

Insights into Breathwork

An Interview with Dan Brulé



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With Dan Brulé



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This interview took place in July of 2013. The interviewer is AdreZakrauskaite, a journalist with Raktas Magazine (“Raktas” means “key” in Lithuanian). This is an edited transcript of that interview. In it Dan reveals:

- His earliest awakening to the breath and the roots of his practice
- Breathing lessons from his medical and military training
- Personal teachers, guides, and mentors
- The connection to yoga and India
- The everyday benefits of breath awareness
- Three fundamental elements in every style or school of breathwork
- A practical formula for breathing practice and for self mastery
- The deepest effects and highest application of breathing practice
- How to know which teacher or technique is best for you
- The link between conscious breathing, health, and longevity
- Three basic breathwork exercises/techniques that everyone should practice
- Instruction and advice for attaining the most benefits from breathwork

A. What do you do now in your life?

D. Breathing is my profession and my passion, so I travel around the world and teach; I pass on what I've learned and what I think is really important. Breathing is my favorite way to be with people; it gives me a chance to be who I really am.

In that context, sometimes breathing is better than sex! For me, it's better than being a plumber or a carpenter...To be able to help people awaken to their essence? To their higher potential! Or to show them how to improve their health and their life on their own? It's awesome! It's a blessing!

I like to be innovative. I am definitely unorthodox. I love tweaking ancient traditions. I love to inspire people to try new things, to discover approaches, to create new simple solutions to old difficult problems.

I'm a missionary for the Spirit of Breath on the planet!

A. You've been studying and teaching breath and breathing techniques since the early 1970's. How did you become interested in this?

D. I don't really remember where it all started. For my whole life I've been fascinated with breathing.

Maybe it was in kindergarten or the first grade in Catholic school. I first heard the words from the book of Genesis: "God took dust of the earth and formed the body of man; then he breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Something about that caused such excitement in me. Childlike innocence, imagination, passion, enthusiasm... I think it was the first trigger, the first awakening to my mission in life, the first step on my path.

I had a number of childhood traumas connected to the breath, painful experiences—nearly drowning several times, which left me shaking and caused me to question things. They also they made me very conscious of my breathing. And for day afterwards, I was thankful for every breath I took!

Out of high school, my first profession, my first real job was as an x-ray technician. One of the most common exams in that business is a chest x-ray. When you take a chest x-ray, you always instruct the patients to, "take in a deep breath and hold it." Then click—you take the picture.

Soon, I had watched about a thousand people follow those simple instructions in their own unique way. I began to notice different patterns in these people: what muscles they engaged, how much effort they used, how they went about holding their breath, what it looked like when they relaxed. I was making observations about their conscious and unconscious breathing habits and patterns.

Then I went into the military and worked as a medical specialist and a deep-sea diver. I mixed gases for breathing – helium and oxygen mixes. I was doing underwater work and a lot of breath holding! I rescued drowning people and did CPR (cardio pulmonary resuscitation) on a number of occasions.

And the first time I resuscitated someone who was clinically dead, who had no pulse... His name was John Doherty. I was 19, an x-ray student at University Hospital in Boston...I blew into him, breathed into him, and he woke up. I thought it was a miracle that you could do something with breathing, could work with the breath, and something so amazing could happen. I was hooked!

I started to study everything I could find; and I started to follow anybody who was doing anything having connected with breathing. If they knew something about the breath, I was either kissing their feet or breathing down their neck.

A. And then you began to teach?

D. Yes. I began teaching people whatever I learned as soon as I learned it. At some point something turned and I began to invent my own methods by putting together different things from different people. Before I knew it I had my own style, my own approach. I was passing on things that I was learning from others, and also passing on things that I was inventing or discovering on my own.

D. Did you have your own teachers or mentors?

D. Oh yes, lots of them! Doctors, university professors, yogis, chi kung masters, martial artists, Buddhist masters, catholic priests, shamans... Some of my favorites are Bruno Hans Geba, Milton Young, Leonard Orr, Swami Rama, Stan Grof, Hu Bin, and many more... my ultimate teacher is Babaji the immortal yogi.

My most recent favorite is BudhPuri, a suryakriya master. In fact, I'm traveling to India in October to visit him again, and I am inviting people to join me on the trip. There is information about him and my trip on my website.

Actually, in a real way, everyone who comes to breathe with me is my teacher. I am still watching, still learning, still discovering things.

