

# The Breathing Self

The Experience of Breath As An Art To Healing Yourself

By Prof. Ilse Middendorf and Juerg Roffler

Breath comes and goes on its own, and with a peaceful rest we trust that the next breath cycle emerges again on its own.

The simplicity of this statement is full of richness and wisdom. It is one of nature's basic principles that we can experience in ourselves and learn about in all living creatures.

The intention of this article is to give you a brief introduction into The Experience of Breath, an artistic form of breath education developed by Prof. Ilse Middendorf.

## Breath as an Experience of Self

The awareness of breath movement encompasses the physical experience as well as the experience of the true nature of the Self, as we unfold our vital forces into the world. It is this breath that we allow to come and go on its own, which sustains the basic rhythms of our life processes. As the work develops, we experience movement out of breath as the source of our creative forces as well as

an outlet for its expression. We enter a self-analytical process of growth and development. Breath becomes our teacher and healer.

Breathing not only reaches our inner world and moves us; it connects us to the world outside. It brings us closer to each other and breaks down our sense of isolation.

How can we learn about our breath?

First of all we need to discover and become sensory aware of how we breathe naturally.

Apart from the chemical exchange which takes place in the lungs and the blood stream, breathing means, above all, movement. Breath – creating inward and outward movements – an ever-continuing act of filling and emptying – resembles life itself. As we allow air to flow in, the body walls expand. As we breathe out, the swing back to their original position. We have a moment of rest, before the next expansion of our organism allows fresh life to come in. Breathing is a constant, rhythmic movement – like the eternal dip and swell of the waves of the ocean.

This rhythmic process, which takes place naturally in every living being, is the primal life-giving motion itself. If we breathe naturally, this rhythm moves our

entire “being” – made up of a collection of forces and processes that interact with each other to form a unique whole.

The unconscious mode of breathing is part of the autonomic nervous system, and accompanies every act of the body – be it physical, spiritual, or emotional. Whereas anxiety restricts our breathing, joy permits it to flow freely. Every activity changes our breathing pattern. If we have worries, fears, struggles – either of an internal or external nature – our muscles become tight and inflexible, and disturb the normal function of our organs, eventually causing illness. We become cramped and tense. These states restrict our natural breathing and are harmful to us.

Our culture still teaches us to treat our bodies as objects, dominated by our will, or what we or others “think” is good for us. We are taught to decide to not trust ourselves – our breath – our own life-giving force. We need to learn to know and appreciate our bodies as a collection of forces working together as one.

We become aware of these forces when we focus and sense our spiritual and psychic powers within a particular area of our body. When we focus our power of awareness on any specific part of our body, we have, at the same time, transposed our Self there. For example, when I place my hands around my ankle, I not only focus my attention there and sense my ankle between my two hands, *I am* there, with full presence, with my whole Self. Consequently, I can feel and experience

that part of me completely. As I am there, so is my breath, if I allow it to come naturally! By experiencing, through this process of conscious awareness, we incorporate a particular part of our body into the whole, and sense our breath growing, expanding, and moving more than ever before.

FOCUSING-SENSING-BREATHING are interrelated processes; one induces the others. The concentration of these forces takes us from an unconscious level of breathing to a composed state of being where breathing is conscious, yet independent of our will. We experience both our sensual awareness and our breathing together as our present state of being. We can experience our Self as an “I-myself” entity, with all of the basic forces which encompass the phenomenon of the human being. In this way, we have access to the enormous knowledge of the breath. We can realize and define this knowledge through sensing and experiencing our breath movement consciously, with our full presence. This includes both the quality of surface as well as the deeper meanings of life – much like the surface and depth of the ocean – two spiritual qualities which interact in the process of maturing. Breath connects and tells us about the essence of our individual being. Even more than opening the paths into our depths, breath also shows us how to evolve from that essence.

We experience our Self as a creative and expressive being, capable of moving our inner world, as well as affecting the world around us.

Actually, we can practice The Experience of Breath to access and connect with the natural laws of breathing.

With practice we can discover and develop breath awareness. It requires devotion and an alert mind. Through a series of spontaneous movement exercises, which make use of stretching/expansion, pressure points, vowel breath-spaces, and movements determined by breath, all sorts of possibilities begin to emerge, together with a growing awareness of a new breathing dynamic.

