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## LEONARD ORR'S REBIRTHING

### **Its History, Theories and Practices**

Rebirthing as developed in the States in the 1970's by Leonard Orr and others is a simple but powerful breathing technique. In his rebirthing sessions, a person is encouraged by a professional 'Rebirther' to breathe intensely and continuously for a period of from thirty minutes to two hours. The person breathing, the 'Rebirthee', often reports physical effects such as tingling and muscular tensions in the arms and legs, and a variety of other experiences, such as emotions and memories from early childhood and birth, or feelings of energy, or the working through of a problem, or the healing of a physical ailment, or experiences of a spiritual nature.

Leonard Orr claims that over 100,000 people in the States have undergone this Rebirthing experience. Besides this large American Rebirthing movement, there are smaller networks in Europe and a few followers in India.

To the newcomer, the movement often appears more than somewhat eccentric, as it has incorporated many of Leonard Orr's beliefs and practices beyond the simple breathing technique. These range from people breathing through snorkel tubes in hot tubs, to the use of positive thinking ('affirmations') in the search for everything from material prosperity in physical immortality, to spiritual purification practices such as fasting, repeating mantras and shaving the head, and the worship of an Indian guru called Baba Ji.

Leonard decided that he could improve his income as a salesman by staying at home and reading metaphysical books. Some of his clients paid him to pass on his learning to them, so that they too could learn to "improve the quality of their thoughts".

At about this time, Leonard tried the experiment of sitting in a sauna beyond the recommended limit of fifteen minutes. He ended up crawling from the sauna and almost passing out. He formed the extraordinary hypothesis that he had "plugged in to" the memory of life in the womb and that the memory had "blocked out" his consciousness. He went on from there to discover that he would get insights into

infancy if he stayed in the bath for a very long time. "He sat around in his bath tub for most of five years" (1) He even learned to sleep in the bath.

As Elana, his first Rebirthing 'disciple', recalled: "He would lie in the bath tub for hours yelling things like "You can't do that to me, you bastard", or "I hate you, you bitch". When I would go in to see what was the matter, he would glower from under the water . . . Sometimes he would get up and hang upside down from a chair. If I asked him, he would mutter something incomprehensible about his birth trauma". (2)

One day, Leonard suggested to Elana that she too try the experiment of lying in a hot bath with the head bent back so that the ears and eyes are covered with water. "Within ten minutes, I was overwhelmed with the most utter terror, anger and confusion I had experienced. I had seen clearly the picture of a doctor's face, (the doctor who attended her birth), and waves of negative emotions rapidly followed". (3)

Elana began to learn to handle these strong emotions using techniques she had previously been taught by Leonard. Her involvement with Leonard had started in March 1974 when she had sat beside him in a lecture hall listening to Werner Erhard, founder of est. He had got her to invite a group of friends to a Sunday afternoon seminar at her house, a seminar for him to lead on the subject of 'Spiritual Psychology'. Elana felt betrayed when, at this seminar, attended by fourteen people, Leonard propounded "off-the-wall irrational ideas" such as his theory that we suffer from an unconscious 'death urge and that 'physical immortality' is our birthright. (4)

Elana nevertheless persevered. The next seminar she organised for Leonard, in April 1974, was on the theme of 'Self-Analysis'. She told him afterwards that he was a "crummy public speaker". (5) Not at all fazed by this, Leonard replied that her self-esteem was low, and he taught her how to use the power of positive thinking, or auto-suggestion, giving her phrases to repeat such as "I am highly pleasing to others and others are highly pleasing to me".

Elana found that these affirmations were a great help to her in dealing with her traumatic experiences in the bath tub. The bath tub sessions were like Christian baptism for her: "I read New Testament stories throughout this period, discovering that Jesus talked about the kind of all-pervading love I experienced every time an affirmation rescued me from my fears in the tub. Perfect love really does cast out fear . . .

Every time I did these baths, I would be screaming, crying or overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness, until a beautiful, life-affirming thought would enter my consciousness. I would cling onto this idea like a life raft . . . Not only did my self-understanding increase from these baths, but my ability to understand others increased to such an extent that people were calling me telepathic". (6)

In August 1974, Leonard took Elana and fourteen friends for a weekend retreat to a former nudist camp near San Francisco. This camp had a six foot diameter outdoor Japanese hot tub, which was to be the setting for the first ever group 'Rebirthing' session, (although at this stage Leonard was still calling it 'baptism').

