

Transformational Breath: An Ancient Wisdom

*Totally windless, by itself, the One breathed;
Beyond that, indeed, nothing whatever was.
'Hymn of Creation'
Rig Veda X.129.2*

‘C’onscious’ breathing is as old as *yoga*, which is at least 5000 years.

Near the north-west corner of modern India, the Indus River Valley civilisation traces back to at least the third millennium BC. It is probably much older. Archaeological digs at the sites of the ancient cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa reveal a highly evolved civilisation which utilised elaborate drainage systems, dams, centralised storage granaries, three story houses, bathrooms, assembly halls and even colleges. There, soapstone seals used by merchants show the great God Shiva sitting in *yoga* posture. Shiva is the ‘Lord of *yoga*’, the Source from which *yoga* springs. At the heart of *yoga* practice lies the breath, and for thousands of years *yogis* have been practising and teaching various forms of breathing exercises known as *pranayama* or breath control. *Prana* or ‘vital force’ circulates in the body, influencing mental and physical health, as well as the quality of our consciousness. If the circulation of life force is blocked due to stress or injury, illness may result. If our life force is weak, we lose our ability to concentrate. We feel fatigued and lack energy. If it is disturbed, our minds and emotions become disturbed. Breath is the connecting link between the vital force and the body-mind. If we stop breathing for even a few minutes, the body’s connection with the life force is broken and death results. By using breathing techniques, especially in conjunction with meditation and *yoga* postures, we gain deep relaxation, inner clarity, emotional stability, better health and greater ability to concentrate.

In modern society, where we spend much of our time sitting hunched over computers, desks or the steering wheels of our cars, most people breathe very poorly. Bad posture, air pollution and constricted, shallow breathing add to the problem. Simply by breathing properly, many of our health problems, including fatigue, nervousness, insomnia, poor circulation, weak concentration, tiredness and depression can be alleviated or even eliminated. Practising even a few minutes of *yogic* breath two or three times a day will make an enormous difference to our well being.

The beginnings of Rebirthing in the West

The 'sixties and 'seventies marked the beginning of the West's fascination with *yoga* and its benefits. Many seekers, young and old, travelled to India in search of the inner peace and wisdom offered by the ancient system of *yoga*. *Yogis* also came to the West, travelling and sharing their knowledge with millions of people. The Beatles took up the practice of Transcendental Meditation and, almost overnight, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi became world famous. Today, in nearly every town and city of North America and Europe, *yoga* classes are taught in studios, schools, community centres and health clubs. Many have taken up some form of meditation. The popularity of *yoga* continues to grow. *Yoga* is clearly not a passing fad but is here to stay, profoundly influencing the very foundations of Western civilisation in a positive way.

During the early 'seventies Leonard Orr, an American *yogi*, began experimenting with a form of *kriya* (active) breathing which he termed 'rebirthing'. Leonard had spent much time in India studying with a Himalayan *yogi* known as Babaji. Inspired by Babaji, Leonard and a group of associates, including Sondra Ray – a widely read author of books on healing and transformation in relationships – developed the rebirthing technique, also known as 'conscious-connected-breathing'. They found the benefits of this form of conscious breathing extraordinary and the practice began to catch on. Thousands of Canadians, Americans and Europeans put themselves through two hour 'rebirthing' sessions and noticed remarkable changes in their lives. Problems that had been plaguing them for years would begin to dissolve or simply disappear. Negative patterns of self-sabotage would begin to unravel and new possibilities for a creative and happier life would open up. Relationships would improve. Well being would replace ill health. Feelings of depression, even suicidal thoughts, would give way to a more positive, affirmative view of life. Many found the burden of living transforming into the joy of living. The 'rebirthing' method, loosely defined as a form of *kriya* (action) *yoga* (to unite), became widely practised in many countries.

How it works

The rebirthing process is easy to learn and can be practised almost anywhere. What is required is a quiet room, a trained breathing 'coach' and about two undisturbed hours. The client reclines in a comfortable position, usually on a couch or mat, and covered with a blanket. The breathing coach sits beside the client, providing a 'safe space' and guidance when needed. Basically, the client

practices about 60 minutes of ‘conscious-connected-breathing’ and surrenders into a process that unfolds naturally from within. The responsibility of the coach is to ensure that the client is breathing correctly and feels safe and secure while going through the rebirthing process. An experienced breath-worker will also be able to provide valuable feedback to the client during and after the session. But, mainly, the coach simply observes the process and allows the client to have his or her own experience.

