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REBIRTHING :

PSYCHOTHERAPY THROUGH BREATHING

By Catherine Dowling

It's something we all do! In fact we do it up to 20,000 times a day, waking or sleeping, from the moment of our birth until the moment of our death. It nourishes every cell in our body and at the same time it also very efficiently and unobtrusively removes 70% of the toxins those cells produce. It is the most essential of all bodily functions. We credit it with our physical survival and doctors are beginning to connect it with the subtler aspects of our physical health and well-being, but breathing as a form of psychotherapy is a concept still alien to most western minds.

This has not been the case in other cultures. In India and China breathing practices have been used for thousands of years to promote physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. Breathing as therapy is as old as Chinese and Aurvedic medicine of not older, and has always been a vital ingredient in the practice of yoga. Rebirthing is a form of breathwork that has its roots in these ancient traditions, but the technique itself was discovered in the USA in the late 1960's by Leonard Orr. Like many people at that time, Orr was experimenting with various ways of altering his state of consciousness. He discovered that changing his pattern of breathing could bring about such altered states, and as his first

experience in this breathwork induced state was to remember his birth, he called the technique rebirthing.

But rebirthing was not without its precursors in the West. As early as 1927 doctors in the USA were beginning to associate faulty breathing with the physical and emotional symptoms of stress, panic and anxiety. Around this time too, psychotherapist Wilhelm Reich began to notice that breathing is affected by what happens in our lives. Think about this. We laugh in mirth, we sigh in weariness, we sob with sorrow, we hold our breath in fear or fright, we breathe fully in ecstasy and hardly breathe at all when we curl up into the dark corner of depression. As children we respond to distress by altering our breathing. If we do it often enough the altered pattern becomes our natural way of breathing. This is why young children can breathe freely into their abdomen when calm and relaxed, up into their collarbone area when sobbing in distress, but by the onset of adolescence, their breathing is largely into their middle chest and quite shallow in comparison with that of a toddler. By the time we are adults our breathing pattern is almost as unique as our fingerprints and in it can be read the history of our emotional lives.

Although it could be counterproductive to diagnose or label a person's mental and emotional make up from an observation of their breathing, there are clear links between an individual's breathing pattern and his/her emotional state or way of behaving. For example, breathing right down into the lower part of the lungs makes the body quite literally heavier and better balanced. If the belly doesn't move in response to the inhale and exhale, the person may not be using their breath to keep them grounded, calm and in control of themselves and situations. If the breath is exclusively into the upper chest, almost as if it is stopping at the neck and going back up into the head, the person may suffer from tension and anxiety. A shallow breather may be shy, fearful or reluctant to make their presence felt. They may not be living life to its fullest. Noticeable pauses in the breath mean different

things to different people. Such a pause at the top of the breath, for example, can indicate a pattern of last minute withdrawal or holding back from a course of action or even from expressing an opinion. For others it can indicate difficulties with commitment or self-belief. Some people hold their breath when they're consciously thinking about something, cutting their mind off from both body and emotions. Others stop breathing when they feel strong emotions, locking the unprocessed feeling into their body.

The breathing technique called rebirthing is full and flowing. Inhale and exhale are connected to eliminate any pauses and, although the lungs are filled with air, the emphasis is on getting the breath up into the less used area beneath the collarbones. When a connected, flowing pattern such as rebirthing is established, it irons out the kinks and idiosyncrasies in the breathing mechanism and when this happens, it is likely that the causes of those distortions will begin to surface. This is the point at which breathwork can become a form of psychotherapy.

People come to rebirthing for much the same reasons they go to counsellors or psychotherapists. These can be anything from deep depression to relationship difficulties to wanting to get to know themselves better, find direction or purpose in life, or simply to enjoy their inward journey. The psychological theory behind rebirthing is a simple but eclectic mix of tenets derived from clinical practice and from earlier schools of psychotherapy. The basic premise is that the events in our lives, particularly birth and what happens throughout childhood, mould us in ways which are not always productive or conducive to happiness. Often these events are remembered quite clearly but the painful lessons we learned from them and the feelings that go with the lessons are suppressed.

