

# Integrating Psychotherapy and Breathwork: Awakening the transpersonal through the use of the Breath:

A Quaker perspective  
by  
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*I work in private practice as a transpersonal psychotherapist, having studied in London, UK at the CCPE on the advanced transpersonal Psychotherapy diploma course.*

*Prior to this I had trained as a Humanistic counsellor, at Roehampton Institute, and have seen a variety of clients since 1987. I began by working voluntarily for a Bereavement project as well as counselling foreign students in the College where I was teaching English. Later I taught Counselling at the same college, for five years, continuing to see clients at home in private practice. Nowadays, I see clients who self refer for Breathwork, and receive referrals from Employee assistance providers, of business employees for short term crisis counselling. Other clients take therapy as part of their counselling courses. My website and my membership of professional organisations brings me referrals.*

My first profession, Speech therapy, taught me the anatomy and physiology of respiration, and its application to speech, voice and movement, and later Yoga meditation introduced me to the effects of breathing on the mind. I studied Buddhist meditation also which consisted of counting the breaths repeatedly.

In 1994, I learned rebirthing for two years, in UK and since then have regularly travelled abroad to study further at the International Foundation of Breathwork conferences, to learn more about Breathwork practice in different countries.

I integrate a process of breathing with awareness into my work.

This seems to lead to a consciousness of spiritual connection in some clients. It is this **awareness** which I wish to consider in this paper

It is perhaps relevant to give some details of my spiritual journey, which has led me away from Jewish roots, to exploring Buddhism and ten years ago I settled into being a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). I quite happily sit in silence on Sundays and connect with the silence and the peace, aware of my breath and the transpersonal element of my being. I do not separate this aspect of my self from my work. (William West found from his research that this is true of other Quaker therapists. I believe firmly in the one and only Quaker credo – that 'there is that of God in every one' and this belief underlies all my work.

Counselling skills and Breathwork can be integrated successfully. Clients wanting Breathwork ( or rebirthing) usually receive from half an hour to an hour of counselling, focusing on the reason they are coming right now, exploring birth traumas, physical health, family history, and relationships. This is the first part of a breathwork session with me. Then the actual breathwork session takes place, the client lying on a firm mattress, in a warm and pleasant room, with candles, and music to create an atmosphere which encourages relaxation. This is very important, as relaxation is the first stage of any breathwork session. I watch the rise and fall of the client's

chest and abdomen to determine the quality and quantity of the 'normal' at rest breathing and this gives me information about the client's state of mind also.

It is easy for to see where there is a lack of breath power, where the breathing is minimal, just enough for survival, while in some cases you can see that a person breathes deeply and powerfully, using the whole of the chest and bringing the diaphragm into action. A powerful personality breathes powerfully too. I look for where there are 'blocks' where there is the potential for increasing the depth of the breath. We breathe to live, and the breath mirrors the amount of power we currently put into our lives. I relate to the Eastern concept of energy, Chi, or Prana and the current state of this is mirrored in the breathing. For

The effect of asking a client to lengthen the exhale is noticeable. The rhythm changes, and then the inhale automatically becomes stronger as well. At first some clients find this difficult to maintain, although others immediately say they feel much better, that blocks have been released. In either case I am getting information about the energy and the life force that is within the person, and how they are accessing it, or avoiding it. Maintaining a low level of energy with poor breathing leads to lethargy and illness, and a resulting build up of frustration in many areas of life. In

stressed individuals, the breathing is often fast and shallow, and in the upper chest without much abdominal involvement. The language of the Breath communicates quite clearly the underlying mental state.

This process of becoming very deeply relaxed and then turning the mind to focus on the breathing rhythm for a variable period of time, usually brings people in touch with emotions after a while. Enjoyment of space and time to just lie there, just being, relieves the stressed out executive who rarely stop and make time for not-doing. . Recognising that they are able to just 'be' and not have to do more than focus can be the start of a new awareness, and the regular breathing rhythm helps to begin to create an altered state of consciousness, an alpha rhythm in the brain, which other writers have explained in depth ( see Grof).

A client reaching this 'altered state' is experiencing something different from a typical counselling session. There is some interaction with the clients as they lie and breathe with awareness at the start of Breathwork sessions, when clients are not sure what to do and want to check out that they are breathing 'correctly'. My role as therapist is to gently lead the breath to deepen, if possible, without causing stress as a result. I try to speak as little as possible, just gently encouraging the conscious breathing to flow.

The client becomes more focused on their body and what they are experiencing.

Most clients are able to breathe freely and fully after a while, and then I ask them to move their awareness on to any feelings in the body. In some cases, clients report strange physical effects, such as a sharp pain in an ear, a strong ache over the heart, or muscle tension in the shoulder or leg. They are asked to focus on the area mentioned, to breathe consciously and continuously, and imagine the area in more detail. Imagery plays a part in helping clients to free up 'blocked' parts of the body, with the aim of creating a freer sensation in the body. These blockages are often metaphors of emotional blockages and are very significant. Some clients report the opposite, a sense of extreme pleasure and freedom, both physical and emotional. It usually takes a few sessions for clients to feel at ease with the experience of letting go, breathing more fully, and becoming aware of their bodily sensations and thoughts, and able to relax more deeply and for longer periods. There is a progression from session to session, as clients become familiar and at ease in the practice, and realise that they are free to control the way they breathe. Quite often tears start to flow, as emotions surface, and I do not ask at this stage what is being experienced. It is sometimes volunteered, sometimes talked about afterwards.