This ‘transformational breath’ session, when practised correctly, follows a simple pattern. The client is resting comfortably with the eyes closed and begins the ‘conscious-connected-breathing’ cycle. The breath-worker is watching the process and corrects the client’s breathing as needed. If the breathing becomes irregular or forced the coach will remind his client to breathe correctly, to relax, to connect the breaths, etc. If the client forgets to breathe or begins to fall asleep, the coach will encourage him or her to remain conscious, to stay present, to stay with the breath. The rebirther will ask him what he is thinking about in order to identify the underlying belief that is pushing him into unconsciousness. If the client cannot see the background thought, the rebirther will remain aware that some belief is beginning to manifest and track it down during the course of the session. When the breathing cycle is complete, he will give his client an appropriate affirmation in order to clarify and transform this core, unconscious belief. The work or action (*kriya*) of rebirthing, however, is done entirely by the client, with the rebirther’s active support.

At the beginning of the session, the client will be primarily outwardly focussed, with his attention on the room, the coach, his own body, noises, odours, etc., basically anything within his field of perception. As the conscious breathing cycle progresses, his attention will become progressively inwardly directed, naturally and without effort. His conscious mind will become quieter and he will become increasingly aware of what he is experiencing *within* his body and mind. Correspondingly, awareness of his external environment will diminish. As the conscious mind becomes quieter and more surrendered to the present moment, repressed psychic matter (traumas, stresses, buried emotions, old hurts and wounds, etc) will begin to resurface and bubble up to consciousness. The transformational breathing process is the vehicle that delivers these buried experiences to the conscious mind for release. There is nothing mystical about the subconscious and the repressed psychic matter that is stored within it. The subconscious is buried in the nervous system and is a storehouse of memories (both painful and pleasant) not immediately accessible to the conscious mind. The energy of the breathing process begins to drive these memories up to the surface. Concurrently, the suppressed energy associated with those memories gets

released from the nervous system and manifests as emotions, sensations and desires. In other words, *conscious breathing is purification*. Because the mind is quiet and enjoying the heightened sense of peace and security arising from its growing awareness of Being, it is able to 'be with' the suppressed material coming to the surface as an observer rather than an active participant. Feelings of fear or anger may come up, but the mind is functioning as a witness to those feelings and so the purification process goes smoothly and easily. The deep relaxation nurtured by the breath shields the client, so that coming into conscious contact with painful memories does not itself become a source of stress. In this context it is important to emphasise the critical role of the breath-worker at this stage of the transformational breath cycle. The presence of a competent coach, who is gently encouraging the process without judgement or fear, enables the client to let go and relax into his unfolding experience.

Most breath-work sessions reach a climax for the client when there is a profound sense of release and of having let go of some old, often forgotten, psychic burden. It is the peak of the session. From this point, the transformational breath cycle continues but becomes less intense. The client's sense of inner relaxation deepens and his mind will become extremely quiet, often attaining a state of absolute silence while remaining fully alert; in other words, a state of profound restful alertness similar to the silent awareness of deep meditation. This experience is like a reward for work well done. Conscious breathing is not a passive process, but an active one requiring a commitment on the part of both the client and the coach. The client does the work of breathing consciously and continuously, while the coach stays actively and unconditionally present to the client and his process for the duration of the breathing cycle.

Slowly, the client comes back to ordinary consciousness, waking up the body by stretching, opening the eyes, and becoming aware once again of his surroundings. This is a period of 'positive' integration for the client. The breath-worker will also provide feedback as required, but the greatest service he has to offer his client is attentive, non-judgmental listening.

Perhaps a résumé of an actual 'transformational breath' session will be useful. The following example is more dramatic than usual but clearly demonstrates the potential healing power of the breath.

Duart's experience:

Monika is a fashion model for a popular woman's magazine and also features

regularly in the catalogues of an upscale clothing chain. She was referred through a mutual friend. When she came to my home for her first session I was impressed by how tall, slender and beautiful she was, while at the same time being simple, straight-forward and down to earth. I liked her immediately.

