**MODULE 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO BREATHWORK**

**LESSON 2: THE HISTORY, SCOPE AND STYLES OF BREATHWORK**

From the beginning of recorded history, across many cultures from the East to the West through ancient Egypt, humanity has sought to define, to explain the indefinable - to attribute to all living things something beyond a mechanical explanation of how the body, the animal, the plant functions - to describe what they felt distinguished the living from the inanimate - the spirit that moved within.

In ancient Chinese texts, it is named as Chi or prana. In the times of ancient Greeks and Romans, such as Hippocrates and Galen it was the vital spark - thought to be taken in through the air.

So, it began this connection of breath to medicine and to spirit. Over time Western medicine especially became more mechanistic - focused upon only what could be observed and measured directly. As this Western mechanistic and causal orientation to medicine and to science flourished, the knowledge and understanding of life, of breath, of the forces moving within all life, within the human were ignored, forgotten by some, dismissed as superstitious by others.

The breath, to inspire and transcend, moved from the world of medicine to the world of spirituality and transformation. Beginning in the 20th century awareness and discussion of the power of these “intangible and indefinable” qualities of the breath has returned to the fields of science and medicine. The ancient practices of yoga and breath, of Ayurvedic medicine and breath, the modern marriage of breath and peak performance have returned to the arenas of Western medicine, psychotherapy, and spirituality. As if the disowned/illegitimate child has been accepted, at least provisionally, back into the arms of its extended family.

Breathwork as a form of conscious connected breathing was first put forward by Leonard Orr with Rebirthing in 1974. Later named Rebirthing Breathwork, this work seeks to heal birth trauma memories through the utilisation of a pattern of powerful conscious connected breathing that activates and releases the emotions of birth trauma and birth trauma breath patterns.

In 1979 Vivation as a breathing technique was introduced by Jim Leonard. Vivation is a technique that focuses upon the breather feeling and tracking the most prominent sensation or emotion in their body. The goal is to utilise the breath to breath “through” the sensation/emotion to integrate. The release of the physiological energy used to contain or manage the sensation/emotion results in relaxation and bliss: Integration ultimately results in ecstasy.

There have been many other manifestations of conscious connected breathing. Holotropic Breath Work developed independently from Rebirthing Breathwork by Stan and Christiana Grof also utilises conscious connected breathing. Spiritual Breathwork developed by Dan Brulé utilises conscious connected breathing, with the focus of going even beyond “ecstasy” to connect with the Oneness that we all are. There are many other breath workers and therapists who offer conscious connected breathing as a tool to increase self-awareness, integrate life traumas and bring a new level of health and wellbeing on an emotional, a physical and a spiritual level.

**The Scope of Breathwork**

Breathwork, its study and application, extend from the ancient Chinese practice of Chi Gong (a physical, mental and energetic practice), through the application of Ayurvedic medicine, the spiritual practices of Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, Hinduism, the yogic traditions that began with Kriya and Tantra Yoga. It is infused into the Western practices of psychotherapy, rebirthing, performance enhancement, relaxation, transformational healing and medicine.

**Benefits of Breathwork**

The nature of modern life has changed the way that we breathe. As we have become more disconnected from nature, desk bound and suffocated with restrictive clothing and more adrenalised, the more shut down and restricted our breathing has become. The disconnection from our natural open and free breathing pattern is being reflected in our physical health, global epidemic of fatigue and rising cancer rates as well as our fear based, reactive and addictive behaviour.

The transformation of the automatic physical process of the breath to a conscious focused purposeful action has many benefits.

It affects our sleep, memory, concentration and energy levels. It is the foundation of mindfulness and for living consciously. Every aspect of our personality depends on our breath. Conscious connected breathing is used to transform and release feelings and patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that create stress and ill health.

Physical: Breathwork can be utilised to alleviate, or eradicate specific physical conditions such Asthma, hypertension, depression, anxiety and chronic pain. By freeing our breathing pattern, we are optimising oxygenation of the cells and prevent build-up of toxins and inflammation. Breathwork balances the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system which is necessary for the functioning of the body-mind system. With modern life pushing us in the direction of adrenalised energy, we succumb to the effects of a chronically activated sympathetic response and build-up of free radicals in the system. It improves sleep, memory, concentration and energy levels.

