

Conscious Breathing: A Path to Freedom

The Estonia Training

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The Five Principles of Breath Therapy

The first principle is the atmosphere.

The external environment, as well as the emotional atmosphere... the energetic atmosphere... the psychological atmosphere... and the physical atmosphere. Is the room comfortable? Is it warm, dry, soft, quiet... The first principle is about creating a nice space, a safe container.

For example at Lilleoru, the Babaji Ashram, I can rely on the atmosphere to do some of the healing almost by itself. The other night at Lilleoru, I was focusing on creating a certain space, an atmosphere of love, something sacred, a space of allowing...

And I felt how creating this type of atmosphere within myself, that my personal presence had a power to add something to the outer atmosphere, to enhance it.

There are certain places in the world that are powerful energetic places... you can just sit in one of those places, and something happens in you. The place is so powerful.

Or there are certain communities, groups of people who create a certain energetic atmosphere, where one feels "it's ok for me to be just how I am, to feel what I need to feel. It's safe here."

So I am very conscious of that: of creating an environment, an atmosphere, a space, a sacred space where healing and growth, awakening can take place...

The second principle is the technique.

If you breathe in a certain way, you are going to cause a certain thing to happen, regardless of the atmosphere. So the technique can be just as powerful as the atmosphere. And when you are good at the technique, you can do it in the most difficult or negative atmospheres—which is very useful by the way—because then you become a change agent. You have the power to change the atmosphere. And that brings us to the third principle.

The third principle is the presence of the teacher/coach/facilitator/guide.

Your personal presence makes a big difference in what happens in other people. Water only rises to its own level. What is open in you creates a space for that same thing to open in someone else. If you are unconscious of something, it's difficult for the other person to become aware of it. If you are afraid of something, if you resist something, it's hard for the other person to feel safe and relaxed.

The fourth principle is the mind of the breather.

We spend a lot of time working on this principle, because when the energy begins to flow, it is going to take the shape and form of the thoughts and beliefs and images that you hold.

We do a number of processes to explore what you hold in consciousness: “What is your intention? What do you want to get out of the session? What are your thoughts and ideas about yourself? What do you believe is possible? What are you willing to receive? What do you desire?”

The fifth Principle is “something else.”

This is a mystical factor, a magical factor, like grace. It comes like a blessing from above. You cannot earn it, you cannot work to deserve it. You cannot resist it. It just comes... for no reason, for any reason. And it comes to saints and sinners alike.

I am conscious of those five principles all the time when I am working. I am trying to maintain a certain inner atmosphere. I am trying to create a certain psychological, emotional, energetic atmosphere... of unconditional love... of freedom and safety...

I am also keenly focused on the breathing and the elements of the technique: always trying to make a person's skill at the process a little bit better, a little more perfect.

I am always trying to be conscious of the other person's inner world, watching for clues to what is occurring in their consciousness. This is difficult sometimes, because we have learned to hide our true feelings (even from ourselves). When we are afraid, we don't show it. When we are excited, we control it. When we are angry, we block it.

Whenever you get a sense of that happening inside the person, and you see that they are doing something to escape or avoid or suppress... fighting with it... trying to control it... You need to bring that to light. Alert them to their pattern, their reaction, and give them permission to let themselves be exactly how they are in each moment.

Breath Therapy Defined

The way I define Breath Therapy is that there are two levels to it.

1. The breath itself, the breathing mechanism has been damaged, injured. And it needs to be healed, fixed, or improved, in order to regain its original power. The fact is that, in almost everyone without exception, the breathing has become inhibited, blocked; it is not functioning fully, as nature intended. And during certain key moments, even small flaws can create tremendous dysfunction.

So getting the breath to be free and full and natural and open: this is the first level of Breath Therapy. Getting the person to breathe as nature intended, instead of the way that limiting habits or external negative forces have shaped it. To heal the inhibitions on the breathing mechanism brought on by early life fears and trauma.

2. The second level of Breath Therapy is that once the breathing has been restored, once the breathing is allowed to flow fully and freely, and naturally... then the breath itself becomes a therapeutic tool. So first you heal the breathing mechanism, the breathing system, and then you use the breath to heal everything else.

And so with Breath Therapy as I teach and practice it, is that you can use the body and the breath to heal the mind and emotions; and you can use the mind and the breath to heal the body and emotions.