I explained to Monika how the transformational breath method works and asked her a few questions about her birth, parents, interests and family background. I also asked her what she wanted from her session. Looking me directly in the eyes she calmly said that, although she met many attractive, successful and interesting men who wanted to go out with her, her relationships never lasted for more than one month. She was clear she had a pattern or blockage but could not understand what it was. She said she wanted a genuine, loving, long-term relationship with someone and that is why she had come. Then she reclined on the cot used for breath-work, I covered her with a blanket, and she started her 'conscious-connected-breathing' cycle.

Within about fifteen or twenty minutes she was immersed in her inner experience and her breath was flowing deeply, easily and continuously. Up to this point, the process appeared to be going smoothly and uneventfully. Suddenly, however, her whole demeanour changed and the peaceful look on her face altered to one of horror and revulsion. Her body began to contract and turn as if resisting something or someone, and her head was moving from side to side. "No! No! No!" she kept repeating, "What are you doing? Don't! Leave me alone!" Often, people have a tendency to dramatise their experiences, perhaps out of a need for attention or from a belief that they have to put more into it in order to get a result – a form of 'struggle pattern'. When this happens, I feel the lack of authenticity and remain unmoved. I encourage them to continue the breathing cycle and allow the experience to unfold, knowing that if they stay with the process something real will begin to occur. Their drama simply delays the letting go, which always follows when the conscious breathing cycle is practised properly. What Monika was experiencing, however, was genuine – very real – and I felt a cold chill run along my spine. Although her eyes were closed and she was totally focussed on her inner process, she could hear my voice. I asked her, 'How old are you right now?' 'Eight', she replied. 'Where are you?' I asked. She answered, 'In a big room, like a hallway or basement, in a big building...there is an old man with me.' At this point, her feelings of revulsion and horror intensified even more and it was clear she was re-experiencing some sort of encounter with an older man that she had found horrific. I asked her a few more questions while she was still in her process and, evidently, she was being fondled or worse by someone in the building where she was living. I allowed her to continue to process this incident, whatever it was, without interference on my part. My role at this point was simply to remain there, continuing to create a 'safe space' in which she could process and integrate this event. After another ten or fifteen minutes, the intensity of her experience diminished significantly and she gradually settled into a deeply peaceful state, similar to a profound meditation, and remained in that blissful condition for the

remainder of her session.

Afterwards, she sat up and we talked about her experience. She told me that she had no conscious memory of any sexual or other form of abuse as a child. But she remembered that as a child of eight she was living with her mother and father in a relatively poor area of Toronto. Both parents were working and she often spent time alone in the apartment building they inhabited. The caretaker of the building was an older man who would be her guardian when her parents were away. So, her experience during her rebirth fit with the facts of her childhood when she was eight. Did the caretaker abuse her? Did it really happen? We have no way of knowing for sure. I told Monika that whether the incident had truly occurred, or happened with that particular man, was not as important as the actual fact of her experience during her rebirth. She had released something major which was not available to her conscious mind prior to her session. What was important is that she was clearing something obviously affecting the quality of her current life in a negative fashion. Monika agreed and was both surprised and pleased by the clarity and intensity of what had been presented to her conscious mind for release through the breath.

Then, I asked her about her history of short-term relationships with men. 'Who leaves the relationship first, you or your boyfriend?', I asked. 'I am always the one who leaves first.', she responded. Monika had a clear, very precise pattern of leaving. 'Do you see the connection?' She nodded her head, 'Yes!' 'Men are dangerous, right?', I said. She got it immediately. Her trust in men had been shattered and she was totally afraid of real intimacy. She had made an unconscious decision that trusting a man was as dangerous as putting her hand in a fire. Just as a new relationship would begin to open up and become emotionally intimate, she would bolt like a frightened, wild horse. Beliefs are powerful, especially when they are unconscious, and they will literally draw to us experiences that will confirm them as true. Unconscious beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies. Monika's hidden conviction that men are dangerous became a self-fulfilling prophecy that blocked her from experiencing intimacy with a male, resulting in one break-up after another. Once she became conscious that she had this belief, it lost its power over her. She no longer had to blindly act out her impulse to 'bolt' whenever a man got too close. She could breathe and feel whatever feelings were arising as she became intimate with someone. She could now choose to stay and 'experience her experience' rather than simply act out the blind impulse to run. She could use affirmations, such as 'I, Monika, can now trust men' and 'Men are safe for me to be with' to help neutralise her belief that men are dangerous. She could also communicate her fear to the object of her fear, men, and thereby overcome her pattern of escaping. Getting conscious of a problem is half way to resolving it. It is ignorance of our unconscious mechanisms that keep us stuck repeating them endlessly.