Leonard prepared everyone psychologically by talking about birth trauma, and how the fear and pain at birth stayed in the depths of the mind and had a negative effect on people as adults. He got them to remain in their sleeping bags for fourteen hours or so, as he felt that this would recreate the feeling of being enclosed in the womb, and help induce memories of birth.

Finally, Elana was the first allowed into the hot tub, where she floated face down, breathing through a snorkel. At first she experienced quiet, darkness and peacefulness. "It was a real surprise to me when I found myself flying out of the tub, sobbing, crawling to find somebody . . . I couldn't talk . . . Parts of my body were in great pain . . . Afterwards, when I was lying on the bed, I composed a beautiful song which was itself an affirmation . . . I was peaceful and relaxed, more than I had ever been . . . How clearly I could see each tree . . . The Rebirth was a singularly profound experience. It was similar to what I had read, and always envied, of the mystical experiences of Jesus, John, and many yogis". (7)

Third into the hot tub was Sondra Ray, who had been very affected by Elana's experience. "I was sobbing hysterically . . . After a long time I finished crying . . . But they had to lift me (into the tub); I was helpless . . . I sank to the bottom . . . I finally came up for air . . . I started breathing very fast. I felt that I could **never** stop that fast breathing. It overtook me. Something was breathing me! . . . A scream came out of me . . . I felt them carrying me out and gently laying me down. I began to tingle all over . . . It felt like a thousand orgasms! I began to throw my head from side to side wildly, in joy. My neck was totally loose for the first time . . . I heard the breeze totally, all of it, it seemed . . . I heard the trees talk to me . . . (Later, after being massaged), I actually saw all the electrons in the universe at once, all the particles in the air, and

all of it sparkling . . . The highest experience of my life . . . it beats taking LSD". (8)

In that same month of August 1974, Leonard Orr bought a 30-roomed house at 301 Lyon Street, San Francisco, as the headquarters for 'Theta seminars' as he now called it. He invited Elana, Sondra and others to move in, and installed a big Japanese hot tub in the basement.

Sondra had another profound hot tub experience about a week after her first. This time she felt that she had got in touch with what she and others were feeling at the moment she was born: " 'Oh my father really wanted a boy . . . I can feel his disappointment. It's awful'. I cried and cried. 'I'll never be good enough to please him' ". (9)

Rebirthing theory describes a negative thought rooted deep in the history of the person, such as "I'll never please my father", as a 'Personal Law', capable of ruling a person's fate until uprooted with breathing and affirmations. In Sondra's case, the **negative** aspect of her 'Personal Law' was, she felt, her subtle desire to compete with and intimidate men, and the **positive** side was that it had made her into a very strong woman.

Leonard wanted to build up the strength of the others in the house, to develop a "multiple guru system". Thus Sondra specialised in 'Loving Relationship Trainings' and Elana, in her nine months at the house, ran four hundred Rebirthing sessions in the basement hot tub.

In 1975, Leonard began to realise that it was the intense breathing, akin to hyperventilation, that was a more significant part of the Rebirthing process than the hot water, and he introduced the idea of 'dry' Rebirthings, with the person lying on a mattress, and only progressing to 'wet' Rebirthings after several sessions. Gradually, Rebirthing became an easier and more pleasurable process, with more emphasis on the person using affirmations in order to keep the experience harmonious, and to be able to keep breathing through all the emotions that came up.

The main purpose of Rebirthing is to eradicate what Leonard terms the 'five biggies': the birth trauma, the parental disapproval syndrome, specific negatives, poverty consciousness (10) and the uncounscious death urge. These five cover much of the theory that is used by Rebirthers; so they deserve further explanation:

## **The Birth Trauma:**

The theory here is that at the moment of birth, people form impressions about the world which control them subsequently from a subconscious level. Many of these impressions can be encapsulated as negative statements: Life is a struggle, People hurt me, Life is painful, I am not wanted, etc.

