Breathing For A Better World: The Healing Power of the Breath

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Breath Is Life

Breath is life, and the act of breathing is our most fundamental interaction with life. Not only does breath give us life, the way we breathe determines the way we live. This might be considered the fundamental faith of the mystic - the pattern of life is created by the pattern of breath. If we take this idea seriously, we should breathe in such a way that reflects our deepest world view and advances our purpose in life.

Conscious and Unconscious Breath

Breathing is a unique activity for the body as it is the only function that can be done either consciously or unconsciously. When breathing becomes conscious, a neurological shift occurs; a different part of the brain, different nerves and different muscles are engaged. The part of the brain that was responsible for unconscious breathing is freed; it then takes on a new role - it becomes the gateway between the conscious and unconscious mind. Consequently, a flood of creativity and unconscious memory emerges in the conscious mind after a few minutes of conscious breathing.

People often tell me they can't meditate because they can't shut off their mind. I say one should not expect the mind to be free of thoughts; the question is whether one's thoughts are the ordinary, uninspired variety that comes with an unconscious breath, or the revelatory, inspired thoughts that come with a conscious breath. Inspiration (ideas) comes from conscious inspiration (breath).

Conversely, the unconscious can be programmed by conscious intention and repetition through the same open gateway. When you learn something "by heart," you are programming your unconscious. You can recall, from learning to play the piano or drive a car, that it required repetition. Usually, the task being learned takes up all of one's attention, so the breath goes unconscious and many repetitions are necessary to knock at the closed door. But if you can stay aware of your breath, learning becomes rapid because the conscious intention enters the unconscious memory directly through the open gateway caused by conscious breathing.

Breath Pattern <=> Life Pattern

We have all experienced the many ways the breath affects our physical state; by breathing in a certain way we can put ourselves to sleep, get excited, become calm, relax, become alert, even access unusual strength and endurance. Our emotional state is also powerfully affected by the breath. Your heart is touched by a sigh, or excited by a sharp intake in the breath. Our emotions are caused by the action of our breath flowing in a certain direction, which causes a corresponding movement of energy within the heart.

It's also true that your physical and emotional state affects your breath - when you're tired, you yawn, which emphasizes the inhalation, and when you're exhausted, you let your breath out audibly - the link between your breath and your state of being works both ways. You can see your physical and emotional condition by watching the pattern of your breath, and you can change your condition by changing your breath. When you are unaware of your breath, you unconsciously receive the influence of your environment; when you are aware of your breath, you become conscious of the interaction between your inner state and your environment, and when you control your breath, you direct your inner state and create an influence upon your environment.

The way we breathe both indicates our state of being and produces our state of being. The pattern and rhythm of the breath is formed by the time of the inhalation, exhalation, and any time when the breath is still, within one breath cycle. Some place a greater emphasis on the inhale, some on the exhale. Some hold the exhale, others hold the inhale. All of these patterns affect one's spiritual condition, emotional state, thought stream, relationships, career, physical body, and every aspect of life. For example, inhalation gives glorification, while exhalation gives surrender, the two great emotions from which all other emotions flow. Inhalation makes one sensitive, while the exhalation makes one influential. Holding the exhalation takes one out of life, while holding the inhalation holds life in the center of your being. A slow breath is helpful for poetry, music, and all creative activities. A faster breath is necessary to give force to physical or mental exertion, but too fast a breath produces confusion and exhaustion.

I used to put my children to sleep by lying next to them and breathing the "sleepy breath": a quickly falling out-breath that releases all concerns and tensions. Children are very sensitive to the breath of others, so my sons would...
usually fall asleep before I would. The power of a rhythmic breath can also be seen in runners -- when the rhythm is even, runners can perform at a high level of exertion, but if the breathing rhythm becomes too fast, erratic, or interrupted, fatigue sets in quickly.

**Breath Entrainment**

An simple way to ensure that your breath has the appropriate speed for the physical and emotional situation of the moment is to time your breath to your heartbeat. This is called entrainment of the breath. Usually, your breath rate and your heart rate are completely independent, but you can synchronize them by breathing six heartbeats in and six heartbeats out. Perhaps you can feel your heartbeat when you sit still; some people can. Most people can’t, so you can also use your pulse, the echo of your heartbeat. You can feel your pulse at your wrist, or in your thumb and finger pressed together. Keep looking for your heartbeat in your chest; it will reveal itself eventually. When you get used to six, a little longer count, like eight or ten heartbeats, will feel more comfortable. There are many other benefits of entrainment, which synchronizes the two main biological oscillators, or clocks, of the body. Emotionally, it makes one feel whole and centered. It creates integrity: all parts of the self are working together in the same rhythm.

