

Breath Notes by Raphael Rod Birney MD

“Modern science has discovered the importance of physical culture and correct breathing, and for all diseases of the lungs there is no greater or more beneficial remedy than sending the patient to a place suitable for breathing freely. Psychologists will some day come to realize that for all illnesses and disorders of the mind the way of breathing also is the best remedy.” HIK

As a child growing up with asthma, I became interested in breath. I remember reading on the importance of breath in books on yoga as I searched for additional help with my breathing lessons.

In the teachings of Murshid Inayat Khan I found full and deep explorations of breath. I found through the years that the breath practices—especially the elemental breaths, stretch breath and retention breath (quasab) have been very important medicines for me not only on the level of my asthma but on emotional, mental and spiritual levels as well.

Over the past few years I have been slowly integrating the use of breath in my practice as a therapist and with students in my work as a Sufi guide. Murshid Wali Ali’s Esoteric Studies #2 course along with a beautiful day of teaching last winter in Ashland on the astrological/planetary breaths and walks from Pir Shabda have quickened this process.

In teaching mind-body skills of self regulation, about one third seem to “get it” from a lecture or one-time lesson. Another one third seem to be able to “get it” and begin to integrate the awareness and skill or practice with an in-depth training. The remaining third often are dealing with either very early and or deep impressions and need more extensive one-on-one time, either with their guide or in psychotherapy, to master and integrate the new awareness and skill in their life in a way that will create meaningful change over time. Patience is necessary in applying the lessons of breath to yourself and others.

I hope the following examples (which have been modified to maintain the anonymity of the individuals) are of use in stimulating our exploration of the use of breath as a healing modality.

Ms. A complains of a lifelong difficulty with sustaining longer term physical tasks and will often find herself in an anxious and or impatient state when having to deal with many of the issues of maintaining her home. We notice a natural quickness to her mind and the pattern of Mercury breath. (Rapid shallow breathing and a capacity for short bursts of energy and engaging in quick tasks.) When she begins to add Darood (the phrase “Toward the One”) on her inhalation and exhalation with the Sun breath (a strong inhalation through the right nostril with natural exhalation through both) she finds her breath naturally longer and deeper and her capacity for longer term physical work and projects increasing significantly.

Mr. B is scattered and fragmented in narrative in therapy today. I notice a lot of air and

ether in his breath which is shallow and erratic with a holding on the inhalation. He has a fear of not being able to breathe and has had several occasions where his breath has been caught and he has felt he is suffocating. In bringing our inquiry to this he is aware of involuntary holding on the inhalation in these episodes His breath also reflects a lack of capacity to focus and follow through, to sustain his efforts in the world.

We focus on the Saturn breath to bring the quality of grounding and perseverance. After doing the breath and walk (to allow him to ground further in his body) he is quietly crying. The experience of slowing down, of grounding through the breath, and me recognizing and then offering a way to address his suffering has affected him deeply.

He wants to guard against his sobbing which we recognize is one of the things which leads to his feeling like he cannot breathe. He understands the origin of his guarding; it was unsafe to cry in his family of origin.

Ms. C is exploring in her session a deep sense of doubt. This has developed over the last few years after difficult endings in relationships and her job. A sense of fear and not wanting to start in new endeavors. She can either not speak up and repress or become reactive and blow up with an attitude of “Fuck you I am out of here.”

Her state of doubt comes with internal super ego messages (self critical thoughts that attack and put her down) and cause a deflated, small, less-than state. In this state she is out of touch with her natural self which is expansive, social and friendly. She often compensates with alcohol use to quiet her super ego and get access to her gregarious and grounded sense of self.

We begin to work with the Jupiter breath (deep inhalation through both nostrils with a natural hold before exhalation) to allow her to access a state of expansiveness, self-governance, friendliness and confidence through the use of breath rather than alcohol. She notices a natural sense of confidence arising and is given the homework to practice this breath daily for five to ten minutes.

Mr. D notices a blank frozen state that arises in life and in sessions. As we explore this occurrence in the session today we notice that during this state his breath deadens, stops and is held on the exhalation. During these times I begin to bring his attention to his breath and encourage a natural slightly deeper and fuller swing to his breath. With this practice he begins to be able to move into and through this dead state and not drown in it. A sense of internal mastery begins to develop which has been lacking in his relationship to his internal world.

Ms. E becomes scattered and fragmented in life and in sessions. She is too full to sort, discriminate and focus on what is most important in her life. She also has asthma and I notice the tendency for her to retain and freeze her breath on the inhalation. I think of the Zen story with the Zen master serving tea to the person coming for instructions who keeps and pouring while the cup keeps overflowing. He says “how can you receive any teachings when you are so full”?

I teach her the triangle breath with the hold on the exhalation to bring the quality of emptiness to her over-full and busy mind. She begins to calm and becomes teary in

thankfulness with an inner state of serenity that develops.

Mr. F is brilliant, but is often off in his own world. He will guard against deeper intimacy through the identification with his mind and overuse of his intellect. I sense a deeper knowing in him and suggest the Uranus breath (breathing in through the whole body and exhaling through the third eye center) to open him to kashf or deeper insight.

He stops after a few breaths. A deep and expansive state of awareness opened and then a sense of terror. As we explore this he realizes that in his childhood, in order to survive he had to cut off contact with his intuition and guidance to dull his awareness of his abusive environment. He then developed his intellect to compensate and distract himself from the external chaos and violence.

As important as contemplating the disturbances of breath in my clients is, it is even more important to monitor my own breath in sessions and allow for a natural rhythm to develop in me! The natural swing of my breath allows me to be present with myself and others. Much healing begins and ends with simple presence.