

# **Conscious Breathing: A Path to Freedom**

*The Estonia Training*

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## **An Analogy to Help Understand the Process**

You can look at this process as if you have a glass of water. And at the bottom is the mud. So when the glass is still all the mud settles to the bottom, and at the top the water is quite clear, and at the bottom its muddy.

So with this process, we begin to stir the water. And when you stir the water, the mud comes up and it fills the whole glass with dirty water. Then you begin to pour clean water in the glass, and the water comes out of the glass, it over flows.

So the clear water and the mud represent our conscious and unconscious mind. If you stop stirring the glass, or you stop pouring in clean water, the process stops,. And all the mud settles to the bottom, and we live on the surface where it's clear.

So we walk thru life trying not to disturb or shake the glass. Anyone or anything that stirs or shakes the glass brings that mud up to the surface. And so people avoid people and places and things that stirr it.

But gradually over a lifetime the water evaporates on the surface, and soon, there is nothing but mud. And there is no way to escape it. And then life becomes so unbearable that death begins to look attractive.

So it takes emotional courage to do this process. And you all must have it, or you wouldn't be here. But the habits of thinking and feeling can interfere with the process. So its as if our subconscious is working against us.

Something has to give. You have to drop your conscious intention, or you have to stop letting your unconscious mind control you. And that's why very often when you start the process, you consciously want to breathe, you want to relax, but then the subconscious fear or resistance takes over and you go unconscious.

Then the breathing gets smaller and smaller and disappears, or it gets harder and harder to relax. That's the unconscious trying to stay in control. So you have to keep coming back into the process.

And you do that in a very simple way: [Demonstarates a Cleansing Breath]. That wakes you up. It's a conscious choice to pull in life, to pour new fresh life into that glass.

## **A Map of the Process**

I am going to draw a map of this process. You remember, I told you there were three parts to this process: Awareness, Relaxation, and Breathing. So as you engage in awareness, relaxation and breathing, you go more deeply into yourself.

We can say that here [see chart] is a center in ourselves, and here we are now, living on the surface. With awareness, you begin to move into that place—your center. With relaxation we fall into that place; and with breathing we move toward that place.

Anyone of those practices will take you there, but when all three are used together, you get there very quickly.

So we begin with circular breathing: active inhale, passive exhale. And as you practice that, you begin to go deeper. And the very first thing that you encounter is something like resistance to change. There is no real reason for it, other than our “habits of being” trying to stay in place.

In physics, they call that inertia, right? The law that says: “an object at rest tends to stay at rest, and an object in motion tends to stay in motion, unless acted on by an external force.”

So you have to overcome your inertia. And it takes something like effort. But very soon, once you are moving, it’s easier to stay with it. So you overcome this inertia with a bit of effort, until you have some momentum. Then you can ease off on the effort.

We could draw the picture this way too... instead of going deeper within us, we are going higher, toward the top of a mountain. From there you can see your whole life, you rise above all the problems, you get a clear perspective on your thoughts and feelings.

So it is interesting, the world is round, circular, and everything that takes place, takes place in cycles. Look at the universe, and you see circles and cycles and everywhere.

That’s why this breathing technique is so powerful: because it is in harmony with certain universal principles: circles and cycles.

And notice that the breathing also involves active and passive forces, “yin and yang:” another universal principle. And also rhythm... another universal principle... All these things are built into this breathing practice, and you will experience them in your process.

As you go deeper, you will encounter feelings and sensations. And these feelings and sensations can stop you. They capture your awareness. Or your mind tries to escape and avoid them. And you get stuck in these feelings, or you can’t get through them. And the reason you can’t get past them is because they are connected to some unconscious fear.

They cause you to become tense or tight. They stop you from breathing. And so the process stops, and you try to escape back to the surface. But these are simply physical sensations, but we think that these simple physical sensations are dangerous; we experience them as uncomfortable, and so they stop us.

But if you continue breathing and you continue relaxing, you will go deeper. You will get through them. You will pop out the other side into more freedom.