Rebirthers have been much influenced by Dr. Leboyer (who has himself undergone Rebirthing) and by his assertions about the physical and psychic pain associated with birth: how the new-born baby is hurt by lights that are too bright for its sensitive eyes, and by sounds too harsh for its ears, and often by being jerked upside down after birth and beaten. (11) The baby's first breath is often gasped in fear and panic because of a too-sudden cutting of the umbilical cord. Breathing becomes associated with pain, and remains shallow ever after. "Probably 90 percent of our fear (as adults) originated with the birth trauma". (12)

Rebirthers also follow Leboyer in emphasizing the psychic pain for the baby of separation from the mother after birth, the pain of being "stuck in a little box in the nursery". (13)

Leonard views the traditional theological description of heaven as a symbolic description of the womb. "What people are really after when they seek heaven is to get back into the womb".

The purpose of Rebirthing, he states, "is to remember and re-experience one's birth; to relive physiologically, psychologically and spiritually the moment of one's first breath and relax the trauma of it". (14) The subconscious impression of birth has to change from one of primal pain to one of pleasure. Rebirthing is seen as a corrective experience, which starts when, in the presence of a supportive Rebirther, the Rebirthee client feels that he or she is in an environment safe enough to re-experience birth.

Rebirthees need to be convinced that this time they will "come out OK". (15) The breathing puts the Rebirthees in touch with their birth traumas, and enables them to take a look at the thoughts and feelings they had then, to re-evaluate them as adults, and to release those that are no longer appropriate. Rebirthees, as they uncover their negative conditioning, are encouraged to counter it with affirmations. Typical examples of such affirmations include: "I'm glad I was born", "I've got all the love I deserve" and "The world is a safe, pleasurable and interesting place to be".

Rebirthing theory stresses the importance of achieving the 'Breathing Release', the reliving of the moment of one's first breath. Typically, in Rebirthing, "the climax occurs when vibrating energy goes through the throat, usually causing constriction and choking just as on amniotic fluid when you took your first breath" (16) One's birth may be the closest thing to death one has ever experienced. "People who achieve the Breathing Release are able to drop their fear of death" (17)

### **The Parental Disapproval Syndrome:**

The Rebirthers' hypothesis is that people take out their hostility towards their parents on their own children. The spirit of the child is broken. The child suppresses its true feelings until it has children of its own, and then takes out its anger on them, and so the damage continues from generation to generation.

The three most popular vehicles for the transmission of this 'parental disapproval' are, according to Leonard, bedtime, mealtime and toilet training. There is often unpleasantness for the child associated with having to go to bed alone, or with being criticised for not eating all its food, or with over-controlled toilet training.

The idea in Rebirthing is to become aware of one's hostility towards one's parents, and aware of the resultant patterns of behaviour, and to release these with the help, as usual, of affirmations, such as "I love my mother and father", or "I can take it or leave it" (re. infant feeding) or "I approve of my body; I approve of everything I put into it, and everything I take out of it" (re. toilet training).

### **Specific Negatives:**

These are "your favourite negative thoughts that you beat yourself with regularly". (18) Leonard identifies some of the most popular ones as "I am not good enough", "People don't like me" and "I can't do it right". It is important, Leonard urges, to pass judgement on every thought, and to invert all negatives into positives, with specific affirmations replacing negative thought structures.

Recommended ways to practise these affirmations include writing them out twenty times each, whilst recording negative emotional responses, saying them with a straight face into the mirror, saying them to a listener who repeats them back to you in the third person, and slipping them surreptitiously into one's everyday conversation.

### **Poverty Consciousness: (19)**

One common 'specific negative' thought that people harbour, Leonard says, is "I'll never have enough money". Leonard's belief is that if "we are truly what we really are, then we do the things we do, and have everything we need to do these things with". (20) The baby at birth whose cord is cut before it is ready to breathe, may conclude from that experience that "there's not enough" and generalise to a feeling of scarcity about everything, especially money. Or the child may decide that the only way to get love from its parents is to get their disapproval, and that one way to get that disapproval is to fail with money. There are many other ways that people can acquire 'poverty consciousness', but the cure in each case is similar - to encourage 'prosperity consciousness', with affirmations such as "I deserve to be wealthy" or "life rewards me with abundance".

### **The Unconscious Death Urge:**

This is the point at which Rebirthing comes up with its startling ideas about the physical immortality of the body.