**The Breath Stream Creates Individuality**

Breath affects us at different levels - physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually - because breath is a stream of energy that unites the realms of body, mind, heart, and soul. These realms are not unique in themselves, it's their unique combination that makes an individual. The essence of one's individuality is a singular stream of the One Breath that enlivens each of the levels of reality in a unique way. You are being continuously created by the out-breath of the One Who Becomes, and all that you have become is absorbed on the in-breath of the One Who Is. Therefore being aware of breath is fundamental to knowing all the levels of yourself and is essential to meditation, the exploration of the self and the All.

**Two Currents of Breath**

There are two currents of breath, the air stream and the energy stream, which flow in and out synchronously. The air stream can be directed in and out through the mouth or nose in four different combinations, each of which stimulates one of the four "Elements" (Air, Fire, Water, and Earth), which are actually different types of subtle energy. As the air stream flows in and out, the energy stream of the breath rides on the air stream. The Elements of the energy stream can then be directed into and out of any meridian, chakra, or any place in the body. It is the combination of the breath timing, the position the body is held in - spine, head, shoulders, arms, hands, legs and feet - the visualization and placement of the two breath streams, together with intention and invocation, that form the basis of the various types of meditation in the world’s traditions.

Concentrating the mind on a certain image, object, or event gives it power from attention. By holding a thought while maintaining a concentration on the breath, the breath is naturally directed toward that which we visualize. Invocation is calling upon a quality of the One Being - Peace, Love, Truth, Wisdom, etc. - that we may receive (inhalation) or manifest (exhalation) that quality in ourselves. The posture of the body and the kind of movement or stillness of the body also affects, and is affected by, the breath. This is the foundation of hatha yoga, the art of meditating in different postures, called asanas. T’ai Chi Ch’uan and Chi Gong also use movement in rhythm with the breath to control the direction and flow of the energetic stream of the breath.

**Upward and Downward Breaths**

Upward forms of meditation use the breath to lift the consciousness out of the body, allowing one to experience the timeless, eternal, nature of our being separate from the body, mind, and heart that we know. Downward forms of meditation bring the experience of infinity into the heart, into the mind, and into the body itself. All of this is the result of different directions of the breath. In our school, The Institute for Applied Meditation, we want to affect the world, so we use the downward form of meditation. The principle meditation of this type is called Heart Rhythm Meditation.

**Exhale into the World**

One’s exhalation is one’s primary means of affecting the world. The out-breath takes what is within a person and sends it out to the world. When the exhalation is powerful and complete, one’s magnetism is strong, one’s influence is wide, and one’s accomplishments are great. One can observe the power of the exhalation in the martial artist who uses a forceful exhale, perhaps combined with a shout, to break blocks of solid concrete. The fullness of the exhalation gives one the energy to start a project, and follow it through to its conclusion.

The exhalation also reaches deep into the heart - the end of the exhalation gives access to the deepest feelings of the heart and the ability to express them. Without a deep breath, one’s depth is impenetrable; with a deep
exhalation, one can reach within oneself the emotions that all people share and the common connection between all beings.

**Inhale the World into Yourself**

By one's inhalation one experiences the outer world, which is brought into the lungs and circulates throughout the mind and body. Inhalation also gives us inspiration and joy. But we can't increase our inhalation without first making room for fresh breath. To inspire, you must first expire. This is expressed in the Christian teaching that we must first give in order to receive.

The inhalation develops sensitivity, perceptiveness, insight, and intuition. When the inhalation is deep, one's ability to receive impressions of all kinds -- joy, pain, beauty, love, sadness, kindness, and so forth -- becomes full and rich.

**The Full Breath**

A full breath is expressive of our philosophy: "Accept all that is given to you and give all that your heart contains." A full breath is necessary to live life fully. The 20th-century mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan said, "Do you know why some people have a full life and others seem to have half a life? They have half a breath." When a person is unable to finish a task they have taken up, they may blame tiredness, lack of enthusiasm or loss of memory, when it is often the lack of a regular and full breath. A full breath starts with a full exhalation, which requires an exertion of the abdominal muscles for a few seconds; the diaphragm muscle will not empty the lungs. Then the inhalation that follows rushes into your depth and fills your being like a new beginning, giving fresh inspiration.

This is our aspiration: to take every in-breath from the beginning, without any left-over breath from before. This allows us to be fully engaged with the life around us, having maximum awareness of others and maximum influence upon events, without baggage from the past. Breathing fully is not only a physical training; it is an emotional training as well to allow a deep surrender in expiration and a full experience of joy in inspiration.

But if your body is still, a full breath must be taken slowly, no more than eight a minute, to avoid hyperventilation. This is never a problem in Heart Rhythm Meditation because the breath is entrained to the heartbeat. As long as the heart rate is 96 or less, using a count of six heartbeats or more for each inhalation and exhalation yields eight or less breaths per minute.