### **Self Talk and Choosing your Thoughts.**

If you talk to yourself in a positive way at that point [of resistance], it makes it easier to accept these feelings: “ok, I surrender... let it be... I am ok...” “I can still relax even with these feelings...”

So you talk to yourself. “It’s safe to feel my feelings.” Just because I don’t feel them doesn’t mean they are not there. So all I am doing is I am feeling something that is already there, but have been suppressing. Feelings don’t go away, when we withdraw our awareness from them. But it seems that we are free of them when we are unconscious of them.

You can tell yourself anything. Thinking is infinite. I can think of an elephant, and my next thought can be a red coat, my next thought can be a BMW, my next thought can be a butterfly, my next thought can be my mother. There is no limit. I can think anything at any time. We need not let our mind put us in a limiting trap.

When you have an uncomfortable feeling, you automatically think something. But you can think anything. And depending on what you think, you are either going to help the process or stop the process.

So the practice is to choose. Think of a thought that will serve you. Develop the skill of changing your thoughts instead of letting your mind automatically follow a certain pattern and generate certain habitual thoughts.

Remember that the mind is mechanical. But you can choose to take control of the machine at anytime. You can begin to think your way out of suffering. That’s what psychotherapy is, right? You begin to change the way you think, and sure enough you can relieve your suffering.

You don’t need anyone to tell you whether a certain thought is pleasant or unpleasant, is high or low. It’s obvious. Which is more of a positive thought: something terrible is happening, or something wonderful is happening? It’s obvious. Who decides which of those thoughts you think? Who decides?

And, depending on which of those thoughts you think, your experience is going to take a certain direction. But the problem is that a lot of our thoughts are unconscious. So when you get to strange or unusual feelings and sensations, if you want to continue the process

and go deeper, you have to consciously pull in a breath, expand, and relax. And then you will break through what Stan Grof calls “the sensory barrier.”

And then you will encounter something else: various emotions. Sometimes we don’t know what the emotion is, but it’s causing certain physical sensations, and all we notice are the physical sensations. And we are not sure what the emotion underneath is. But if you keep breathing, the emotion is going to reveal itself.

And all of the negative emotions can be reduced to a single one: fear. We might not experience it as fear, but if it is uncomfortable, if it stops us, it’s fear. At the deepest level there are only two emotions: fear and love. All the positive emotions are connected to love and all the negative emotions are connected to fear. It’s that simple.

And love is just unconditional acceptance. It’s a big “yes.” It’s opening. It’s expansive. And fear is a “no.” It’s contracting, closing... And you always know which of those you are experiencing.

The problem is that some of these emotions... we’ve learned or we believe are wrong, or dangerous, or they mean something about us. And so we don’t want to feel them. It’s normal. Just like it’s normal to try to avoid the mud at the bottom of the glass, and stay up on the surface where it feels like everything is ok.

But if you don’t shake yourself, if you don’t or stir yourself, than life will do it. And, isn’t it easier to learn to swim if you decide to do it, if you choose to do it, rather than when you accidentally fall out of boat in the middle of the ocean? To learn, you choose the place and time, you ask someone to help you; you move into the water gradually and you experiment.

You still have the fear, but you can manage it with your attention. It is much easier to learn to swim in that case. And if you ever fall out of a boat by accident, or your boat sinks, you can handle it. So this process is like that. You are choosing to learn what life will force you to learn some day, something you must learn one way or another.

Some people put off learning until the last few moments of life. And then at the last moment, I think people have a great “Ah ha! They discover that they need to be afraid of their feelings. They realize that they are ok, no matter what’s happening in their body. But then it’s too late! They’ve run out of juice. So, it’s better to learn the lessons as early as possible, and then live your life fully and freely.

So during your breathing session, you say yes to all your emotions. And when you say yes to them, when you breathe into them, when you relax into them, when you let them be... when you don’t fight with them, don’t resist them, don’t try to make them go away, then you go deeper.

On the surface we have dense physical sensations, then the next layer is emotions, and under the emotions are subtle thoughts—thoughts, ideas, beliefs... unconscious thoughts... old forgotten thoughts and beliefs.

