**MODULE 3: THE PRACTICE OF CONSCIOUS BREATHING**

**LESSON 1: THE CORNERSTONES OF BREATHWORK**

**Three Cornerstones of Breathwork: Awareness, Relaxation and Energy**

In the first few sessions with a client, it’s best not to have any focused intention for the session. Rather work on establishing the basic foundational skills of breathing which will serve to break any dysfunctional patterns that the client has developed. Remember that the aim in breathwork is to train a way of breathing that is free, full and responsive, a reflection of freedom from fear and living the highest expression of self. Breathing in this way will naturally support optimum cellular respiration and flow of subtle energies in the body. In later sessions bring in the idea of intention where you can work with specific issues and challenges.

The 3 foundation skills - “Formula for Transformation” - in Conscious Breathing are Awareness, Relaxation and Energy.

1. **Breath Awareness.**

Breath awareness is the foundation of Breathwork.

Most of the time we are not conscious of our breathing, because we don’t have to be. Our breath is under the control of our autonomic nervous system that also regulates our heart rate and temperature which maintains homeostasis and balance. It’s only when breathing becomes difficult or when we need more of it, do we become aware of its importance.

Before we can start using the breath and controlling it, first we must learn to get to know it, make friends with it, establish a relationship with it.

We need to support the client to develop a level of non-reactivity to the inner experience and the ability to hold intensity, without getting caught up in it.

The more aware we become of the breath, the more we become aware of our feelings, thoughts, habits and posture, giving us an opportunity to make more conscious choices.

Breath awareness is a mindfulness practice and is the first step in breaking out of habitual patterns that stand in the way of accessing our potential. The more breath awareness we have, the more benefits we can gain from all the conscious breathing exercises that follow.

Observe natural breath and dysfunctional breathing habits in your client.

* Posture: The military posture of “belly in, chest out” projects an image of strength and courage or in other cases, a self-consciousness about weight. These can become unconscious chronic postures that block full breathing into the belly
* Ability to relax: Relationship with body. Fear of sexual energy, sexual trauma and self-consciousness can cause people to freeze and contract the pelvic and lower abdominal area. Tension or discomfort due to digestive problems or menstrual problems can also cause habitual holding, tension and contraction
* Restrictive clothing: Bras, tight belts and tight jeans all restrict the flow of natural, flowing open breathing
* Breathing through mouth or nose: Often people with anatomical problems in their nasal architecture e.g. deviated septum or chronic sinusitis develop a habit of breathing through the mouth at rest
* Breathing mechanics: Respiratory rate, volume, location i.e. chest or belly

When we observe these details, all the subtle and not so subtle aspects and patterns, we can trust our intuitive minds to synthesize and collate all the information and inform how the session will unfold.

Get your client comfortable with their bodies and inner world. Guiding them to notice and become aware of their thoughts, feelings, sensations and emotions throughout the session.

Guide breathing with attention, willfully and deliberately, supporting the development of a very conscious relationship with the breath. Observing the movement and flow of air, action of muscles, and resulting sensations. Encourage the focus on these details of the experience and to keep turning inwards to look, listen and feel.

In this exercise, we are letting the autonomic system regulate the breathing, all we are doing is bringing our attention to it, bringing our conscious attention to an automatic function, linking conscious to unconscious.

This exercise can be guided sitting in a chair in a relaxed posture that ‘embodies dignity’ maintaining a relaxed awareness or lying down. Hands can rest on the lap, palms facing up or placed gently on the belly.

Remember that when you are guiding this practice, you are probably dealing with someone that is caught up in layers of mind activity and relaxation is a process.

Asking someone to place their ‘feet on the floor’, helps them to feel their body, get grounded and come into the present moment. A deep breath followed by a sigh will help with this.

You can play around with the 4 dimensions of focus here

* Broad outer: ‘Keeping your eyes open, bring attention to the broad environment around you, becoming aware of everything at the same time, engaging all your senses.
* Become aware of the room you’re in, the colours. Tune into the different layers of sound, notice if there’s a scent in the air.’
* Narrow outer: ‘Now narrow your focus, hone in on just one thing, a sound, a leaf on a tree and keep your focus there.’
* Broad inner: ‘Close your eyes now and turn your attention inwards noticing your whole body at the same time, all your sensations.’
* Narrow inner: ‘Now narrow your attention on just your breath. Without controlling the breath in any way, simply enjoy its natural gentle rhythm, just watching, just observing. Feel the sensation of the breath in your nostrils, the cooler air of the inhale vs the warmer air of the exhale. Feel the breath passing down the back of your throat. And feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you inhale and exhale. Notice the texture of your breath, its natural rhythm or pattern. Notice if you are feeling any restriction or tightness. Notice the nature of the inhale and exhale. Which is longer? Notice the gaps and pauses between the breaths.’