For example, if a child's appearance is criticised enough by the adults and other children in his life, he may come to believe, without questioning it, that he is ugly. With this belief can come a range of very uncomfortable feelings including sorrow, shame and self-

hatred. These are difficult feelings to live with every day. As a way of distancing himself from them and the underlying belief that he is ugly the child may do things like altering his breathing every time a feeling emerges, over-eating, becoming shy and withdrawn or over-compensating with a brash, over the top personality. Some of these distancing behaviours are more socially acceptable than others but all of them help the child escape the full brunt of the feeling associated with his core belief that he is ugly. Yet the belief is still there, influencing his life quite profoundly. As an adult the diversionary behaviours may be causing problems in his life or they may not be working so well anymore and the buried feelings are beginning to surface. These, or any number of other reasons, may prompt him to begin rebirthing.

A rebirthing session usually consists of three parts. It generally begins with about forty five minutes to an hour of talking. During this period the rebirther listens, questions, probes and facilitates their client in becoming aware of the nature of their difficulties. This is followed by the rebirth itself, the breathwork session, which lasts about an hour although, for some people, this is a little longer or shorter. It is usually done lying down on a bed or mattress covered with a blanket. The breathing technique itself is easy to learn and becomes automatic quite quickly. Once the rebirthee relaxes into the breathing they begin to feel the effects of the extra oxygen circulating in their body. Energy levels rise and people experience this in various ways including heat, cold, tingling or simply as if their whole body is vibrating.

Accelerated breathing such as rebirthing brings about a state of expanded awareness. There is, as yet, no scientific explanation for why this happens although a study currently under way in a hospital in Vienna may shed some light on the issue. In this state of expanded awareness the rebirthee becomes conscious of the fascinating world inside him/herself in unexpected detail. The experience is difficult to describe partly because it is different for each person, each time, but also because the non-ordinary state of awareness brought about

by the breathing is outside the experience of people who have never worked with a consciousness expanding technique like rebirthing. It's a bit like trying to tell people what a piece of music is like using only words. You have to hear it to understand. However, some experiences are fairly common.

Sometimes people have deep insights into the way they think or into events and relationships in their lives. They see things from an angle they never saw before, they understand in a way they never understood before. Such insights are experienced physically and emotionally as well as intellectually which means they become profound and transformative events rather than mere insights. At other times people feel a wide range of emotions from fear and anger to joy and ecstasy. Occasionally there are memories. With the exception of birth, most of the memories that surface in rebirthing have never been forgotten and are readily available to the rebirthee in the normal course of their lives. The difference is that in rebirthing the emotion and the significance of the event return with the memory of the event itself. For example, if a child is slapped in front of his friends for being too loud or exuberant, his experience of the event is not just of the slapping and the circumstances in which it took place. It may also contain embarrassment, even shame. And if the child drew any conclusions about himself from the event, such as that he should not express his enthusiasm for life or be himself, this too will be part of the experience. As an adult the event and its circumstances are easily recalled and even laughed about. But the shame and the lessons learned are very painful and have long since been banished from awareness or suppressed. What returns in rebirthing is the emotion and the awareness of the lesson learned. This makes it more like reliving than remembering. It also makes rebirthing a much more multi-dimensional experience than most forms of talk therapy. At other times people have the physical sensations of hearing sounds or seeing colours and occasionally they experience localised aches and pains. There is often a palpable sense of connection with the

world and everyone in it, an assurance of belonging in the greater scheme of things. The variety of experience is both endless and endlessly fascinating.