Many clients report spontaneously that they feel a new happiness, a great joy, free from anxiety. I may tentatively suggest that they consciously breathe into their 'source' or whatever creative force they believe in. ( I find that I must myself be fully aware and connected to my own spiritual belief system. I take time before the session to bring myself to a point where I am ready to give my attention to the client from this perspective ) (W.West research into Quaker therapists, etc.)

### **Case History**

C. a French woman, aged 35, came from a family of practising Jehovah's witnesses. She had married at 20 to a suitable Jehovah witness husband, but then caused displeasure and excommunication from the society by divorcing him. She had come to UK to get away from this, and proceeded to have a series of relationships which did not last. She cried heavily for several Breathwork sessions, and we spent time discussing the story of her life in the counselling session before the breathwork. She had recently broken up with yet another man, and was feeling lonely and unhappy. After each breathing session, she seemed more able to see it from a new viewpoint. She started to lose the guilt she felt, and wanted now to strengthen herself in all areas of her life. By session five, she was keen to get into the breathwork session, had stopped crying, and surprised me by a dramatic change from looking very

gloomy and weary, becoming glamorous and chic in her clothes and make up. She also commented that she felt a great deal of joy and pleasure in her life now. She reported that her friends were noticing her new attitude, and she was no longer miserable. She laughed when she recalled that she had cried so many sessions.

A Breathwork session, as we have seen, is generally divided into three parts:

Counselling for half an hour or so. Taking a case history, finding the reason for coming. Finding an Affirmation to 'take into' the breathing session is sometimes useful. For example: 'I am a happy and loveable person' may be the Mantra that the client focuses on during the breathwork.

Breathwork session – lying down.  
From 50 –90 minutes

Recap and consideration of the breathwork process, what insight the client has received from the experience. This part is frequently the most interesting, as clients may have had images or memories or understandings that they did not expect and are keen to discuss further. Regression to early life stages may have occurred. If clients have such experiences, I honour them, and accept that they have some meaning for the client. I am aware of the danger of 'false memory syndrome' and the need for caution. In one case, D. aged 40, remembered appalling physical and sexual abuse by a nurse when living abroad, and

this was verified by a sibling, who had been similarly abused. Open discussion of this helped the client to express his anger at his parents who had not been able to prevent it from happening, since they had not known about it anyway. He spent many sessions offloading his anger and pain about this, and eventually came to the point where it was no longer of importance to him. He was happier in his work as a Manager and found far more pleasure in his family and in his voluntary work with the local church. He found that each time he came for a breathwork session, he accesses this early pain, and cried a great deal until suddenly it finished. He did not need to confront his one surviving elderly parent, as it no longer mattered as he had reconciled himself to her failure to know about the situation when it occurred.

### **Case History**

P. came for a breathwork session, saying he was in a state of transition, not sure what to do about his career. Having quite a formal professional training, he now felt he needed to work with people, but was not sure in what capacity. He also said he needed freeing up, to help to access his true self. Breathing steadily for only five minutes, he started crying and moaning, and eventually this led to strong kicking of his feet. It looked to me like a baby stage, very primitive. After this he breathed steadily and quietly, and with a serene expression on his face. He became aware during the session that he had a difficult relationship with his

parents, whose expectations were of a formal academic career.

### **Counselling And Integrated Breathwork**

A counselling session may be helped by introducing some breathwork, without the client lying down. A comfortable chair is necessary, and I have one that actually extends backwards so that the client is almost supine.

Clients gain from sitting down in a chair, breathing quietly with eyes shut, when strong emotional feelings arise in a counselling session. Healing of painful emotions of loss, of bereavement, can be helped by being allowed to cry and breathe consciously through this release.

Clients who get into excessively stressed narration of every detail of their problems, recited in a monotonous tone, may be helped by being asked to stop, breathe quietly, relax the body totally, and then return to look at the situation from a calmer perspective. For example, I noted that a client was lulling me to sleep by a detailed account of her troubles, and apparently she was bored by hearing herself too! She switched off, and listened to her breathing, and became aware that there were strong underlying feelings that she was ignoring. We continued the session on a deeper level after this focus.

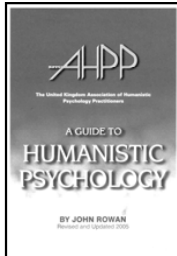
### **Breathing For Stress Management**

A. is an executive, happily married and enjoying his job and did not admit to any particular

difficulty in life except that he knew he was stressed, and wanted to learn to relax. I had worked with one of his family, who suggested he try out Breathwork. He is someone who has not had much contact with this kind of therapy at all. I explained to him about levels of brain activity, altered states of consciousness, going from a beta state to an alpha state, and this was a new concept to him.

He had a breathwork session, lying down, with gentle music accompanying it, while he breathed deeply from the abdomen.. It was apparent he was a strong and fit person,

breathing powerfully. To my surprise he had a birth experience in what looked like very relaxed session. He had an image of being in water, and being a baby in the water. His reaction after the session was amusing, as he was so astonished what had happened, and became aware that he could be so deeply relaxed in a way he had not experienced. I lent him tapes to enable him to practice this at home and a book on Stress Management. The purpose of the sessions is to get him aware that he has control of his life, and that changing the breath rhythm is a way to do this.



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