnerabilities." (p. 104).

Humphreys is particularly good at succinctly charting the ways people behave in relationships and explaining the issues that underpin that behaviour as well as the protective function that behaviour serves. As a solution to relationship difficulties he advocates taking responsibility for our own reactions and examining the feelings and issues that are sparked off by our partner's behaviour. Open relating means showing our vulnerabilities and examining the hurt that emerges in response to a partner's behaviour rather than blaming him/her or resorting to other strategies which protect us from looking at our own unresolved issues.

I found this an excellent book for simply and practically describing the anatomy of relationship. It was brought to my attention by several clients and I now recommend it to clients who have difficulties with their intimate relationships. They find it very valuable and it helps them make sense of patterns which they found difficulty analysing or understanding. He articulates sometimes difficult concepts such as self-responsibility with practical simplicity and compassion. It's well written in that it is simple, to the point and makes no far-fetched claims or glib generalisations. However, because Humphreys' style is to densely pack his pages with facts with little room for literary flow, it demands concentration. A very useful book for breathworkers and their clients.

Catherine Dowling

**White, Mike Grant CMT, NE. DD, Breathing Specialist, *Secrets of Optimal Natural Breathing™: Safe, Easy Ways to Improved Respiration Without Drugs or Surgery*, Balanced Breathing press, 181 Bryson Avenue, Bryson City, North Carolina 28713, USA.**

This publication describes itself as "the most sophisticated and complete manual on breathing in existence" – the printing mistake is not mine; it is in the book. It is "an ongoing study that will probably never end." The author tells us that he updates the manual several times a year. To keep up with the updates is expensive: at \$20.- plus

shipping and taxes every six months. Describing itself in this way, the publication obliges the reader to ask, "Is it?" and "Is it worth it?" Let me relieve the tension immediately by saying that I do not review books that I don't find interesting and valuable.

White explains the purpose of this manual: these "breathing techniques and exercises ... guided me into simultaneously combined states of increased energy, mental clarity, emotional calm, physical ease, and expanded breathing freedom. This new way of breathing helped re-establish internal integration and breathing coordination that had eluded me for over forty years." Many breathwork techniques lead to the results described and leave their participants and teachers equally enthusiastic and evangelical. What does White add that is new?

In this review I will respect that this is a work in progress, point to what is already good in it, and suggest improvements.

This is a very uneven publication. It begins with pages of repetitive assertions around the theme that "Breath is Life." If I were not familiar with Mike White's website, I would have given up. However, just as I despaired of finding any useful information in it, suddenly the wave calmed, and I found a mass of information around breathing, although somewhat incoherently put together.

The introduction defines Optimal Breathing:

"I believe there is a way to measure breathing objectively and influence it positively in a very profound way. It must be large enough, deep enough, easy enough, strong enough, and coordinated for our chosen or necessary survival tasks. We must also be calmly and quietly perceptive of its influence and creating on of body sensations, feelings and emotions. I believe that when one's breathing becomes optimal in both a perceived and measured way that this will become a metaphor for life and that we can use this breathing criteria as a guide for the maintenance of a joyful and optimum living." (p. 7)

White obviously has a huge knowledge about the breath, both its physiological functioning and the psychological implications and effects, and wisdom about the combination of these two aspects: "To begin to unravel the mysteries and power of the breathe, we need to combine the approaches of hard science, psychological exploration, and spiritual practice." (p. 20) He can be constructively critical and insightful: "Taking a deep breathe is the quick fix of stress management. It has many fine qualities, but may divert us from an even deeper place of healing, empowerment and peace within. It also sets up an internal confusion or mask as to what deep states of calm really feel like." (p. 16) I feel thirsty for a case history illustration when I read interesting remarks like this. It rings so true, and I want the evidence to be put before me. He can really make one think: he tells us that there are six varieties of breathing exercises easiest to grasp in writing: "Emergency, Relaxing, Energizing, Balancing, Observed, Undisturbed," and asks us what our goal is. (p. 21) He gives exercises to illustrate the first three categories interrupted by a brief section on Breath Holding (p.22) and then jumps into 'A Belly Breath and Rib Breath Visual' illustrated with very good diagrams. Nevertheless, I'm lost. Where are the other kinds of breath? Rendered breathless, I'm launched into this different subject. The print and layout of pp. 25-29 is incoherent, too many capitals. Through the incoherent presentation I cannot follow and practice the exercise. I'm disappointed.