## **Infancy Patterns**

So for example, when you were a tiny infant, you were helpless. You had no power to move or resist. Someone could pick you up and throw you out the window, and you could do nothing about it. So really and truly, you were helpless.

And so for an infant to think and feel: “I am helpless,” it’s probably true. But 20 or 30 or 40 years later, it is not true anymore. And yet many people still hold those thoughts of helplessness. And those thoughts stop us from moving forward in life.

That’s one of the deepest beliefs, responsible for our most negative feelings and emotions: “I am helpless.” “It’s hopeless.” “There’s nothing I can do about it.” Most people don’t realize that they can do something about their emotions. You are a baby, and you are crying, and you are miserable, and unless or until someone comes and gives you what you want, you are stuck with your feelings.

No one here is an infant, yet those infant feelings and thoughts can still direct you and stop you. You may not consciously think that you are helpless, but your behavior, your reactions, show us that that’s what you believe.

“Life is a struggle.” That’s a thought that many people have carried in their unconscious since birth. And so in this process, you can act out that thought...you make the process a struggle. The process itself isn’t a struggle, but your belief that life is a struggle, causes you to create an experience that matches that thought.

So we can call this a picture of the human mind [see chart]. It’s a circle, but it’s an open circle, made of a dotted line. And in your mind you have a subconscious and a conscious portion. And in your mind, you have positive thoughts and you have negative thoughts. Positive thoughts create positive experiences, and negative thoughts create negative experiences.

And it doesn’t matter whether the thought is conscious or unconscious; it still has the same power. In fact the unconscious thoughts have more power to run you, because you don’t know that they are there. This process causes those negative or limiting thoughts to come up into your conscious awareness. And then you can change them into positive or liberating thoughts.

You have the thought: “I can’t do it.” You change that to “I can’t do it!” If you don’t change that thought, that thought becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You have to change it: “I can.” “I am strong enough.” Choose whatever you need to in order to reverse or neutralize that negative thought.

There is a structure to this. The structure is that you have a certain thought, and that thought causes a certain emotion, and that emotion causes certain body sensations, and those body sensations strengthen the emotion, and that emotion strengthens the thought. So this structure [see chart] is shaped like a diamond, is a very basic structure in consciousness.

During the process you start breathing. You are opening and expanding, relaxing. And then you reach a certain point and you can't go any further. You start to contract again... until it gets so compressed, that life forces you to open again. Then you reach your maximum pleasure potential, and then you go back.

You just keep going thru the process like that: peaks and valleys, up cycles and down cycles—vascillating between pain and pleasure limits

And this structure is also connected to different kinds of growth. Your whole life is moving toward a certain point. Everything that happens is sending you toward this point. And then you reach this point, and there is a great “Ah ha!” Now you understand the purpose and the meaning of everything. Life has been coaching us toward something. And when you have this “Ah ha:” then your life expands. You grow.

The breath itself, the technique that we practice is shaped like this [diamond breath]. We keep repeating that breath, and at some point during the process your momentum is so strong... this place, our center, starts to pull us.

If you take two steps toward God, God takes three steps toward you. And at some point it seems that we can't stop. The process is just happening, and now you have no choice. You are moving toward one of those points of awakening.

Awareness becomes very important. And relaxation becomes very important. Because when you try to resist, it hurts. The closer you get to this point, the stronger the force is, the faster the movement is, and trying to stop the process is very painful.

### **Coaching and Assists in the First Few Sessions**

When I first began doing sessions, the people that we were practicing on were also students. We all had the same training. We listened to the same teaching. And we just went off in pairs and traded sessions.

So for me, from the very beginning, it was process between equals. It wasn't that one person knew everything and the other person knew nothing. It was not a situation where: “I am the poor patient and you are the great therapist who is going to save me, fix me, set me free!”

But in some ways, that is what rebirthing has become. Instead of just a group of ordinary people helping each other, making our way along a new path... Now we have people who

have traveled that path very often, and they can act as guides. It's a natural evolution I think.

I wrote article on "The First Session" in 1980, because our assignment, when I was training with Leonard Orr, was that we had to give Rebirthing a new name. We had to invent a new name for it. We had to make up our own name for the process. The more different styles and approaches to Rebirthing, the better. Because then people could pick and choose, and find someone who's style or way fit their needs.

