

THE NEW LEBOYER REVOLUTION?

by

Nicholas Albery

Leboyer greets me in his sparsely furnished flat off the Fulham Road - London is now his home. He is white haired, brown eyed and full of spirit, despite a recent serious illness. He is also charming, romantic and gentlemanly, although at times I feel like a disciple trying to get a straight answer from a wily Zen master.

Albery: *What were the main turning points for you in your early development?*

Leboyer: I underwent psychoanalysis, a purely Freudian one.

A: *Was there a particular inspiration behind your 'Birth Without Violence' approach, a particular starting point?*

L: There was no starting point. Truth and reality are like a river or flux.

A: *You seem to have parted company with orthodox medicine. You no longer like even to be called doctor.*

L: I resigned from the medical establishment 14 years ago for many reasons - before then I was fully a professional man, a surgeon, and in my relationship with expectant mothers my attitude was, "I'm here, leave it to me". As if I were going to have the baby for them. It was absurd. I was trying to fulfil incestuous desires and longings. I have moved to the opposite attitude, to say to the woman, "You don't need anybody but yourself". It was a surrender of power, a turning point if you like, a reversal.

A: *Do you believe that men envy women the capacity to bear children?*

L: Definitely. Man is missing something he will never know. It is a secret, a privilege of the woman.

A: *With the Leboyer method . . .*

L: The Leboyer method? There is no such thing as the Leboyer method, it is not a technique or trick. It is a way of looking at things.

My first book and film were showing that a newborn baby is not some object, which we can manipulate. It is already somebody, fully aware and terrified and over-sensitive.

We are handling the newborn roughly. But we should introduce ourselves first. It is the relationship of one being to another being. It is frustrating beyond words for the child to feel ignored.

A: *Are so-called Leboyer children different? Is there any evidence about the later development of children whose mothers adopted your perspective?*

L: Scientists will never be convinced. There are things beyond the realm of logic and reason - this is now fully accepted by the most advanced scientists and physicists.

A: *But has there been a study made of Leboyer children?*

L: Yes. There was a study by a French psychologist, Daniele Rapoport; and she has investigated or interviewed 200 of those mothers whom I had delivered personally. It was a long study and the children were found to be outstandingly different. And the mothers had no qualms and no problems - usually when a mother meets a psychologist she brings lots of problems. With these women, there were no problems with the children, no sicknesses, no colics. Mostly Daniele Rapoport has described these children as self-reliant, with an inner stability right from the beginning which is amazing.

These children fulfil my basic expectation - if some children could be born free from fear, if some children could be spared this fear of coming from one world to another, what an extraordinary life they would have. They have an inner strength.

A: *What is your view of recent refinements such as underwater birth or squatting positions in birth?*

L: These are very physical techniques which are not on the right level. They represent a misunderstanding of birth and death. They act as if these were merely physical occurrences - they miss their

other dimensions. Whereas my new film, 'The Rite of Birth' - in French 'Le Sacre de la Naissance' - sacramentalises birth, catches its sacred or religious aspect.

The fact is that birth and death are mysteries. We know of the scientific and physiological aspects of death, but we are afraid of dying. Reason and logic can go only to a certain point, but the great emotions, fear and anger, and the limitations of will power, make us ask how far we are masters of ourselves. What happens when something stronger gets hold of us?

A: *According to the back cover of your new book, 'The Art of Breathing', you came to this new view of birth via Eastern practices such as hatha yoga, martial arts, tai chi, kung fu, meditation and zazen.*

L: The Indian mystical experience is no different from woman's experience in labour. If she can go far enough, she will come very close to the experience of mystery, going beyond the experiences of the small self.

A: *How did you acquire your interest in chanting in relation to childbirth?*

L: My new film begins with a singing class given by an Indian guru, who happens to be a great friend of mine, Savitry Nayr. It has been through this friend, whom I met in Paris, that I got in touch with singing and chanting. I have always been very open to music. I took up the flute in India. But then I was so fascinated by singing and chanting that I took these up instead, and have taken classes in these for the past twelve years.

A: *At what point did you have the inspiration of connecting chanting and labour?*

L: The point is when you connect this and that, where before they had no connection. I am involved, for instance, in making a new connection between birth and psychiatry, in order to try to make the medical people aware. I am often invited to talk to obstetricians. I have them invite a psychiatrist as well. There is a deep connection between mental illness and birth. Psychiatrists are fascinated by my films. We will begin to see the deep connection between life in the uterus, birth and later mental distress.

A: *Is there any culture or society on earth that you know of where chanting is used by the mothers in pregnancy or birth?*

L: No . . . Yvonne, (he calls to his assistant who is helping him translate his books from French into English), can we have tea . . . if you feel like making it?

