

Breathwork Practice

Vivienne Silver-Leigh

Buddhists, Sufis, speech and voice specialists and physiotherapists all stress the importance of conscious breathing, to assist in meditation, to develop spirituality, for singing or to help with stammering and voice problems. I learned about the anatomy and physiology of breathing and relaxation in my early speech therapy training, and applied it in my work with stammerers and patients with voice disorders for many years. I recognised then the power and usefulness of breathwork, though I did not call it that.

Many years later I unexpectedly found an interesting conscious breathing technique called Vivation, pioneered in the USA by Jim Leonard and Phil Laut. It involved inhaling and exhaling without a break, and after a full hour of this I experienced unusual reactions: regression, feelings of bliss, feelings which I had not known about coming to the surface. I was astonished at the intensity and power of this rather gentle process. Vivation today is practised in France, Russia and the USA.

I followed this up in the UK with a course in Holistic Breathwork run by Mary McGlynn, a psychologist, hypnotherapist and rebirther. We learned all aspects of Breathwork, including regression, hot tub rebirthing, how to recognise our long-standing negative belief patterns and

how to breathe and release them. Mary was a wonderful example to her students, since she applied Breathwork to every aspect of her own life, including her pregnancy which culminated in a home birth in a special water tub, so that she could continue with using breath consciously and experience to the full the miracle of her child's birth.

I met up with other breathworkers at the British Rebirth Society. This is a small organisation which has existed for 18 years, which authorises practitioner rebirthers, and monitors training and ethical standards. It has successfully arranged for rebirthers to be members of the Institute of Complementary Medicine. In the UK there are only a few Breathwork training courses, with visiting trainers coming from abroad. In 1993 I went to Sweden to attend the first Global Inspiration Conference, organised by Gunnell Minett, and found to my surprise that Breathwork is well-known and accepted internationally far more than it is in the UK. In Sweden Breathwork is available on the NHS, and it has been used with alcohol and drug dependency. There was enthusiasm for the formation of the International Breathwork Foundation, which flourishes, with an annual conference now attended by some 100 people, from 20 countries, meeting in

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a different country each year. Sweden, Sardinia, Austria, Poland, and France have hosted it so far. American holotropic breathworkers, Polish yoga teachers, Norwegian meditation practitioners, Russian psychologists and scientists are among the many trainers of Breathwork who have attended. The standard of lectures and workshops is extremely high, and one can experience holotropic Breathwork, listen to scientists talking about altered states of consciousness through the use of the breath, attend a voice dialogue workshop which gives a new perspective on therapeutic work, and much more. The very keen could start the day at 7am with Bio-energetics, run by a 70-year-old Doctor of Philosophy.

The development of the International Breathwork Foundation will hopefully bring about unity in the UK between disparate groups who are all working with the breath, but separately. The IBF has its own directory and ethical code, and is attracting lecturers with sound academic backgrounds and interest in research work.

The reader may be wondering what actually happens in Breathwork sessions. Gone are the days when drama and catharsis were encouraged. Clients who have a session of conscious connected breathing lie down and relax, then are asked to focus on their breathing and to become aware of feelings, both physical and mental. Dr Joy Manné calls this 'gentle breathwork', and it is a powerful way of dealing with emotions and releasing them. 'Feeling them is healing them' is one integrating sentence which sums up the belief system. It links up with Buddhist detached meditation, as described well in *Breathe! You Are Alive* by Thich Nhat Han. When I

use Gentle Breathwork with clients I focus on their breathing patterns and watch the rhythms and movements. The role of the therapist is to watch, to encourage and to support the client through whatever reactions that occur. Clients are often surprised at what jumps into their minds and want to share their experiences, either during or after the session, which is about an hour long. Integration of this material is very important, which is where counselling and psychotherapy skills are essential.

A brief description of this work with a client might clarify what happens. Rosie comes to me for support over a broken relationship. She is a gentle, fragile-looking woman of 33, who wants to do some rebirthing. But first I take a case history, to find out about her health record, and to see if she is suited to Breathwork. She does a drawing of what she is feeling, and I am surprised to see a very powerful-looking tree, with bright red apples, and bright red roots, nothing fragile about it. I make a mental note of its strength. She lies down and I take her through a relaxation process, then let her breathe consciously, watching the movements. Diaphragm, thorax and upper chest move strongly, without my encouragement. I leave well alone, and watch.

Rosie keeps breathing powerfully, and I ask her to exhale more gently, to reduce the possibility of hyperventilation. She does so and continues to breathe consciously and connectedly, becoming more and more relaxed, and she finishes by smiling. I ask her to turn on her side, before she sits up slowly. We talk through what she has experienced.

After one particular session Rosie says she feels 'like a saint', without any of the

initial anger and sadness she brought to it over the break-up of her relationship. After another she feels very powerful, and is evidently beginning to get over the loss of her partner. We discuss issues of projection and how each of them was expecting something the other could not give, and Rosie gets clearer over what went wrong.

I find Breathwork has to be adapted where a client has a particularly poor sense of self. Sue had no sense of separate identity from her mother; she said she had a close relationship with her, but in reality the relationship was emotionally abusive, with the mother wanting Sue to behave like a mother to her, and never giving her daughter any support. Sue was unable to relax, could not keep her eyes shut without panic because when she shut them she experienced a frightening void, and became very fearful. I decided to help her to focus on awareness of the physical sensations in her body, avoiding any questions about her feelings. With increased body-consciousness, she seemed to develop more awareness generally. Over a year she had psychotherapy combined with very short relaxation sessions, which brought about reduced stress. She can now breathe and relax in difficult work situations, and has come to terms with the fact that she is very angry with many people.

Part of the theory behind using Breathwork connects with basic awareness theories, such as those of Carl Rogers

and Fritz Perls. These suggest that once we become aware of our feelings they have less emotional charge, and that with acceptance comes change. So sitting with clients while they are consciously breathing seems quite Rogerian to me, in that I as therapist am quietly, non-judgementally accepting this person.

What does it feel like to be a client? It is a strong experience, rather like having a parent sitting beside you as you lie in bed just before going to sleep, with attention and caring directed towards you. It feels supportive to have this person there for you while you lie and breathe and experience your thoughts and feelings in safety. During one breathing session I saw an image of myself as a frightened five-year-old, hiding under a large metal table. It brought up memories of barrage balloons, anti-aircraft guns and listening to air raids. This recall of wartime events was extremely helpful in removing my anger at my parents, as I suddenly understood why I had been sent away to a boarding school.

Breathwork also works effectively in enabling currently repressed feelings to surface. After the breathing session the client wants to talk about these. Quite frequently people have an experience of their own birth, feeling their face crushed or their throat blocked by mucus, and then afterwards a sense of release and relaxation and a sense of being reborn.

Further reading

Dr Joy Manné, *Soul Therapy*, North Atlantic Books, 1997

Gunnell Minett, *Breath and Spirit*, Aquarian/Thorsons, 1994

Jim Leonard and Phil Laut, *Vivation: The science of enjoying all of your life*, Vivation Publishing Co, 1983

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe! You Are Alive*, Parallax Press, 1996