So this was a very good structure in the beginning, for the first sessions. And although people had spontaneous rebirth experiences, they weren't really guided rebirthing sessions.

But then people began to come to me for their first session, but had not been to the seminars that I had been to, or received the training that I had. So I needed to approach them differently than the fellow trainees I had been doing sessions with for a year or so. So, I began to ask myself, "where do we start?" "What is the most important thing?"

And so the first meeting was a kind of an orientation session: an introduction to breath awareness and conscious breathing. I would tell people to set aside at least two hours. During the first session, I would introduce them to the "Formula for Transformation," which was the first new name I created for Rebirthing. It was the title of my first seminar.

I was interested in transformation, and when I looked at the primary result of rebirthing, that was the best way I saw to describe it. One my early clients Judith Kravitz, actually went off and started a movement called Transformational Breath. So she learned rebirthing, gave it her own particular focus and style, and she gave it her own name.

And so, during the first session, I am teaching people the formula: what I think are the three key things, the most important things to learn, or to practice: Awareness—meditative awareness—where you simply watch your feelings, and watch your thoughts; observe your sensations, observe your reactions. That is so important. I think the most important thing in the beginning.

And equally important is the ability to relax. And then from this aware relaxed state, you begin to do something with the breath. So if you approach the breath without awareness, without practicing relaxation, it's not going to be as powerful or valuable. It will take longer to get results. It will create needless static, friction, stress, difficulties.

So during the first session, I am probing, testing. Can the person maintain awareness? Can they relax? Are there places in their body that are hard or tense, places where they contract? Are they doing things with their muscles that they are not aware of? Are they able to do something with the breath? So we explore and we experiment.

We might talk a little bit before the session. But I get everyone to lay down for their first session, to just relax and become aware of their inner world. Just begin to get them to



observe their thoughts, observe their feelings, their sensations, emotions. And as I observe them, I may point them out things I observe, or say something. Always with the intention or in the direction of accepting what is happening...

You observe something, and then you observe the reaction. You can train the person to make their reaction one of acceptance, self-acceptance. So when a person first lies down, you can see their nervousness, you can see their apprehension, their anxiety, their excitement. And you can also see any resistance...

There is no hurry. So if someone is late for a session. They were waiting for a bus, and they ran up the stairs. I let them spend some time lying down, just to get over that, to let that pass. And I also always begin by noticing my own thoughts: acknowledging and accepting my own feelings: "Oh this person is attractive," or "Oh I don't like this person."

I watch these judgments come and go. And I don't project those into the session. I simply observe and accept myself. And I get in touch with my own breathing. I relax and watch. Very often during a session, instead of giving a person instructions to breathe in a certain way, or to relax... I'll just do that for myself, and see if they don't respond automatically.

And so we start with conscious breathing, with bringing awareness to the breath itself. I encourage them to notice and sense their breathing, watch it, listen to it, feel it. Sort of heightening their sensitivity to the details of it. As they do that, I am also doing that in myself: I am watching each breath, trying to sense my breathing, and I am sort of looking at them thru an awareness of my own breathing.

A very simple instruction in the beginning is to just tell someone to "breathe more." Breathe a little more deliberately. And then see what they do with that. It will reveal something about them and their process. Do they dive right in? Do they show some confusion? Do they begin to put pressure on themselves to do it right? Or is there hardly any difference in what happens before and after I give them that instruction?

I encourage them to observe the movement and the flow of air. And, I observe the movement and flow of their breath. What muscles are they using? I encourage them to breathe more fully and freely, and have them notice how they do that, and what feelings and sensations they activate. And so the idea is to focus on the details.

Breathing consciously is a way to turn your attention inward. You will often see, during group sessions, that people are more concerned with what is happening around them and in other people, because they don't want to, or it is difficult for them to get into their own process.

But when we are doing an individual session, there isn't anything else for the person to focus on, and so they are stuck with their own feelings and sensations. And you can observe them trying to avoid or escape their own inner sensations, distracting themselves from what is coming up...