D. In Yoga lessons it's often said, that breathing is the first and the main source of energy, but people hardly ever think of that. Why is it important to be conscious of your breathing?

A. Yes, it is often overlooked and underestimated by many yoga students and teachers. Yet, one of the most essential teachings of yoga concerns "breath awareness" and "conscious breathing." As you become more aware of your breathing, you become more aware in general. The more conscious I am of my breathing—the subtle details of the breath, the more conscious I become of everything. Breathing is a good way to practice developing more awareness, to become a more conscious and aware human being.

And there of course are many extra benefits. There are points in the breathing that people have never observed. And some of those points are very powerful. They can lead you to a new awareness, and to states of ecstasy and profound peace. Breath is like a doorway; you can go through it and come into some very beautiful places.

A. What breathing techniques do you teach?

D. I teach hundreds of techniques depending on one's degree of health, level of skill, and reason for practicing. In a way, I am the Will Rogers of Breathing: I've never met a breathing technique I didn't like! I teach ancient techniques and modern ones. I teach techniques for increasing energy, for relaxation, and for inner training; for emotional healing, psychological health, and spiritual development.

And I have some basic, fundamental skills or teachings that I feel is important to pass on to everyone. If you look at all the various breathing exercises and techniques, and all the different schools of breathing, they have several things in common, certain basic, main, or universal aspects.

The first is awareness: teaching people to be more conscious of their breathing...I suggest that people tune into their breathing at different times and in different situations – how do you breathe when somebody is insulting you? How do you breathe when you are listening to music or trying to solve a math problem? How do you breathe when you are having sex? When you are confused, in pain, drowsy, excited, etc.

That's important, because specific breathing patterns are connected to specific states. Every psychological state, every emotional state, every physiological state is connected with a certain breathing pattern, a certain breathing quality.

The way you breathe when you are upset is different from the way you breathe when you are peaceful. The way you breathe when you're enjoying music is different from the way you breathe when you are arguing with someone. That is obvious to anyone who observes themselves or others.

But people don't focus on their breath in these moments, so they miss the opportunity to make connections on how certain breathing patterns contribute to, or actually cause or put us into certain emotional, psychological, or physiological states.

That's the first skill – becoming more aware of your breathing... noticing it... meditating on your breathing, listening to it, watching it, sensing it. The idea is to develop more intimate relationship with the flow of life in and through you. That awareness, that experience has profound benefits. And the more you do it, the more benefits you get.

The second skill is using the breath to relax and release the breathing mechanism: the skill of letting go of control.... Learning to set the breath free so that it can flow more naturally. This type of

breathwork involves clearing away the habit of holding your breath when in stress and learning to release your breath instead. We teach breathing as it connects to relaxation.

The third thing is breath control... conscious breathing. We learn to control the breathing, to regulate it, to use it. We give the breathing a certain pattern, a certain quality, we breathe with certain intentions.

So we might practice breathing fast, breathing slow, breathing high in your chest, low in your belly, making the inhales longer or making exhales longer, playing with the pauses between the breaths. So all of that is under breath control.

Depending on what you want to accomplish, you breathe in different ways. If I'm a martial artist and I want to bring more force or speed or grace to my movements, I'll use the breath in a certain way. If I'm sitting and appreciating the sunset, and want to maximize my enjoyment of it, then I'm going to use my breath in another way.

We get creative about breathing, about how to use the breath. We connect breathing with visualization, with movement; we use the breathing to generate energy, we use breathing to release stress.

So those 3 things – breath awareness, relaxation and breath control – they are the three pillars of breathwork, and we build on them, we mix them and put them together into unique exercises.

A. So, by controlling our breath we can control our emotions?

D. Yes. Absolutely. With breath control you control your emotions, you control your chemistry, the quality of your thoughts... Breath is the bridge between your body and your mind. If you can control the breath, you can control your mind and you can control your body. You can bring the body and mind together through the breath in some very powerful ways.

These are basic principles in many healing practices, in many body-mind approaches to healing, to performance, to creative endeavors. Breath is the bridge between the conscious mind and the subconscious mind, and so you can use breathing to make deep and lasting changes.

When you play with breathing, you play with chemistry. Every emotional or psychological state has certain chemistry to it. So when you play with your chemistry, you shift psychological and emotional states.