Monika came for a few more breathing sessions and continued to integrate her initial experience. About eight months later I happened to bump into her at a shopping

mall and we talked. She told me that she had been in a new relationship for several months and it was going well. For the first time she was enjoying a relationship lasting more than a few weeks. She also said that this man was different from the type of men she had been dating before. This relationship was based less on external appearances and symbols of success and more on the inner qualities and character of the person she was with. She told me she was very happy with him. I never saw Monika again but I am sure that, whatever the outcome of that particular relationship, something fundamental had healed within her, something lasting.

Birth trauma

People often assume that breath-work is principally about pregnancy and the birth experience. In fact, among the core group of people working with Leonard Orr, founder of the 'rebirthing' movement, memories of their own birth experiences came up so frequently and powerfully that the connected breathing cycle became associated with healing trauma associated with birth itself. While it is true that many people engaged in breath-work have experiences that appear to relate directly to the kind of birth they underwent, these do not represent the majority of memories which arise during their sessions. For this reason, 'rebirthing' is more accurately termed 'conscious-connected-breathing', 'transformational breath' or simply 'breath-work', which avoids limiting the practice to any single aspect of the total human experience. But the term 'rebirthing' is also appropriate in the sense that this form of *kriya* (work) allows practitioners to enjoy a profound renewal, a sense of being 'born again', in their lives. Thus, the term 'rebirthing' is correct, but in a spiritual rather than literal sense. This said, birth memories do resurface as a significant aspect of the overall transformational breath experience. When we consider that a new-born is already a fairly developed 'little' person when he or she makes that intense and difficult passage through the birth canal, it is reasonable to presume that aspects of this primal experience will remain buried in the unconscious. The connected breathing cycle often brings up 'chunks' of this material during rebirthing sessions. Clearing this repressed matter from the subconscious is valuable, since what is buried there forms an important part of the screen or filter through which we perceive our world. We all have ways of perceiving and being that we can't account for, but which influence our behaviour for good or ill, affecting our health, career, finances and relationships either positively or negatively. For example, if our birth was very painful or a great struggle, then it is entirely likely that we will have entered this world with the unconscious decision that life *itself* is a struggle or a painful process.

Based on thousands of experiences of the birth process during rebirthing

sessions, breath-workers have come up with a summary of basic, unconscious patterns that repeatedly accompany different types of birth, such as caesarean, breech, etc. Some of these patterns have been identified as follows:

Short labour: a pattern of feeling rushed and nervous, impatient, always hurrying.

Long labour: a pattern of feeling 'held back' in life, always facing a 'wall of resistance'.

Premature birth: a pattern of feeling small, insignificant, vulnerable, immature.

Late birth: a pattern of being late, keeping others waiting, resistance to being on time.

Caesarean: a pattern of feeling that 'I can't do it myself' or 'I always do it wrong', difficulty completing things.

Incubator: a pattern of feeling separate and alone, afraid of being touched.

Transverse Lie: a pattern of not knowing 'which way to go', of being misdirected, misguided, of having things 'twisted'.

Induced: a pattern of feeling helpless, of needing to be 'induced' to take action, difficulty in starting projects.

Breech: a pattern of 'fighting to get out' of situations and relationships, feeling pulled and forced by others, feeling life is a struggle.

Forceps: a pattern of feeling that 'I can't make it on my own', fear of being controlled and manipulated.

Cord around neck: a pattern of feeling 'strangled' in relationships, fear of being 'choked', feelings of 'suffocation' in close situations.

Lyse's experience:

During my six-month Rebirth Training, which I attended in New York City in 1985, I suddenly became aware of my own birth trauma. Up to that point, I had personally completed twelve rebirths: six privates and six in a group. I had had strong feelings of

rejection coming up during these sessions, as well as a variety of related emotions. When the trainers talked about the importance of the birth trauma, the birth script, thoughts at birth, in fact, the entire birth scenario, I thought they were exaggerating. During my own first twelve rebirths I had not encountered anything remotely resembling the birth trauma. I had felt physical sensations, pain here and there, shaking in my body (i.e., kinaesthetic experience), but I did not see any memory, any image or anything related to my birth.