Observing and Guiding the Breath

In directing the breath or observing the breath... in the practice of breath therapy... I mentioned earlier that you can vary the breathing in a number of ways: fast or slow, big breaths or small breaths... You can also vary the location: breathing high in the chest, low in the belly. Creating expansion and relaxation in the back, the sides, and so on.

You can also vary the shape and the sound of the breath: shape the stream of breath. A big round stream of breath shaped like an “oh.” I can hear the “oh” on the outside, but I can also internalize that shape and sound. And that shape and sound will activate different parts of you, different levels of your being.

Every time I change the shape of the stream, it changes the sound. And each individual shape and sound gives the stream of breath a different quality. And the breath can find its way into different places. It can light up different areas of the body. It can access a different levels... trigger different emotions... generate a different range of sensations.

You can also combine thought with the breath. So that with every breath you are focused on a certain thought: “relax... strength... safety... freedom...” So with every breath, you think that word. And every time you think about that word, it causes you to breathe.

You can generate a certain feeling. So that with each breath you are focused on a certain feeling... a certain sound, a certain picture, a certain emotion, a certain movement. Every time you breathe, you are creating some movement inside of you. So then the process becomes very rich, with multiple layers and levels.

So you are bringing in the breath and you are also bringing in a picture, a thought, a feeling, an emotion, a sound, a word, a movement... And then the process is so rich. And yet it can be very subtle.

You can be experiencing a beautiful feeling, and you then express or reflect that feeling with the breath: you can breathe in a way that matches, enhances, strengthens the feeling

A Simple Exercise from Gay Hendricks

Gay Hendricks teaches this very simple movement: when you exhale, your head drops and your spine curls. And when you inhale, your head comes up and you arch your back. The movement of the breath and the movement of the body come together.

This same movement happens in the embryo in the womb. It is expressing a primal pulse of energy. It is like a wave happening in the body... It is a very pleasurable movement. You can exaggerate it, or you can make it very subtle.

Sufi Techniques and Inventing Exercises and Meditations

The Sufis have a lot of techniques where they combine movement and breath; or they combine a thought or an intention and the breath. [exercise] Bowing the head in a quick and extreme way, bending from the waist up and down while exhaling, and thinking: "I empty my mind." You can imagine dumping out a garbage can! [breathing]

So you might invent something: a unique combination of an image, a thought, a sound, a movement, and the breath. You encourage your clients to do the same: just find what's enjoyable and interesting, and play with it.

Then when the person comes back for their next session: "Show me what you've been doing." "Tell me about what you've been thinking and feeling." "How have you been using the breath?" "What kinds of feelings and sensations have you been producing or generating, stimulating, activating?" "What have you been experimenting with? "What have you noticed?" "What results have you been getting?"

Dealing with Fear and Discomfort

I often send people in the opposite direction of what they've been doing by habit, because very often what people think is pleasurable, the direction that they think is toward pleasure, it's really away from something they fear. So I might turn them around and send them right back in the opposite direction, to face what it is they are unconsciously avoiding.

And of course, bowing to uncomfot is ok too. For example the classic dry throat. In fact, this is something that passes with practice and skill at relaxation. But a person may complain: "I can't breathe through my mouth, because when I breathe through my mouth, my throat gets dry. That feeling of a dry throat is uncomfortable and I don't want to feel it."

So I tell them: "It's ok. It's ok to swallow, to wet your whistle." And then go back to breathing thru your mouth again.

If people come and show me what they've been doing, and they are very active: we might make the session about being totally passive, extremely gentle... Or I see that someone is

afraid of intensity, but they say: “Oh no, it just feels good to breathe slowly and shallowly”

And of course their breathing is very subtle in a visible way, as if they don't want to disturb anything in themselves: they don't want to make any waves; they don't want to shake anything up. And they are right. It does feel good to avoid all that. It feels safe and comfortable to avoid disturbing any feelings, to be very still, quiet.. and barely breathing... ahhh...

But wouldn't it be wonderful to get that same feeling of peace and comfort in the middle of intensity? Isn't it useful to be able to access that peaceful calm place even when uncomfortable feelings come over you?

The only way to do it is to deliberately go into that intensity and then in the middle of it, find your comfort. Don't avoid the intensity to feel comfortable. And don't leave the comfort behind in order to feel the intensity.

All right, let's breathe.