**The Shallow Breath Problem**

The most common breath problem is shallow breathing, and it is very common. A shallow breath is a small, unconscious breath taken ten or more times a minute into the upper part of the lungs with a very slight physical movement. Of the five-liter capacity of the lungs, the shallow breath moves perhaps one-half liter, or ten percent. This breath produces a low-level of oxygenation in the brain and other organs of the body, resulting in chronic fatigue and weakening, over time, of the lungs, heart and nervous system. The shallow breath is a defense mechanism to either avoid absorption of the inharmonious vibrations of others or to avoid the fear of death that one touches during a full expiration. But breathing in a shallow way makes one shallow, diminishes one’s enthusiasm and concentration, and makes one’s life mundane and mediocre. There is not enough life energy in a shallow breath to power the attainment of the extraordinary states of meditation. When people try to meditate while maintaining the defensive shield of a shallow breath, they typically go to sleep.

**The Death Breath Problem**

The second most common breathing problem is holding the exhalation: after breathing out, but not completely, the breath stops for several seconds. This is a physical expression of the emotion that says, "I don't want to be here, as I am, doing this." We call it the "death breath," as it is an unconscious wish to be without life. Breath is life.

My friend Simon used to regularly feel as though he was about to fall asleep during important meetings. In spite of many doses of caffeine and sugar, in many meetings he felt it was all he could do to stay awake, which impaired his ability to pay attention to the issues under discussion. After learning meditation, he realized he had been holding his exhalation, perhaps because the meetings both bored him with their endless discussion, and stressed him out because he felt his career was on the line. Practicing meditation allowed him to notice when he interrupted his breathing in this way, and to respond by extending his exhalation to the end. When the out-breath is completed, one automatically breathes in again, and that inhalation gives an energizing blast of oxygen to the mind and the whole body. By keeping his breath deep and regular, he could stay alert and sharp.

In the death breath, the exhalation pauses before the out-breath is complete. Sleep apnea, which can be life threatening, is also an incomplete exhalation followed by an extended pause; literally a "death breath." It can be cured by breath training in which one learns in meditation to make a fully conscious breath that reaches the real end of the exhalation. This breath pattern then carries over into one’s day, and even into sleep if one meditates...
Balanced Breath

I recommend a balanced breath, with equal length inhalation and exhalation. If the inhalation is longer, one develops the ability to feel and see what must be done without the strength to do it. If the exhalation is longer, one develops the ability to accomplish things without the insight needed to direct that power. With a balanced breath, one walks through life with a rhythm: one step in insight, one step in power. Then neither does one become exhausted nor uninspired.

Generating Magnetic Waves

Every heartbeat generates a powerful magnetic wave that radiates into the space around you and affects the brain waves and other aspects of people in your vicinity.

When your breath is entrained to your heart, and your breath is full and slow, several physiological changes occur. The metabolic rate increases, blood pressure and heart rate decrease, and the Heart Rate Variability (HRV) becomes a smooth wave. Breath control gives regulation of these autonomic functions that can’t be controlled directly. Raising the metabolic rate demonstrates that oxygenation has increased; this is also helpful in weight control. Lowering the blood pressure and heart rate gives an increased capacity to handle stress.

Most importantly, regulating HRV as we do it in Heart Rhythm Meditation creates a single, low-frequency transmission from the heart below 0.13 Hz., well within what is considered a heart-healthy frequency range of 0.03 Hz. to 0.15 Hz. Heart arrhythmia is eliminated. Without breath control, the transmission power of the heart is spread across many frequencies, some as high as 0.5 Hz, where the heart is significantly stressed. The wide frequency distribution caused by unconscious breath reduces the transmission of the heart to noise without any content.

With a slow, full, balanced and entrained breath, as in Heart Rhythm Meditation, the magnetic transmission of the heart is focused into a synchronous beam of low frequencies; this means the magnetic field can extend quite far, like an FM radio broadcast, and the message carried on this wave is a very simple and coherent message: peace and harmony.

Radiating Waves of Peace into the World

The ultimate purpose for breath control is not to increase the capacity and health of your lungs, heart and nervous system, nor to increase your capacity for stress, nor to make your work more creative and productive. Breath control will do these things, but its real purpose is to increase the gift of your harmonious heart to others and the whole world. When the breath is entrained with the heartbeat, the magnetic pulse generated by the heart carries a powerful message of spiritual harmony and peace. Magnetic fields extend into space indefinitely, influencing all other fields they contact. It has been shown that people receive information from the magnetic fields of others. Those who receive the heart’s harmonious transmission absorb its message and become more harmonious within themselves and with others. Thus the heart-centered breath is a direct way of creating peaceful, harmonious changes to improve the condition of the world at a fundamental level.