The Unconscious Death Urge is presented by Leonard as a complex of ideas bound up in emotions - "Hopelessness, depression, fear and failure are all miniature death experiences. These negative emotions, combined with the thought that death is inevitable, build an enormous complex of energy that interferes with the life force building healthy new cells, with the result that the body becomes an unpleasant place to live". The main affirmation Leonard recommends to confront the Unconscious Death Urge is the statement: "I am alive now - therefore my life urges are stronger than my death urges; as long as I continue strengthening my life urges and weakening my death urges, I will go on living in health and youthfulness". (21)

Despite the accumulated superstructure of strange beliefs and theories, the essence of Rebirthing remains the simple breathing technique. It is called 'Connected Breathing' or 'Circular Breathing' and has been discussed in most detail by Jim Leonard and Phil Laut in their book, 'Rebirthing, The Science of Enjoying All of Your Life' (22). This style of breathing is one in which

- 1) The inhale and exhale are connected together so that there are no pauses in the breathing.
- 2) the exhale is relaxed and not controlled at all.

3) if the inhale comes in through the nose then the exhale also goes out through the nose, or, if the inhale comes in through the mouth, then the exhale also goes out through the mouth". (23)

Jim Leonard and Phil Laut recommend breathing into the upper part of the lungs (the normal Rebirthing method) when focusing on a pattern of energy that is manifesting in the head or the upper part of the body, and breathing into the lower part of the lungs when focusing on the legs or the lower part of the body. They also recommend different combinations of volume and speed of breathing according to circumstances - "full and slow" when trying to focus on details of a pattern of energy from the unconscious, "fast and shallow" when very intense material is coming up, and "fast and full", perhaps the most effective, and especially suited to times when the Rebirthee is sleepy or is becoming conscious of memories of anaesthesia during birth (which is liable to make it difficult for the Rebirthee to "retain body consciousness").

Jim Leonard and Phil Laut claim that hyperventilation and tetany (involuntary tightening of muscles or paralysis) which have in the past been a usual ten to fifteen minute interlude in almost everyone's early sessions, occur only if the Rebirthee is forcing the exhale or holding on to the exhale. Leonard Orr, however, writing in 1977, considers the 'hyperventilation syndrome' a natural part of Rebirthing. Medically, hyperventilation occurs when the acid-base balance in the blood stream adjusts to the lowering of CO<sub>2</sub>, producing alkalosis, characterised at times by intense pain in the stomach muscles and joints. (24) Leonard argues that hyperventilation is merely a cure for subventilation, the inhibited breathing "commonly called **normal** breathing". Several hundred American doctors have been rebirthed and have gone through a period of hyperventilation "without difficulty". (25) The pain of the paralysis symptoms is, for Leonard, a sign of resistance, "the effort involved in clinging to negative thoughts". Relax, keep breathing, and the pain and fear dissolve.

Once the Rebirthee has achieved the Breathing Release (discussed above, p.7), the hyperventilation syndrome no longer occurs in sessions. Rapid breathing dissolves and pumps out tension and negative thought from the body, and this process is often accompanied by tingling and vibrating sensations. (Leonard:) "Trust that the tingling and vibrating is 'God loving you at the cellular level' ". (26)

Relaxation in a session helps bring about what Leonard terms the 'Energy Release': "The Energy Release gives you a new body. You feel connected to your body in a wonderful way - sensually - abundant



physical energy and a sense of safety and serenity spread over you". (27) It is a "reconnection to Divine Energy" (28), a feeling, as Nushka Tai puts it, that "one is not breathing but 'it' (God, Diana, Ki, etc) is breathing one". (34)

Rebirthing is offered as a healing process for physical illness, as a way of relaxing into the feelings of the mind and body while inverting the negative thoughts that are creating the feelings. Sondra and Leonard write of people being cured of respiratory illnesses, stomach and back pains, frigidity, haemorrhoids, insomnia, diabetes, epilepsy, arthritis and cancer. (30) Nushka Tai writes in *Self and Society* how she used Rebirthing in conjunction with positive affirmations and creative visualisations. "I took two weeks totally to clear out all signs of tuberculosis". She tells of a colleague who used Rebirthing to cure himself of chronic hepatitis within three days, "as proved by blood tests taken before and after treatment", and of a 52 year old patient with a serious kidney disease cured in one week. (31)