But the purpose of rebirthing is not so much to uncover as to resolve. This resolution is called integration and it means that something that has been having a disproportionate influence on our lives is put into its proper place within the fabric of who we are. This too is done through breathing and the willingness to change. Again there is no scientific explanation as to why a technique that gives access to unresolved issues is also the means of integrating those issues so that they no longer hold sway over our actions and feelings. But that is what happens. All the rebirthee has to do is breathe, be willing to change, and accept without judgement whatever he/she is feeling or thinking. Integration is experienced in different ways, sometimes simply as the fading away of a feeling or thought, often as if a physical weight were being lifted off the body. The process is profound, multi-layered and usually results in feelings of well-being and increased energy. As the rebirthee becomes more comfortable with the technique and more skilful at using his breath in this manner, he can begin to rebirth himself. This means that the technique is available to him any time he wishes to use it to process feelings, to relax or just to help him think things through more clearly.

With any psychotherapy, with any therapy, the issue of safety arises. In the early days of rebirthing back in the 1960's and '70's, the trend in personal development was towards the confrontational, unorthodox and dramatic. Rebirthers encouraged their clients to act out their feelings. This made for very dramatic scenes which could have given the impression that the rebirthee had 'opened a can of worms', sometimes a dangerous thing to do. This is still the style of rebirthing in some countries, but over the years rebirthers have come to realise that acting out an emotion and integrating it can be two different things. It is important sometimes to cry a little, or express anger or other emotions, but in most cases all

that is needed to resolve even the most painful of issues is to breathe and accept whatever you are feeling without employing diversionary tactics to avoid it. The feelings can be strong but if the rebirthee keeps breathing, they rarely last very long.

Rebirthing is a holistic, body based therapy that relies on the body's most basic function to heal itself. The body has its own safety mechanism, the ability to suppress. That mechanism has worked hard in the past to contain feelings and memories which might be too difficult for a child to face at the time they occurred. It does not suddenly stop functioning and allow those feelings overwhelm the adult, particularly not in response to the very natural act of breathing. The rebirther acts as a breathing coach and supporter encouraging people to stretch themselves but not pushing them beyond their safety zone. They make minimal interventions in the clients experience, therefore they are not tampering with the body's safety mechanism. As a result, material emerges as the rebirthee grows in confidence and skill in handling it. It is, however, important to work with a well trained rebirther and prospective clients might want to ask their rebirther about their training and experience.

That said there are a small number of people for whom rebirthing is not suitable. It is an awareness expanding technique that makes possible non-ordinary states of consciousness. It is important therefore that rebirthees have what is called sufficient autonomous functioning, that they have a reasonably solid grounding in daily reality. This makes the therapy unsuited to people suffering from bi-polar disorder (manic depression), schizophrenia, paranoia or any other psychotic disorder. For people in crisis, a very gentle form of the breathwork can be used to aid relaxation and, as the crisis is worked through, they can proceed to the more experiential type of breathing.

For most other people rebirthing is a very deep and fast acting therapy that can empower people to free themselves from the limitations of their past experiences. The only proviso is that prospective rebirthees really need to be willing to deal with the causes rather

than the symptoms of their discomfort. It is not a pill that makes pain go away; it is a process of growth and change that resolves the causes of that pain. As such it challenges the current trend in psychological medicine of finding a chemical cure for non-psychiatric emotional difficulties. For example, a hormone inhibitor that blocks a stress reaction such as social withdrawal and shyness is under development by pharmaceutical companies. Shyness is one of the easiest difficulties to deal with in rebirthing and it is done through breathing, not through ingesting a substance that blocks the body's production or absorption of one of its own hormones. Rebirthing is not opposed to the use of psychotherapeutic drugs and recognises the immense value such treatment has for people in crisis. But in the area of mental and emotional health, it does offer a very effective natural option which, in the long term, may eliminate the need for such drugs.

MORE INFORMATION:

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SUGGESTED READING

Rebirthing and Breathwork: A Powerful Technique for Personal Transformation by
Catherine Dowling (Piatkus, UK)

Breath and Spirit by Gunnel Minett (Aquarian Press, UK)

Soul Therapy by Joy Manne (North Atlantic Books, USA)

Breathing in Light and Love by Jim Morningstar (Transformations Inc., USA)

The Breathwork Experience by Kylea Taylor (Hanford Mead, USA)

Inner Adventures by Colin Sissons (Total Press, Ltd., NZ)