Change the way you breathe and you'll change the way you feel. Different breathing patterns trigger different thoughts. Thru conscious breathing, different emotional and spiritual qualities can begin to emerge. Change the way you breathe and you change the way your body functions.

D. How much time a day should we spend doing breathing practices?

A. It depends on how passionate, enthusiastic you are, how committed you are, and how determinate you are to achieve whatever goals you want to achieve. If you are really passionate about something, you are going to spend every available moment practicing it to get it as good as you can, so that you get the benefits as soon as possible.

I teach a basic formula: $10 + 10 + 10 \times 2$. That's forty minutes a day of practice. 10 minutes in the morning, 10 minutes at night, and 10 times during the day for 2 minutes. That's 40 minutes a day. If you put 40 minutes a day of focused attention into anything – playing violin, doing exercises, push-ups, you bring the benefits of the practice into your daily life.

If you practice something 40 minutes a day, every day without fail, within a few weeks or few months you will have accumulated enough practice to bring about many benefits. With that many hours of regular practice, it doesn't matter what is it—you are going to get very good at it. And so I recommend 40 minutes of practice a day, perhaps in addition to more extended, intensive regimes. Depending on people that come, I give them certain specific things to practice.

D. What are the effects of conscious breathing?

A. For the first few years of our lives we were given the programs to limit who we are. If you had been born in a different culture, a different family, in a different time in history, in a different socio-economic setting, you would be a different person. And so it seems to me that “who people are” is almost a product of random chance!

It's not a self-created life. They are not expressing their essence, their highest potential or even living the principles that they may value; they are not honoring their unique purpose in life, they are not in touch with their essence.

What they are doing is living out programs that they were given to them by others. And so that for me is the highest potential of breathwork: to wake us up to who we really are. And it gives us a tool and a way to become more of what is possible for us, and what we dream to be.

Today, ordinary people can accomplish things that in the past only the greatest yogis could. The average person can experience states that only the Buddha or Confucius, or Jesus was supposed to have experienced. We put them very high upon the pedestal, but they were simply people who broke through to their ultimate potential, to their higher-selves.

For me the highest use of breathwork is to embody our higher-self, to reach our highest potential. You can use breathwork to get with headaches, to control your heart-beat, blood pressure, reduce stress and anxiety, perform better; you can do lots of things, but for me the juiciest thing is to go for gold! Let's use it to become golden beings, to become self-realized, to awaken as a Buddha, to become a yogi master. Let's use breath to unlock our unlimited potential!

A. Now a days there are so many yoga teachers, gurus, breathing masters... How to choose the right one and not to get lost?

D. Well, you have to be one. Don't choose one: become one. There was a time when there was only one Buddha on the planet, there was a time there was only one Jesus walking on earth. Today there are tens of thousands—probably millions of Buddhas walking the earth! Things are accelerating. You can pass Buddha in the street and not know it, sit beside one on a bus and not know it. You could live next door to one and not realize it. And if you are not careful, you could be one and not know it!☺ So the more people awaken, the easier is for all of us to awaken.

I'm like the Bruce Lee of breathing. There are traditional approaches to breathing like Kriya Yoga, where you have a tradition where a master works with a student for their lifetime and before the master dies, he passes on the teaching, initiate the next teacher. There are living traditions like that, that have been passed down through the centuries. That's useful, and for some people that's the purpose of their life: to maintain and carry on a tradition, to be loyal to that tradition.

I think we should be creating new traditions and I think it's absolutely okay to take something from one tradition and mix it with another tradition, which is often against the rules. You can't study with one teacher, then study with another one, then another, and then put all those things together – that's a sin! But that's exactly what I think we need to do. We need to be our own scientists.

If you wake up in the morning and have feeling that you need to do something, read a book or meet someone, you should jump on that feeling and follow it while it's still fresh. See where it takes you; allow that spontaneous childlike nature, that curiosity to come. But we've been trained that we must do this, that you shouldn't do this, you must only do that and never do this... That feels like bullshit for me. Maybe it's met for small percent of people, who for some karmic reason are there in this world to be loyal to some old dusty tradition.

But now the secrets are out in the open; the cats are out of the bag. You know what's happening now. There is the Internet; and now secrets that were once only revealed to the very chosen few, are wide open and available to anyone on the web. That's not an accident: we're approaching an evolutionary point. A huge shift is coming. And the old ways, the old paths aren't going to help. We need to be exponential, simultaneous, not linear, not sequential.