Yvonne Murphy: What you need is a mummy.

L: In every woman the mummy is dormant.

M: I don't think I'm a dormant mummy. (She brings us tea and apple cake).

L: The public say, "Ah yes, we know about Leboyer. It's about switching off the light, keeping silent, putting the baby in water. Very good. We know". My first film about the baby and the child was really a revolution.

But the new book is as much a revolution as the first. This association of pure sound with birth is opening the gate for women into a totally unknown experience. It seems to be so far-fetched, that professionals say, "this Leboyer must be out of his mind".

When a woman is giving birth she is reborn herself. She goes back to her own birth and can go beyond herself. Her little self merges with the real self, the totality, the one and all. Going through this frightening experience, she comes to the limitations of the small I: the ego collapses. She's both herself and the totality . . . I can see that Yvonne is now thinking, 'Oh how strange, these men discussing birth'.

A: *Yet women accept what Leboyer, a man, is saying to them. Why are they looking up to a man?*

L: Now this is a different question. What is the true relationship between men and women? Why are women looking up to men? It is for this ability that exists in man of understanding, or trying to understand. Women live. Men are trying to understand. Man is the sun, Apollo, clarity of mind. Woman is big with life, the Earth. Reality is a river. Men are sitting on the banks. Life is flowing through women. Men are trying to understand. Women laugh. They are in the river.

M: Talk such as this would madden feminists, that women should be considered not able to be logical.

L: But woman is complementary: she is on a different track. Women have a simple relationship with life - they are life.

A: *Primal therapists would argue that men know about birth too. They have been born through the mother, receiving her feelings through the umbilical cord and feeling their own. Men too have inside information about birth.*

L: Before birth it is a unity, like the wave and particle in modern physics. It is impossible to reconcile the two. It is both at the same time. In the same way, the mother and child are both two and one.

A: *What is your experience of childbirth, Yvonne?*

M: I have had two children, my first at 22, when I was alone in a foreign country. I enjoyed it the first time. I enjoyed it more the second time.

L: If man can do anything in this area, what he can give to a woman is the confidence that she can do it. They have been brainwashed by men to believe that they cannot. They are almost blackmailed into going to hospital - "otherwise you'll be taking a risk or damaging your child".

My first book was for the sake of the child. Some women said, "He hates women, it's only the child he considers". These women were in the trap of thinking it must be one or the other.

M: How do you know you weren't unconsciously saying to the mother, "It's nothing to do with you"?

L: My major feeling was that the child is saying, 'I'm ignored. I'm not loved'. The child is completely ignored. Odent in France has fallen back into the trap of trying to give women a delivery; he forgets the child again.

In order to make the baby accept the new situation it takes infinite love. If the child is handled technically, it is like killing the child. Mothers understand that to make the child accept that he is born, he must feel infinite love, a love coming from silence and respect. Then the baby can feel, "At last I've landed, oh yes I'm here".

A: *Are there signs that the unborn child in pregnancy appreciates the chanting of the mother?*

L: Yes. Very often when the woman has a restless child in the womb, it signifies that the child is unhappy. With the chanting, the mother knows, 'My child is different now'. She knows because the child moves around less.

A: *How many women's experience of chanting during pregnancy and childbirth is your book "The Art of Breathing" based on?*

L: I will not answer. Quantifying is part of a Descartean perspective in which it was felt that one could explain the universe. Even laws have limitations. Before number one, there came zero and truth. With the chanting it is necessary to recognise that this is the truth. In the book, one woman Pamela is teaching another, Giacomella. But there have been others. They were not the first.

A: *Have there been instances of women trying this approach of chanting during labour, and failing because of difficulties and complications, and then feeling sad and inadequate?*

L: This couldn't apply. It would be as if the woman has been taking lessons or classes and has got to be successful, or to pass exams. It would be a play of the little ego and ambition. Then you have to be defeated. But one must surrender. It is something bigger than you. You cannot play with it, you must let it play with you.

Childbirth is a tempest or tornado. The woman is in a frail bark. She needs the supreme courage to jump out of the boat, be one with the storm.

For me, with the chanting in labour, it was the connecting of two things not before connected. What is the essence of zen?

A: *What is?*

L: Breath is the essence. Breathing as advocated by the Rebirthing movement, up into the chest, is something else, it is the opposite - a way of releasing repressed emotions. It is only after this release that breathing in the belly can unlock the solar plexus - once you find the key, you can then open the gate.