Another lurch into something new and interesting. I'm getting used to sudden changes but I long for introductions and explanations. On p. 31-32 there are diagrams showing "major blocks to optimal breathing." There are little faces showing emotion in the various areas I guess to show which emotions arise or are blocked there. It's not clear enough to me. They are good and they make sense to me: I'm a breathworker, after all. Would they make sense to everyone? I don't know.

Suddenly the exercises start on p. 34 and end – I cannot fathom where! Some are taken from Denis Lewis, Carola Spead, and other sources, some from yoga. The sources' books are acknowledged by name but no page numbers are given. There are good paragraphs 'About Breathing Blocks,' 'Straining to Breathe,' and 'Breathing Integration/Coordination on pp. 59-60 and good exercises to experience 'the direct relationship between breathing and positive emotions,' and 'the effect of tension on the breath' on p. 61. There are questionnaires and information to lead to the diagnosis of primary and secondary blocks to the (breathing) reflex on pp. 62-70 and a long explanation (pp.71-77) of how to rehabilitate the optimal breathing reflex. I don't know whether it is wise for people who are not educated in how the body works to experiment on each other without supervision, basing their physical work on a written text. Pp. 78-85 concerns the anatomy of breathing. It includes a perceptive comment on the myth in breathwork circles that babies have perfect breath, explaining the physiology of the infant and how it changes and how these changes influence the breath. (p. 84) There are still too many foolish and almost superstitious beliefs around breathwork; this manual makes a good contribution to dispersing some of these and is to be commended for doing so.

The manual now jumps from topic to topic in way that is difficult to follow. First 'Increasing Easy Exhale and Inhale volume,' 'Breathing Easier,' and the active and passive exhales. (pp. 86-87) White correctly observes, 'The length of the passive exhale is often directly proportionate to one's ability to relax and become vulnerable.' Then a jump back to the anatomy of posture and breathing (pp. 98-90), and another jump to the use of pillows to support easier breathing (p. 91) and on to chanting (p.93) and back to breathing coordination (p. 95-96. Suddenly a section on Asthma, Adrenal Insufficiency (misspelt), Bronchitis, Emphysema appears, with comments and dietary recommendations. (pp. 97-102) followed by various exercises and several pages of testimony on 'the results of working with Mike White.' Appendix A starts with a continuation of the self-assessment tests. Then follows pages of 'Critical Areas "Defined" With Relevant Exercises.' (111-128) This part is very difficult to understand because of the way it is presented, until the paragraphs on the critical areas which include addictions, ambivalence, allergies, anger, angina ..... At least one can understand the notes under each heading and the reference to pages on White's website. This information could be much better presented. Appendix B contains 'Health Professionals Breathing Assessment Index: A work in progress' – without further explanation. Is this a compilation or White's invention? Is it tested anywhere? How is its reliability to be assessed?

Appendix F, 'Autonomic Nervous System Function and the Breath' is very interesting. There is another jump here, to a section on Breathing Consciousness with lists of suggested items to observe. Some pages on Candida and some other subjects that occur earlier, and finally the benefits of optimal breathing are set forward, followed by a list of White's programmes and the products he sells with an order form.

This is neither a well-planned or well-written book. Sometimes it consists of



pages of repetitive assertions, other times of a kind of commentary: i.e. statements without explanation; e.g. on the theme of Conscious Breathing White says, “Watching the breath is good for many focusing and calming [purposes?] but can develop into an ongoing distraction.” and “Postures can expand or distribute the breath as well as cause the breathing restriction they hope to eliminate.” (p. 15) These remarks ring true, but are unsupported by any evidence or reference and are therefore difficult to relate to. This is disappointing as this manual, like White’s the website is a mine of information.

If enough work is done on it to make it coherent, this manual has the potential to become course material in any serious breathwork or breathing work training. I hope the author will make the layout clearer including ensuring that headings on the same level match each other, provide more explanatory material, get rid of spelling mistakes, add a proper section of references, etc. so that this manual fulfils its potential.