Emotional: Breathwork allows us to open to, feel and release emotional blockages that eventually manifest physically. It supports us to feel safe in our vulnerability. Breathing not only improves physical functions, it is also a pathway inward, a bridge between the body, mind and spirit. It is the foundation of mindfulness and for living consciously. Every aspect of our personality depends on our breath. Conscious connected breathing is used to transform and release feelings and patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that create stress and ill health.

Spiritual: Breathwork is a simple and universal way to tap into our spirituality and have an experience of the divinity that resides within. This brings us meaning and a deep sense of peace and fulfilment.

**Ways of working with the Breath**

1. Breath Awareness

Breath awareness provides the foundation of all other kinds of breathing work but is transformational in itself. It is also the cornerstone of mindfulness. When we are aware of the breath and we turn towards it, we begin to change the way we perceive and respond to our thought, feelings and environment. Breath awareness shifts us from a reactive to a more responsive state and moves us to be more present with ourselves without judgement. By learning to be aware of the breath and to consciously track the inhalations and exhalations without trying to manipulate or change anything, we can gain many insights into the relationship of our breath and inner world.

2. Controlled breathing/Conscious Breathing

Conscious breathing and breath control techniques often practiced as part of yoga serves to support health, energy and balance in everyday life. Its role is to activate the parasympathetic nervous system which serves to relax and rejuvenate the system. It can be seen as “maintenance breathing”.

Breath control exercises can also be used to bring about some kind of effect or change in state. There are thousands of techniques and exercises that are used across the spiritual traditions. The result is brought about by alternating the rate and rhythm of the breath and changing the speed of the inhalations, exhalations and pauses to bring about changes in our chemicals and hormones but also in our mind, emotions and consciousness.

Conscious connected breathing falls on the other end of the spectrum of breathwork. Breathing in a connected rhythm initially activates the sympathetic nervous system, and creates a slightly altered state of consciousness. This creates an opening for the release of stuck patterns of thought, emotion and posture that prevent us from accessing our natural state and our potential.

3. Focused breathing

Here, we use our focus and attention to experience the sensations in a particular part of the body and we use our intention to direct the inner and outer movements and energies of the breath to that area. We can use visualisation, but we do not intentionally alter the rhythm and rate of our breathing, we simply visualise a part of our body and imagine or sense that we are breathing into that part of the body.

This technique is very useful for self-healing and can help open to the various breathing spaces, helping us to repattern dysfunctional breathing patterns. When we become aware of where we are not breathing, we can focus on these areas allowing the breath to engage them more fully.

4. Movement Supported Breathing

Movement is a fundamental expression of life force. Life and breath depend on movement. The way we breathe depends on the coordination, flexibility and fluidity of our breathing muscles, fascia, bones, tendons, ligaments and bodily fluids. Every movement we make shapes our breathing in a particular way. Movement can be used to support breathing through, stretching, dancing, tai chi and walking.

5. Position Supported Breathing

The specific positions and postures we habitually take often reflect our needs, hopes, beliefs, physical habits and attitudes towards ourselves and to life. They reflect our openness to ourselves and to others. Every position we take shapes our breathing in a particular way. If we habitually hold a posture that tightens and restricts our back and causes the shoulders to be tight, this will, in time, impede our internal movements associated with healthy breathing which involves learning how to engage all the breathing spaces in our body.

6. Touch Supported Breathing

In touch supported breathing, we use various kinds of touch to awaken the sensory fibres in the skin and areas just below the skin. This can have a powerful effect on our breath as it helps us to release underlying tensions and activates the relaxation response. Touching can involve gentle touch, rubbing and massage, skin pulling, tapping and pressure.

7. Sound Supported Breathing

The sounds we produce with our vocal cords ride on the waves of our breath and contribute to the harmony or disharmony of our being, perceptions and life. They also shape the way we breathe. Work with sound can help us feel and give healthy expression to our often unconscious emotions and can release any negatively safely and creatively. Each sound we make and hear has a specific energy frequency that have very specific effects on our system.

The vagus nerve which is responsible for activating the parasympathetic response has tiny branches that innervate the larynx. So, any chanting, singing and sighing with the breath will enhance the effects of the relaxation response.

**Assignment:**

Research references to breath in the following traditions and philosophies:

* Yoga and Ayurveda
* African traditional wisdom eg San tradition
* The Bible
* The Kaballah
* Chinese Medicine
* Huna (Hawaiian)
* Sufi tradition