Or you can observe that they begin to feel something and you get the sense that they don't know what to do about what they are feeling. As if they have to do something about their feelings. And that might be their first lesson: "I don't have to do anything about my feelings." "My feelings don't mean anything about me."

And so we are getting practice at simply expanding and relaxing, and letting our feelings be the way they are. And for some people that might be the key to their entire healing process. They might start a process that could last for months or years: simply developing a new relationship to their feelings: breaking the automatic habit to control or suppress or react.

Then instead of getting pushed and pulled by their feelings, they learn to just breathe and relax and allow their feelings to flow. For some people that is an entirely new experience. It is a transformational lesson.

### **Engaging the Exhale: Learning to Let Go**

Letting go takes practice. So to help them in their practice, I began to get them to engage in the exhale: to use the exhale, to begin to set the exhale free, snap it loose, to release it, to let it go and not control it. It's like a sigh of relief.

And you try to get them to release their muscle tension during that breath, to let go of their urge to control... And along with that they are going to let go of some of their fears. The idea is to get them to let go of their exhale quickly and completely. And then observe where they hold, how they hold back... Point out how and where they are holding on.

And so that might be their entire session, just getting them to practice so that they are good at letting go of the exhale. You sense and feel what is involved in letting go, and you guide them in that direction.

You can use the natural tendency of the muscles to do the work of the exhale. Encourage the person not to push or blow the air out on the exhale... What I mean is that when you inhale, your muscles stretch. And now you have created a potential force. Then when you relax, the elastic tendency of the muscles does the work of the exhale. When you stretch the muscle, it's like a rubber band, and when you relax and let go, it springs back.

In order to trigger that relaxation/release response, we need to create a little extra stretch. Which means that their inhale needs to be fuller, deeper, bigger... And when they do that unconsciously or automatically, point that out to them. Get them to notice the expansion, and to do it more consciously.

If someone is going to blow out a candle, or blow up a balloon, they automatically take a deeper breath. And so when you encourage people to give themselves a big sigh of relief, they will automatically talk in a deeper breath. So then you get them to be more

conscious of the action of their muscles while breathing in. And to begin to do it more deliberately, more actively.

### **Charging the Heart and Focusing on the Throat and Belly**

And so now we are into the next lesson, which I call “Charging the Heart.” You are encouraging the person to deliberately pull in more energy. So I give them ideas like “you are feeding yourself... “you are charging yourself with energy,” “pulling in life, light...” I get them to create a little extra stretch on the inhale, so they can open more spaces to breathe into.

And I watch for a ceiling on the breath. Very often, a person takes in a breath, and they go so far.... As if they are hitting something. And you can sense it, that there is a lot more room to expand, but somehow they are not going into that potential.... So I’ll shift them back into relaxation and back into awareness.

I am listening to the sound of the breath... And now it seems that when I wrote this article 20 years ago... I have become aware of a lot more of what I wasn’t aware of then. Now I am much more conscious of what people do with the muscles of the forehead and the muscles of the jaw... listening to the sound of breath as it comes thru the throat...

I get people to find that reflex: the yawning reflex. Because something opens and expands when a person yawns. They have a natural urge to stretch. So I try to get them to trigger those normal body reflexes to support the process.

In the first session, I really want to be aware of where the breathing goes, and where it doesn’t go, what moves when you breathe and what doesn’t move. So I probe and test to see if a person has an ability to breathe into their belly. And I might coach them in various ways to wake that part up, to get energy into that part of the body.

I have them experiment with breathing through the nose and breathing through the mouth, and see how that changes the color of their skin, what it does to their tension and relaxation.... And then we move into the connected rhythm, that is circular connected breathing. It may just arise spontaneously. Without even talking about it, they begin to breathe in that connected rhythm. So this is the classic rebirthing technique.

A lot of the things that I do leading up to it, are just things that I noticed in different people’s sessions, that happened just before the breathing became free. So, instead of just getting a person to lie down and begin the connected breathing, which is what we did in the beginning... we just laid down and got right into it!