A: *Upper chest breathing is then a good preparation for belly breathing and chanting?*

A: *You have, I believe, experienced a Rebirthing session guided by Leonard Orr.*

L: I met Leonard Orr in America. They invited me in San Francisco to their centre. They gave me a very nice and warm welcome. A year later we met again. I heard more and more about Rebirthing. And they were using my name. I wanted to know what was what. The only true information is experience, so I went to see them. I witnessed one Rebirthing session where they were trying to Rebirth a young woman in hot water. Then I tried it myself. There was no result. I was rather disappointed. Leonard then said, "Water is not necessary. Try a dry Rebirth". He came to my hotel. I lay on the bed. I started breathing. It did not work.

I had a long and very deep psychoanalysis in India with a master that went so much beyond any of this. Leonard Orr was only using a little trick or technique. Breathing techniques can trigger something. But in my analysis it was much deeper, coming as it were spontaneously without techniques, due to the mental power of the teacher.

A: *I have read that you were very impressed by Janov's films - apparently at a showing of an adult having a Birth Primal experience in therapy, you exclaimed, "There finally is the proof" - proof that there can be lasting memories of the birth experience.*

L: Yes. Janov heard about my book and film in Los Angeles. We met and became great friends. The film he showed me was not a remembering of birth so much as a reliving, a going again through the experience. It was a physical knowledge. The body of the adult assumes the posture of the baby moving in the birth canal. You can see where it has got stuck. (Leboyer plays me a tape of the sounds of a newborn baby crying). How old was that baby?

A: *About two minutes old.*

L: That was a man 43 years old in therapy. I don't remember my birth. But one can go back

L: Possibly. You can first let go of emotions stuck in the chest. The chest of a zen master or aikido teacher is empty. It is the opposite of the Western attitude of chest holding. There needs to be a bringing into harmony of these two levels of breathing, the masculine and feminine, the yin and the yang, instead of the one fighting the other.

A: *Do you believe that damage can be undone in therapy?*

L: I am not sure that damage done to babies at birth can be undone. It seems that, after the moment a child is born, one has only about 15 minutes, when all the damage can be undone, then afterwards it is finished. But birth is not necessarily a trauma for the child. It is intense, but if it is orgasmic for the mother, it can be for the child also.

A: *Can you imagine groups of pregnant women getting together to practise chanting?*

M: I think a woman would resist the idea of doing things in a group, pregnancy is something so personal. Frederick (Leboyer) had the idea of obtaining a nice house where pregnant women come and do chanting. But I would not want to do it with 20 other pregnant women there too. It would be like going into church and worshipping 10 statues.

L: You are right. It needs to be a one to one relationship, like psychoanalysis; it is so intimate. All that filming for television that took place at Odent's Pithiviers centre in France was obscene, with people looking at the woman giving birth and the woman exhibiting herself.

M: I had to stop looking, it was like some kind of orgy.

L: I was shocked to think my name was associated with Pithiviers - they say Odent is the disciple of Leboyer who has gone a step further.

Some women believe you can take six quick lessons before birth, like before taking a car for a drive. But there are things which cannot be taught. All inner experiences are a matter of getting attuned. Little by little you awaken. The disciple is trying to understand, and reading the book may say 'Ah yes', but the teaching can only be the confirmation of personal understanding; it has only this value.

A: *How do you justify making your own films of a woman in childbirth?*

L: This latest film is like going to the opera or a religious ceremony. Unconsciously in church you become one with the others and the priest. This changes your breathing pattern. Just as if you listen to a great singer, unconsciously and slowly your breathing changes. You feel good. You've experienced a full perfect breath. It's not something you are doing consciously.

Pregnancy is something so private and intimate, and so is the relationship of mother and newborn. The father has not got anything to do with the birth.

A: *I don't agree.*

L: That is the woman in you speaking, the mother in you, the feminine side. Although it is possible the baby, if a girl, will respond differently to the father being present. The boy from the beginning can be jealous of the father, but a newborn girl perhaps not so. For the father, a new baby is as if he were being deceived by the mother, he becomes jealous. I suspect that the end of pregnancy is very similar to a new love and the altered state of consciousness that goes with it.

A: *Have you ever been married?*

L: Not married ever. Nor have I had children. My birth experience was no doubt dreadful.

A: *Do you mind not having had a child?*

L: I miss the experience. It is something so important. But if I became a father, if my wife gave birth to a child, if I happened to be there, it would be as if I had opened a door by mistake, witnessing something not intended for me, two lovers making love . . . (He plays a cassette tape of a woman having a baby). We played this tape in the cutting room when making the film, and the people working in the next studio thought that we were making a pornographic film.

M: I would not want people recording me having a child or making love.