Expansion and Contraction

Observing and regulating your breath makes you conscious of the fundamental movement of the universe: the movement of expansion and contraction. This is the motion of all things, and you activate your cosmic consciousness when you see this cycle in yourself. When you sit still and look within, you notice two forms of this movement: your heart is expanding and contracting with every beat, and your lungs are expanding and contracting with every breath. It’s exhilarating to experience consciously the expansion and contraction of the universe operating within yourself. Reflecting upon the stages of your life, you can also see steps of expansion interspersed with steps of contraction as breakthroughs and breakdowns alternate. Your life as a whole is also an example: the universe contracted itself to create you as its microcosm, and your life experience contributes to an expansion of the self-discovery of the whole universe.

Everything has expansion and contraction; it is unrealistic of us to expect that expansion will persist without a contraction. On a personal level, we need a period of rest between periods of activity, of consolidation after gains, and of reflection after risk-taking. Society also has cycles of expansion and contraction. The USA had an incredible economic expansion from 1982 to 2007, as the Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJIA) went from 822 to 14,279, a gain of 17.4 times in 25 years. In the previous 28 years, from 1954 to 1982, the DJIA moved from 360 to only 822, a gain of 2.3. This relatively flat period was preceded by the contraction from July 1929 to July 1954; it took 25 years for the DJIA to regain its high of 381 just before the financial crash of 1929 that took the DJIA down to 41 in 1932, a loss of 89%. Before 1929, the previous 22 years from the "Panic of 1907" showed a gain of 7.2 times.
These four phases -- up 7.2 times, down 89%, flat 2.3 times, up 17.4 times -- look like a breath of exhale, inhale, hold, exhale, with approximately 25-year periods, like the breath of a generation. Is another 25-year, 90% contraction coming? I think so, although if hyperinflation occurs the DJIA may actually go up during this depression, as in the Weimar Republic. This necessary contraction cycle may be considerably shortened if the contraction is honored, not resisted, and if expanded consciousness can then be applied on a large scale.

**Listening with Your Heart**

With a conscious breath, experiencing expansion and contraction, you are aware of the cycles of life -- the very short cycles of the heartbeat, the cycles of a breath in and out, the longer cycles of the moon and sun that resonate within our bodies and emotions, and the generational cycles of the culture. The stock market cycles noted above are about a generation in length. The periods of war and peace in the United States also have had a generational rhythm. This awareness of the cycles of life allows us to anticipate and honor each phase, for progress is made, like the motion of an inchworm, by the combination of expansion and contraction. Neither is contraction bad nor expansion good; both have their purpose, like inhaling and exhaling. Success comes by taking action appropriate to the cycle. Those who can use the energy of contraction will be able to contribute in the coming time, while others who are attempting expansion-appropriate activity will experience loss.
What are appropriate activities during a contraction cycle? Simplification and purity; appreciation of natural beauty; care of the environment; consolidation and research; reflection upon the lessons of life; local focus toward communities, small work groups and family; inner spirituality; meaningful work; and close cooperation with others along strongly-held values and common purpose. What activities are inappropriate for a contraction cycle? Globalization, outsourcing to people you don’t know, debt, busy-ness, work without joy, and competition. During times of expansion, when nearly every area of life is increasing, one doesn’t need to examine one’s values. Expansion is its own purpose. "A rising tide lifts all boats," so most strategies work during expansion. Engrossed in outer activity, the inner world is lost to view; morality and compassion fall to greed and fear. During contraction, values are re-examined; when most outer-directed activities become difficult, people look for an inner happiness that can’t be counted or measured. The inherent belief in an individual purpose in life gains strength while dogmas fall away.

Use Your Breath to Help Others

In the difficult years of the coming period of contraction, your breath can help you help others in two ways. (1) Your inhalation gives you guidance and inner conviction as you draw in spirit as a subtle energy. Your in-breath will also carry into your heart the condition and needs of others so you’ll know where help is needed. Feeling your inner rhythms will bring awareness of the cycles that influence you so you can tune your actions appropriately. (2) Your exhalation will send waves of peace and harmony into the hearts of others, as described earlier. Your inner confidence will emanate as hope and optimism that can sustain others.

As you breathe in, be aware of a flow of inspiration entering your heart from behind, between your shoulder blades. This is your spiritual inheritance, like a hand on your back, continually energizing and guiding you. As you breathe out, send an energy stream from your heart forward, opening and illuminating the path in front of you. The key to using the breath is to send out into the world the same energy you would like to have more of. Breath is a stream; the more that flows out, the more that can flow in.

With your awareness of breath, which is spirit and subtle energy, in the rhythms of expanding and contracting cycles without and within, and with the power to transmit waves of peace and harmony through your exhalation, you can have a greater effect upon the world than the world has upon you. We all need your help to keep spirit flowing through the cycle of contraction and into expansion again. Honor every breath; entrain your breath to your heartbeat; live from your heart.

Endnotes:

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panic_of_1907