Rebirthing was initially promoted as a very fast-working technique, in contrast for instance to the many years often taken by clients in psychoanalysis. Leonard has written that ten weekly sessions, of one and a half to three hours each, with a paid Rebirther, should be enough before one starts being able to rebirth oneself alone. (Indeed, completing ten sessions and undergoing 30 hours of training remain the principal and very modest requirements before being entitled to affiliate in the States as a professional Rebirther, taking on paying clients - although there are higher grades with more stringent requirements that one can aspire to). (32)

Laut and Leonard try to give a general picture of the likely course of a client's first ten sessions: the first five sessions or so may include "some tetany, some dramatic reactivation of old emotions and/or memories, and all kinds of other strange and wonderful experiences . . . As layer after layer of suppression disappears, you will begin to get a feeling of the vastness of yourself". The second five sessions (approximately) will most likely be "more subtle and powerful as you gain facility with the process . . . Perhaps you will get some birth or womb memory. You will enjoy these sessions more and you will notice more profound effects in your life". (33)

"After ten sessions", wrote Leonard in 1980, "you should trade sessions with your Rebirther, in case you happen to be spiritually, intellectually or psychologically more advanced than your Rebirther" (34) - although this trading of sessions is perhaps not common in the Rebirthing profession nowadays. More recently, Sondra Ray has urged that one

continue indefinitely into the future getting rebirthed by a qualified Rebirther at least twice a month. (35). And Phil Laut and Jim Leonard warn that "most people have a **lot** of suppressed negativity. It would be unreasonable to expect even the most powerful technique to clear that up overnight. It is a process extending over many years, even for the best of us". (36)

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## **APPENDIX**

### **NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN PRIMAL THERAPY**

I sent a copy of my article to Dr. Janov asking for comments for publication, and he sent a letter of criticism in reply, the main points being that Primal Therapy had changed a great deal since the time of his first book 'Primal Scream', and that I should have focussed more on his recent books, 'Prisoners of Pain' and 'Primal Man'. Here are extracts from his letter:

*"You must remember that I wrote the 'Primal Scream' seventeen years ago . . . To remain with the 'Primal Scream' alone is to remain far in the past in terms of what I believe now. Further, Wilhelm Reich was not an influence on me since I had never read him before I wrote the first draft of my manuscript. I do consider Freud the genius in psychology and I said so in my books.*

*Primal Therapy is not an exercise in sadism or in masochism. I have said just the opposite in a recent book and explained why. So it is a great disservice to quote something which I wrote a long time ago.*

*Regarding Leonard Orr, there was a magazine article some years ago in which he finally admitted that he developed a rebirthing idea after reading my work. I regard rebirthing as extremely dangerous in that it opens people up prematurely and can lead and has led to serious mental breakdowns and suicide attempts. Opening people up to their pains and to their early imprints is a process that requires great skill and is not a week-end seminar kind of thing . . .*

*I no longer believe in the 'Primal Scene' and have not for many years. Patients are no longer isolated for long periods of time and I do not make it difficult for people to be trained. As a matter of fact, the training is opened to anyone, but it takes a long time to be trained and people have to stay with it . . .*

*You must understand that we have now done twelve years of research, that research is going on now with Saint Bartholomew's Hospital and the Open University . . . (in the U.K.) . . . It is a serious, scientific therapy now, the techniques are quite precise and do not resemble anything you have written about . . . The therapy takes far less time now because of that precision.*

*No one ever says that after seven or eight months of group therapy the Primal person is born. That really is too slick and does our psychotherapy a disservice. Nor have I ever said that after seven or eight months the therapy is over.*

*There is no bulldozing of clients' defences. It's not a refusal to countenance other therapeutic methods . . . I am just finishing a book discussing the differences between Primal therapy and other therapies and perhaps when that comes out it may help you . . . I take a very scientific view to explain why each other therapy cannot do the job it is supposed to do.*

*I have nothing to do with any Primal commune as you well know, and consider it is not a healthy experience over all. I do not say that people remain happily married for ever after, and, over all, you paint a glib picture of Primal therapy . . .*

*I do appreciate that you have taken the time to write about my work. I only wish it could be more accurate and up to date".  
(Paris, June 5th, 1984).*

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