A: *How do you justify finding women to appear in your films of childbirth?*

L: I've been working like a painter fascinated by the mother, by the nudity of woman, by this symbol of mystery. It can be done with respect. In the first film you see just the woman's abdomen, in close up, round like the globe, a perfect shape.

I am trying to put people in touch with the symbolic mythological level. I'm an artist or a poet. I include music and the world of the soul as aspects of artistic creativity. Socrates says, "Poetry means

to give birth", and the Greek from which the word "poetry" is derived means "giving birth" or "essence". I am mainly a writer. A literary text is different from a text book, just as my films are not documentaries. Janov, for instance, is a remarkable man, but he is not a writer: he is a good technician. I have written lots of short stories - some published in French, but not in English.

A: *Is there more resistance to your work in the English publishing world?*

L: Perhaps I am out of fashion? They are only interested in childbirth. Yvonne and I have been busy translating the "Sacre de la Naissance" book, but for the time being we have no English publisher for it.

A: *For me your new book "The Art of Breathing" is another in the series of "Zen Art of" books - "The Zen Art of Archery", "The Zen Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", "The Zen Art of Flower Arranging", and now yours, which could be called "The Zen Art of Pregnancy and Childbirth".*

It is over 200 pages long, but its information content is low. The suggestions about chanting and breathing that it contains could be explained in a few words; in essence you are saying: breathe in deeply and slowly from the belly, chant on the outbreath and with the contraction; and then wait at the end of the outbreath for the contraction to be over, before breathing in again. Most of the rest of the book is simply to inspire?

L: The book is as deep as it is simple, as simple as it is deep. Its theme is the need to restructure oneself, and how this can be achieved by chanting.

A: *Does it need to be the specific type of Indian chanting you are describing in the book? Would the Tibetan chant 'Aum' do for instance?*

L: Some people say, "Ah yes, it is very nice to have music in labour, what would you like, Vivaldi or what?" But listening to pure sound is different, a perfect sound includes all its harmonies, it is all sounds put together, just as the rainbow includes all colours. With pure sound you can touch absolute perfection. You need to let the sounds open and awaken within yourself. If women can connect with this level of themselves, the experience of childbirth has another dimension.

This kind of childbirth cannot happen in hospitals.

A: *Can you not visualize really pleasant rooms in a hospital where this chanting could take place?*

L: This is like saying, "If Paris were in the country, it would be perfect". This new way requires real courage. This is why I have not started a school or institution.

A: *Do you advise women to have their babies at home, even the first? The statistics seem to show, I'm told, that home births are slightly more dangerous.*

L: Complete security is a different world; it should be more a matter of accepting life and death.

M: With the hospital and the doctor, the woman loses her confidence in her own intuition. The doctor makes out everything is 100% safe - if left to him.

L: The doctor stops the woman from going on her journey. He is so afraid. But I would never advise women to have a home birth. That is not my business. However, if the woman says, "this is what I want", I would encourage her. There is no right way of giving birth. Everything is itself. We must not fall into the trap of this or that.

Birth is not something sweet. It is the most intense experience a person can go through. But as long as you fight it, you're finished. Just as the mystics tell of the joy of getting drunkenly flooded with excessive energy, so for the woman it is possible to go through the storm of labour like this, instead of containing the contractions or bearing the pains.

M: When you're in labour, you're not yourself, you're like a receptacle. You know you're there, yet you're as if asleep, with something going through you. It's not a matter of me or my breath. For me there was heat, especially in the back. I thought my back was open.

L: The woman is flooded with fire.

In childbirth, breath is the ultimate. The breathing and contraction get completely attuned. It is a matter of becoming aware that breath and contraction are one and the same movement, in time with the cosmic breath, the breath of the universe. The breath is breathing you; it is a holographic concept of one in the whole, each part a reproduction of the whole.

In zazen you become little by little aware of the importance of breathing, the most subtle aspect of your self, of physical reality. "I'm not this mind" you realise. Then what are you? This something that is continuously there, yet fluctuating, is the breathing.

M: The timeless times for me were the pregnancies, the only periods in my life when I have felt complete, with no longings. I would like to be pregnant all the time, full and perfect and complete.

L: The woman when she is so-called "expecting" is not expecting any more. She is beyond time. It is a state of grace. There is a field energy around the body. But once pregnancy is institutionalised, the magic is gone; it becomes like a supermarket. 'Desacralise!

Leboyer's new book, "The Art of Breathing", is published by Element Books, (Sept. '85, £6.95).

SELF HELP

Our next issue is on the subject of SELF HELP . . . in the social, psychological, physical, therapy and political areas.

For this issue we would welcome comments, articles and contributions, however brief.

We would like to hear from YOU - preferably before October 1st.