Now in the first session, I like to play around with the elements of the practice, and see if there isn’t something that will naturally trigger the process. Then we just allow and encourage it. And as they move into their process, we refine and adjust the breathing rhythm.

The person sort of eases very naturally into the process. Lots of times when I was working with people, I would notice that they were “doing” the process. They knew what it was about: active inhale... passive exhale...no pauses... no gaps...

They would begin to practice it [breathing]. And I would notice that they needed to relax their jaw. [breathing] And as soon as they relaxed their jaw, the breathing changed, and they went deeper into the process.

So I learned to get people to focus on that right a way, to get it out of the way... one less thing to interfere with the process. I've also become very conscious of tension in the neck and the shoulders, which is all connected to the jaw.

### **Two Ways to Enter the Process**

So there are two ways to get into energy breathing: which is the essence of rebirthing. It's the key lesson in Rebirthing: learning to breathe energy. There are two ways to get into this energy.

You can just keep pulling in more breath, keep inviting and activating it... [breathing] If you keep breathing like that, the energy is going to increase in your body.

And the other way is to just relax. Then something opens, something softens, and then the energy begins to move.

So we use those two ways: the active way, and the passive way. In the ideal rebirthing session, you have both those forces working: active, passive, active, passive, active passive.

The mistake that most beginners make, is that they breathe too much and don't relax enough, or they relax so much that they stop breathing. So it is a game of finding that perfect balance. And that is also the resulting state: something like an “energized calm” or a “dynamic relaxation.”

That's when the real magic happens: when there is this combination of active dynamic energy, and relaxed peaceful stillness. Most people give up one for the other. But the magic happens when those two things come together.

So we are encouraging people to get into a breathing rhythm that has that quality of active energy and also relaxation; it's smooth and easy yet strong and powerful. And you watch what disturbs the rhythm. And you encourage the person to notice what interferes with the rhythm.

So when they get into the rhythm, I'll make sure that they know by saying: “Ah, that's it... you've got it... that's the way... keep doing that... perfect... beautiful...”

By then, they are usually very responsive, so I can make fine tuning adjustments to their breathing. I might demonstrate... give them a sound, a speed, a volume, a rhythm... Then I am just sort of guiding them in that direction... of active inhale and passive exhale... a smooth connection... where they are breathing fully and freely, and everything is open and soft.

Some people like the excitement of the work. They like the effort. [breathing] They like getting into an intense process. So they are revealing something about their personality, what they enjoy or what they need, or how they relate to themselves, their habits and patterns and tendencies.

Other people sort of disappear into laziness. They go into this passive state. And we need to keep putting them back into the breathing process. If they go too far in the direction of passiveness...

It's like that Zen story of the master standing beside the road and people come asking how to get home. And he says: "Just follow this road and stay to the left, stay to the left." Someone else comes and he says: "Stay to the right, stay to the right."

And the disciple asks which is the correct way, to the left or to the right? And the master says, "well for those people who are too far to the right, I tell them go left, and to those who are too far to the left, I tell them go right."

So you get an intuitive sense from doing a lot of sessions and observing a lot of people. There may be people that you need to push and there may be people that you need to remind to slow down and be gentle.... So the same process can seem to be opposite from one to another.

### **Varying the Breathing Rhythm and Speed**

But there are only several ways of varying the breathing rhythm. You can breathe fast and shallow [breathing], which is very useful when you are experiencing something intense.

You can breath fast and deep [breathing], when you are trying to get the person to wake up, to get out of unconsciousness, to activate the energy, to stay in their body.

Or you can breathe slow and deep [breathing], which is a good way to breathe when something very pleasurable is happening. You breathe slow and deep, to really feel and enjoy and deeply absorb the pleasure.

So I always want to make sure that people have a really good idea of the technique. I wrote this article in 1980. I'll pass it out here, but I didn't make enough copies, so at lunch I'll need to make more.

This comes from was a guided group session. And someone took notes while I was talking, and so I thought: “Wow, that’s a pretty good set of notes!” It’s something you can use for ideas on what to say, how to guide a session on the rebirthing technique.

The Article is called “Notes on the Rebirthing Technique”