If your breath is open, if you get out of your head and get into your heart, you can clear away the unconscious junk that blocks your view of reality. If you don't clear away the limited perceptions that you were given, then when you look at yourself you won't see who you really are; when you look at the world you won't see how it really is... If you use that kind of limited consciousness to make decisions, you'd be better off following just about anybody else's advice; or you could flip a coin and be just as safe.

However, if you can get clear, if you can drop a big portion of your programming, get in touch with your heart, get in touch with your intuition, then that will lead you to whatever teacher, book, or method is best, is next for you. In fact, if you're ready, then it doesn't matter which teacher you choose, doesn't matter what book you read, doesn't matter what method you practice...Your readiness is going to bring a power to what you do and that's what's going to make it work.

The teacher is just a secondary aspect. The technique is just a detail. Your readiness – that's what does the work.

A. Conscious breathing also has a positive effect on health, doesn't it?

D. Extremely positive! Yes. When you're breathing, you're playing with vital chemical elements, like carbon dioxide. People think oxygen is good and carbon dioxide is bad: "in with the good, out with the bad." In fact, carbon dioxide is a volatile acid. And one of the most critical physiological or metabolic activities in every living organism is the pH balance: the acid base balance. It's so critical that there are number of redundant systems to make sure that we stay within a very precise narrow level or zone.

When you play with your breathing, you play with your carbon dioxide level. By building up carbon dioxide you tip your pH in one direction, and by blowing off carbon dioxide you tip your pH in the other direction. So through breathing you can actually get handle on the most vital health factors.

If you think of staying healthy, then you have to realize that every living organism—if it wants to survive—needs to eliminate metabolic waste. One of the strongest theories about aging involves the accumulation and poor elimination of toxins and wastes from our system. Free radicals and so on. If you look at how every human eliminates metabolic waste, it goes like this: 3% of our metabolic waste is eliminated through defecation, 7% through urination 20% through perspiration.

That leaves 70%, which is released through respiration. The majority of toxins and metabolic waste is being eliminated through the breathing! So, if you think having regular bowel movements are important, and that working up a good sweat now and then is healthy, then you have you consider breathing, because the better you breathe, the better you eliminate waste, the healthier you will be.

Another unarguable fact is the direct link between respiratory capacity and life expectancy. If you can improve or maintain peak respiratory capacity as you age, will not only maintain better health, you will improve your odds of living longer.

A. What do you think about Lithuanian people? It's often said that they are quite depressed, negative. What do you notice?

D. Everybody is the same on the inside. There are superficial, surface differences. People wear social masks and you can't judge them by their masks. I have a convenient mask, I don't look particularly

joyful, I don't look like a big giddy smiley kid, but I contain a lot of joy. And I experience continuous inner peace and tremendous joy.

Yes, many Lithuanians seem to have of a look of seriousness to them, but I think that's just a superficial mask, a social thing that everyone unconsciously takes on and copies. It doesn't say anything about what's really happening inside of them. I find that the deeper you look inside the people, the more they are the same.

If I go to the centre of myself, I pop up in the same place that you pop up when you go to the center of yourself. We are all one at innermost point. Maybe everywhere I go I attract the same kind of people, and so maybe my view of world is different from the average person. Everywhere I go, I meet very loving people, I meet people who are sincere spiritual seekers, I meet people who want to make a difference in the world, who want to create or experience something more in life. Maybe I just attract a certain kind of person. 😊

A. Maybe can you suggest some breathing techniques for ordinary people?

D. There are certain universal principles. And if you're going to practice breathing techniques, then you may as well apply or at least honor some of those universal principles. You can't just open a book on yoga or something, where it says inhale for a count of 4, hold it for a count of 8, exhale for a count of 12... And then force that pattern on yourself. That's so artificial. Maybe it worked in the old days, maybe it works for some people, but I don't think it's a useful way.

What I suggest is that people practice the basics, for example simply be aware of your breathing. Spend time everyday doing nothing, just sitting and observing how you breathe. Don't do anything to the breath except observe it. Don't breathe in any certain way: just sit and meditate on your breathing. I suggest that everyone do that.

This daily practice will begin to open your intuition, it will quiet your mind, it will relax your body; and you'll be in a better state to make decisions, to make choices, an ease and clarity will come to you. Simply observe your breathing; notice the breath coming in, and going out... There may be pauses between the breaths. Observe them. Experience them.