Note, March 2001. I am informed that White is being helped with the organisation of his manual.

Mike White has a large, informative website on Optimal Breathing at <http://www.breathing.com>. Through this website he sells this manual and various tapes.

## **Breathing Tapes by Michael Grant White**

I have just spent a very pleasant hour or so, listening to two of Michael Grant White’s tapes. I am feeling revitalised, and definitely more positive, as a result. I dutifully lay down, put cushions under me where he instructed, raised my feet onto the arm of my sofa, and let myself fall under the spell of his soothing voice. I do not know if it is the accompanying Tibetan bells or his voice, or the warm blanket I was cocooned in, which induced in me a state of very deep relaxation, my body and mind become totally absorbed in following the instructions which are given clearly and pleasantly. Often they are repeated, which I find useful, since I tend to drift into a state where I am at times not able to hear, I get into a dreamlike trance state.

### **Tibetan Caffeine, The Walking Breath and Watching Breath, Exercise only - sub titled : Develop a centred Energetic calm.**

This was the first tape I heard today, and I found it deeply relaxing. There was no accompanying information either written or spoken, with this tape. Tibetan bells sound throughout, on both sides of the tape. without any commentary. This tape is best used after practice with the other ones so that you know what position you should lie in, and where to put cushions, as directed on the other tape.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, breathing from my abdomen strongly, into my upper chest, then letting go fully, synchronising my breath with the rhythmic and repetitive beats of the Tibetan bells. I found this an energising and refreshing experience.

## **2 Breathing- in Self Esteem**

Subtitled: Develop a feeling sense of self esteem and self love.

This tape is described as “a guided breathing exercise combined with selected affirmations and suggestions supported by exquisite tones of Tibetan singing bowls intended to develop a sense of self esteem and self love.” There were accompanying written instructions, with diagrams showing where exactly to site cushions, when you lie or sit down. The bells sing differently on this tape, from the Caffeine one, and are accompanied by Michael’s voice, giving a series of gentle yet firm positive affirmations. Michael always emphasises the correct way to breathe, expanding from the diaphragm to the ribs and upper chest, taking in as much air as feels comfortable. I found the instructions totally acceptable, nothing irritated me, and maybe if I listen often enough I will be a transformed, self appreciating, self confident and powerful person at long last.

This tape is part of a new five phase Somatic Education system of workshops, private sessions, and recorded breathing exercises called Balanced Breathing. From the written information we learn that Balanced breathing is “essential for a balanced life...when you develop a peaceful and joyous mind you naturally attract similar energy. ...the Tibetan bells remind us that the healing power of vibration and sound has been utilized for thousands of years.. Modern physics and Magnetic Resonance imaging has proven that a healthy body is a living entity of balanced vibrations and wavelengths.”

While I was listening, I found myself thinking how really useful this tape would be for some of my Clients, since the affirmations are of a general nature, applicable to most of us who are not full of self love and self appreciation, or who need reminding that we can make our lives better if we start by strengthening ourselves. Michael recommends daily listening practice for 15 minutes, for a month, in order to gain the best results. I am definitely hooked already, on the voice, the bells, and the directions which keep you breathing strongly and powerfully, so you do not go off to sleep completely. As with other deep breathing techniques, a change in the mind and body results, which is stress reducing and highly beneficial.

### **3. The Watching Breath -Level 1 and 2**

Again no accompanying written instructions, so no ISBN available  
Side One, subtitled: Level 1 for Focus and Awareness.

Sticking imaginary shiny stars on the intimate parts of my body which Michael Grant White somewhat rudely names out loud, I somehow managed to ignore his impertinence, and was gradually reduced to a semi-comatose state, which he told me to maintain for the rest of the day. I doubt if I can do otherwise, since his voice has the effect of making me pleasantly mindless, a state which I can fully recommend to other workaholics. However, there are rather a lot of instructions, and no Tibetan bells, so I do not rate it as highly as his other tapes.

Side2, Level 2 for Deepened Awareness and Concentration.

This side of this tape is quite different, as it is a Concentration exercise, focusing on the breath sensation in the nostrils, the inner spaces in the body, and the awareness of the breath which is actually a meditational practice. The instructions are given slowly enough to ensure the practitioner can follow easily, and there is plenty of quiet time (no bells on this tape) just to breathe on ones own. A useful tape for quick de-stressing and Centring.