As the Rebirth Training progressed I began having terrible headaches. I was staying alone at a Holiday Inn in a run-down part of New York, feeling nervous and disturbed because my room was next to an ice machine and a crowd of loud, obnoxious people throwing all night parties. I could hear them talking next to my door, banging on the ice machine. I felt afraid and very vulnerable. I thought, 'What am I doing here alone in a strange city, surrounded by these aggressive strangers? Maybe they'll break down my door and attack me.' All of my major fears were activated. I felt unsafe in New York, unsafe on the planet, unsafe in my own body, and at the same time suffered an excruciating headache. I was dizzy, feeling disoriented like someone on drugs or alcohol. I remember walking in Central Park thinking, 'Did I take drugs? Did I take alcohol? No, I have not been drunk or high for years, I've had nothing at all.' But I felt so drugged, so disoriented, that I had a hard time finding my way around. It was really unpleasant.

One day midway through a Rebirth Training weekend, one of the trainers, Peter Kane commented, 'If you are having big headaches or feeling dizzy you might be going through chunks of your birth and your delivery may have included the use of forceps.' His words stunned me because I had been born with the help of forceps! As he spoke I felt an intense anxiety in my solar plexus, along with anguish and fear, and I was convinced that something terrible was about to happen to me. My headache intensified around my temples and I felt a big pressure in my head. He added that many people have migraine headaches due to the use of forceps during birth. At that moment I felt he was talking directly to me, although there were more than 50 people in the room. Intellectually, I found his comments far fetched, but at the same time I had no other explanation for how I was feeling, which was certainly not my normal state. Finally I let go of my resistance to Peter's message and opened myself to the possibility that it was true.

During the rebirth session that followed, I became crippled, paralysed and totally terrified. The trainers asked me, 'What's going on?' Hardly able to speak I repeated, 'I can't, I can't, I can't...' They asked, 'You can't what?' I said, 'I can't move...I feel paralysed... I'm blocked here... I'm stuck...' Their response was, 'This is just a thought, it's a memory you're going through...only a thought...and of course you can. Since what you are going through is related to your birth, you can!' They started to laugh, which only intensified my upset because I felt they were laughing at me. However, my paralysis cleared up. It disappeared with the words, 'Of course you can.' I also could feel the stress releasing from my body and my headache fading away.

After this experience I realised that I had had similar intense headaches whenever I was trapped in a packed elevator or a crowded room. As a child, sometimes my parents and I would get stuck in heavy traffic driving over Montreal's Champlain Bridge on our way to the country and I would have terrible headaches to the point of vomiting. This feeling of being trapped and stuck in a small space from which I could not escape could have stemmed from being caught in the birth canal, but I could not be certain that there was a direct connection. I did observe, however, that after this particular rebirth session, tight, crowded spaces or traffic jams would no longer give me headaches or anguish. Gone were the pressure in my temples, the nausea and the pain in my head. I began to have confidence in the words of my trainers.

Through rebirthing, I also learned that people born with forceps want support and at the same time are afraid of it. Forceps are painful for the baby, however they support the infant in staying alive, since getting caught too long in the birth canal can cause death. My own subconscious belief that support hurts has also been an issue in my life. I have always assumed that I want support, but my unconscious pattern has been to push support away.

Often, forceps have been used for convenience and efficiency rather than as a life-saving maneuver of last resort. In the 1950's, with so many baby boomers arriving, doctors often would have to run from one delivery to another. To speed the process they came to rely increasingly on the use forceps and/or anaesthesia. I have also realised that my inexplicable feeling of being drugged during my weekend in New York was related to my mother's anaesthesia. Babies are definitely affected by anaesthesia, and residues of the drug will stay in the system for a long time after. A baby's full 'aliveness' is suppressed by anaesthesia and it is this memory which was surfacing during my Rebirth Training.

It is also noteworthy that baby boomers are the ones who got into drugs in a big way in the 'sixties and 'seventies. The attitude has been, 'When it's too intense, we take some drugs and anaesthetise ourselves. Whether we feel intense joy or intense pain, we anaesthetise ourselves in order to dull the experience.' The tendency of my generation has been to suppress our aliveness with some substance, rather than to fully live both our pleasures and our pains. From the perspective of rebirth, this is a repetition of the birth process where the mother, and by extension the baby, are drugged with anaesthesia at the point where the mother's labour becomes difficult and intensely painful.

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