That's what Buddha was doing and he became enlightened, so I suggest that everyone do that. It is meditation. You can meditate on a mantra, on a picture of a saint, you can sit by the water and watch sparkling sun on the water, you can listen to music and meditate on it. But using the breath as a meditation has all the benefits of meditation plus a lot of benefits that other forms of meditation don't have. That's the first thing, a technique or exercise if you want to call it that. Everyone should spend 10-15 minutes twice a day, every day, simply observing their breathing.

The second thing is to learn to use the breath to let go. Practice an exaggerated sigh of relief. Practice releasing the exhale, setting it free. Don't control the exhale: let it go with a sigh of relief. That's

another basic technique that everyone should practice. Learn to let go the exhale quickly and completely.

Take a longer, deeper, or more expansive inhale to produce a greater release, to trigger a reflexive exhale. Let the exhale begin to do some work for you. Learn to let go the exhale quickly and completely. Let the breath go without holding on and without controlling. Get good at letting go of the breath, and then you can apply that letting go to many other things.

Some people try to let go pain, tension, fear, anxiety, but they haven't learnt to let go of their breath, and so they struggle with letting go of all those things. If you can't let go your exhale, don't be surprised if you can't let go physical pain or tension; don't be surprised if you can't let go of thoughts that are going around your head.

But if you practice letting go of your exhale consistently and regularly, you are going to get good at letting go of much more than just your breath. You are going to get good at letting go of programming, of conditioning, of negative thoughts and limiting beliefs. You'll be able to let go of past, and of disease before it becomes something serious inside of you. You'll be able to release stress, anxiety, and muscular tensions.

And when you learn to let go totally, you can drop into a deeper place within yourself. You can fall into your center. The sigh of relief is not really a technique. It is a natural reflex. Everyone already knows how to do it. The idea is to make it more dramatic, more exaggerated. Do it consciously. Do it regularly.

The third technique is to use rhythm. Breathe in a continuous rhythm for a period of time. When you walk, breathe in the rhythm of your footsteps. Feel your heartbeat, and breathe along with the rhythm of your heart: perhaps breathing in for 2 or 3 or 4 beats, and then out for 2 or 3 or 4 beats. You can listen to music, and instead of tapping the foot, let your breath move to the rhythm.

A connected continuous rhythm is a very powerful technique that everyone should practice. Take away the pauses between the in-breath and the out-breath: connect the breaths. It could be fast or slow as you like, but make it steady and rhythmic. Establishing regular rhythm of breathing creates order in the system. You can use breathing to regulate many other physiological functions.

Many people who practice mantras out loud don't realize that what they are doing is regulating their breathing. Reading Shakespeare's sonnets puts your breathing in a certain regular rhythm. If you repeat certain prayers again and again, you put your breathing into a regular pattern. It really doesn't matter how you regulate the breath, it's going to create a certain order, and other systems will regulate themselves around the breath.

Breathing is the only system in the body that is completely under our control, and also completely involuntary. That's not an accident of nature, that's not a coincidence: that's an opportunity, that's an invitation to take part in our own nature, to involve ourselves in our own evolution.

Those are three things that I suggest. And you don't need a teacher to do it. Practice observing your breathing, use the exhale to learn to let go, and practice regulating your breath in any way that is interesting to you.

Bring breath awareness and conscious breathing into your everyday life. Play with different breath sounds, different rhythms. Learn to breathe into all your breathing spaces: lower, middle, upper. Combine breathing with visualization. Use breathing together with mantras or prayers. Combine breathing with movement. All this will be more than enough to inspire and motivate you to go deeper, to explore more.

Breath is life. To breathe is to live. This is not just a pretty philosophy. It is a fact in reality! The secret of life is right under your nose! The sooner you begin to explore and develop this natural resource, the sooner you can reap the benefits!

What are you waiting for? Start right now! Expand and relax... pull in and let go. You are not just breathing air: you are breathing energy—the energy of life. You are breathing light! Love yourself with every breath!

Play with your breath. Breathe in a way that strengthens you and soothes you. Breathe in a way that feels good, that brings you pleasure, that you find interesting. If you can get out of your head and breathe into your heart, something in you will click...

At some point in your practice, who you thought was doing the breathing will take a back seat, and something else... the spirit of life... the breath itself will breathe you! Then you are home free!