### **4. Breathing-in Intention**

**Aim: to strenthen Abdominal Breathing - Balance Chakras (both sides)**

This tape contains Tibetan bell sounds, which I find extremely pleasant to listen to. With the minimum of instructions from Michael Grant White, I found it easy to follow, my breath became easier and more rhythmic, and I felt calm and alert. Bringing in an Intention gives a focus, which kept me conscious and aware throughout. I liked this tape a lot, with the reservation that I feel sure it is meant for someone with plenty of good Breathwork practice already, who knows how to breathe fully and freely. There were no written instructions with my particular tape. I would recommend it if you have already practised some of the other tapes.

### **Better Breathing - #2**

#### **AKA Tibetan Caffeine. Guided Breathing Exercise for a Focused Energetic Calm**

The written instructions which accompany this tape emphasises the need for at least 15 minutes practice daily, until a state of calm or physical release is achieved.

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I listened to this tape when I was feeling somewhat tense, knowing I needed to relax and revive in a short time. The first side gives brief instructions about what cushions to get and where to put them, and how to breathe in a certain way, that is, with a strong inhale, and a relaxed exhale, and to only breathe again when the body decides to do so. I enjoyed the accompanying Tibetan bell tones and felt deeply relaxed after this brief introduction. Michael's voice is calm and pleasant, and I definitely wanted more. On to side two, armed now with blanket and pillow, and wrapped up comfortably, This side is a repeat of side one, then it extends the Tibetan bowl sounds for a longer period, even more soothing.. You are encouraged to keep breathing in the manner described above, and I did so, and began to feel my breathing slowing down considerably, and my stress level was definitely reducing. I felt a renewal of energy at a time of day when I had been feeling I needed a good sleep, but I no longer felt like that when the tape ended. I felt as if I had had a very good re-energising bath of breath, and I intend to play this tape regularly. It worked a treat. I can recommend this as good for stress management.

### **5. Cassette 2 Tibetan Caffeine - exercise only**

I found that there were no instructions to listen to first, and this tape consisted only of the Tibetan bowl sounds which were meant to be helping me "return to my deep inner self" but instead I got irritated by the monotonous beats and pings. I decided that it was the wrong time of day, and really I needed to have a live Tibetan monk and bowl in front of me. Basically, I wanted Michael's calming voice encouraging me to breathe, and without this I found the cassette too boring and gave up. I then belatedly looked at the written instructions which accompanied the tape.

The instructions are written by a Tibetan, Tarthang Tulku and have not been edited, and are in Tibetan/ English, which is a hybrid I have not come across before. There are some hilarious suggestions - "Lye in your office on the floor, your car with your legs out the window, across the seats on the wide-bodied jet (reduces jet lag etc)" I got the message that I had to find a comfortable position and put a wide yellow rubber band (supplied) around my middle, and then: "the ease of breathing and the cat stretches that emanate from here can feel absolutely exquisite". Although I definitely needed Michael's voice, I was captivated by the idea of feeling exquisite and decided to give this tape a second try with more preparation.

Warned by the written instructions: “as the Tibetan Bowl strike will take you into a state of deep healing semi-trance state of deep relaxation.....if you need to function clearly you can. Too much dizziness for too long (sic).” I tried again. This time I stayed an hour and got my “exquisite” fix of deep relaxation, as I instructed myself to breathe in the same way as the first cassette that Michael introduced. I breathed and the bowls pinged on and on, and it was a good experience. But the cassette definitely needs an introduction and Michael explaining what exactly one has to do.

These tapes all probably need to be accompanied by the Optimal Breathing Work book which is mentioned in the tape notes. Some of the tapes seem to have similar names, e.g. tape 1 and 5 both mention the Walking Breath and Watching Breath, which is confusing. I think the accompanying instructions need to be improved, and the tapes packaged in a sequential order. But I should say that I found the effects of the tapes on me were very powerful, and they are enjoyable to listen to. Highly recommended.

These tapes can be obtained from Mike White through his Optimal Breathing website <http://www.breathing.com>.

Listened to by Vivienne Silver-Leigh