Some prompts:

* Choose a point of focus of the breath, whether that is the breath in your nostrils or the belly.
* As soon as you notice a thought, simply notice what the thought is and without judging it, getting annoyed with yourself or engaging the thought, gently guide your awareness back to the feeling of the breath.
* Don’t fight what is coming up inside you whether it is a thought, emotion or sensation, simply be the neutral watcher and keep returning your attention to your breath.
* Stay alert, keeping a relaxed awareness, feeling the turbulence of your mind settling and allowing yourself to rest in your StillPoint.

Homework for client:

* Develop the habit of observing your breath in different situations throughout the day.
* How are you breathing when you are concentrating on a task, feeling stressed, feeling relaxed, exercising, listening to someone, having a shower.
* Practice breath awareness for 1 week - self practice 20 mins a day and journal your experiences

**2. Relaxation - Let Go**

True relaxation is the forgotten art of the 21st century and the new paradigm in peak performance. More work is done in a state of relaxation than we realise.

Being in a constant state of ‘high energy’ or adrenalised energy is useful in the short term but toxic to the system in the long term. Most of us are holding habitual patterns of tension that need to be unraveled so that energy can flow effectively throughout our system.

We ‘react’ to relaxation by falling asleep but conscious relaxation is a skill that is fundamental to self-mastery. Breath holds the secret to letting go and activate the relaxation response. We use the breath to relax more quickly, more deeply, and in more situations.

Most people struggle to relax and are not even aware of the amount of tension the body habitually holds. Test the ability to relax on the exhale. Deepen the inhale slightly through the mouth or the nose. Invite a full free exhale and notice any holding patterns and areas of chronic tension. Encourage an open jaw, relaxed throat, full and free yawning and release of joints and muscles with the exhale. Invite and enhance a very natural breathing reflex: the sigh of relief, which is an built in recovery loop that nature has provided to help us to deactivate the stress response and reboot the system.

You might need to use props, loosen restrictive clothing, or use touch to facilitate deeper relaxation. Encourage sound on the exhale, the sound of an exaggerated sigh. Use the passive soft exhale to relax and release tension from the body. The idea is to snap the exhale loose, to release the air quickly and completely, allowing the elastic tendency of the muscles, gravity and atmospheric pressure to facilitate the exhale. You may need to encourage the feeling of complete exhale by pushing gently on the chest, encouraging more ‘emptying’.

**Homework for client:**

* Dedicated practice for 10 minutes daily
* And at random moments throughout the day whenever you notice a buildup of tension.
* Train relaxation recovery loops into your system by consciously practicing the sigh of relief throughout the day.
* Rather than habitually holding the breath in times of stress, release the exhale together with stressful thoughts and physical tension.

**3. Energy - Take Charge**

We use breath control to access more energy and more power and aliveness.

This exercise is about experiencing the breath as life force energy and getting comfortable with intensity. In the last exercise we engaged the exhale to deepen relaxation. In this foundational exercise, we are engaging the inhale to activate energy in the system by increasing lung capacity and optimising oxygenation of cells.

Using the inhale, draw the breath up into the chest, expanding the lungs to ‘charge the heart’.

The inhale is about ‘taking charge’ of the process and of your life, drawing in life, energy, nourishment with the air you breathe. Get clients to stretch, reach gently beyond limits and open into new spaces. Encourage opening into all three breathing spaces.

Experiment with other techniques to open up breathing areas, such as using breath sounds, equalising the flow, pursed lip breathing to achieve balance and harmony, or access surpassed or forgotten energy.

When you challenge a deeper inhale, chronic tension patterns will show up. Use of neck, accessory muscles. Work on a better **energy to effort ratio**, i.e. how much effort you use to accomplish a deep breath. If we struggle or use too much effort to breathe, we use up all the energy we get from the breathing and there’s no net gain. Sometimes, when the client is trying to ‘get it right’ it is normal to use extra effort. Encourage the skill of taking in big powerful breaths while keeping the neck and shoulders very relaxed.

Encourage the feeling and way of breathing that expands the heart in the dimensions: top to bottom, side to side and back to front.

**Homework for Client:**

* 10 minutes every morning for 5 days beginning with breath awareness. Practice together with the sigh of relief, bringing all 3 cornerstones together
* For 2 minutes whenever you’re feeling a slump of energy