On inhalation, emphasis is on allowing the air to come in. On exhalation, breath movement swings back with our full presence. This is followed by a peaceful rest before the next breath cycle emerges on its own. In this way we achieve not only greater openness, but also greater differentiation. We can experience our authentic Self.

Natural breathing frees us from superfluous concerns, tensions, and prejudices. We can gain an immediate, direct experience of our true nature and the profound joy which comes with it.

## Breath Class

At this point we would like to invite you to join us in a breath class. Fourteen people are sitting in a circle on wooden stools in a spacious room. People in this class have been working with breath for more than one year, meeting once a

week for an hour and a half. Participants are men and women of all ages from different walks of life and with varying professions. We begin the session by stretching – extending ourselves – inviting breath to enter into our inner world. We all sit naturally, our spine upright, letting ourselves be carried by the ground and the stools we are sitting on. We wait with a quiet mind for our breath to come and go on its own. Gradually, after expanding our fingers as we inhale, and releasing them as we exhale, we also move our hands and arms – actually our whole body – with the natural breath rhythm, completing the breath movement to its definition. All movements are unique, there is no right or wrong way.

Following our breath as a guideline, we become aware of our “lower space” which includes our feet, legs and pelvis. This area carries us; it contains our instincts, earth force, and vital power. As we grow upward, we become aware of our “middle space,” which reaches from our navel to the middle of our sternum (breast bone), where we meet the center of our Self. After we have become aware of ourselves, we sense the urge to conclude the process by entering the “upper space,” which refines, completes, shapes, and expresses the forces of the other areas. As a result, we may be rewarded by a variety of experiences. Some people call it clarity or understanding; others call it transformation or wisdom. This is the place where instinct and spirit become one.

Our class has experienced this process and has also realized that by giving in to inhalation, the natural force of exhalation happens, without effort. Now we begin to release the forces that we have absorbed into the space around us – in front of us, behind us, on both sides, above, and below. This is the space that not only affects us; it is also the space on which we can act. The breath movement which happens out of our lower, middle, and upper spaces, meets the space around us, and encounters another force field which emanates from the world around us. From the security of our breath power, we address ourselves to our partners. We find ourselves in constantly renewed movements. We experience a response; we see the interaction completed, in a state of balance.

We sit down again to feel and sense the effect of the whole exercise. We realize something important has grown in us. The possibility of change is the gateway to constant transformation. Through change we can shed the old that is no longer useful to us, leave it to the past, and embrace the present. Exercises promoting this kind of transformation lead also to a new posture, which does not only depend on muscular tension, but also on self-knowledge and balance of Self, embracing doing and non-doing.

It takes some practice before the group reaches a satisfying stage of simply letting the breath come and go on its own, without controlling or directing it. Allowing inhalation is particularly challenging. We need to give ourselves over to

our breath and wait for it to come on its own accord, while at the same time, be fully present and sense the breath movement.

Part of the practice with this class also includes our work with vowels and consonants as a integrated part of the work with The Experience of Breath. Contemplating individual vowels on inhalation creates specific spaces for breath. Each vowel creates space in its own particular area of our body. Working with all the vowels, one at a time, provides and stimulates breath throughout our whole being. When we contemplate the vowel sound as we inhale, and voice the sound as we exhale, sounds then become rooted, substantial, and full of personal meaning. They reach their intended goal and reflect back into our own depth. We also proceed in a similar way with consonants. Whereas vowels create space for the breath, consonants accentuate, define, center, stimulate, relax, or stroke throughout the body's cavity. Similar practices are found in some Eastern spiritual approaches, e.g. the mantra-yoga or the sound meditations of the Tibetan Buddhists.

One of the women in this class decided to deepen her understanding of herself through breath by making individual appointments with a practitioner. At this time, the client lies on a table, and the breath practitioner works with hands on the client's body, and together they develop a "breath dialogue." The practitioner's hands convey all the knowledge, experience, maturity, and fullness

of his or her personality. The hand address themselves to the client, and person to person, they bring to light not only the breath conflicts, but the causes that often underlie the problems – and even more important – the healing forces that can bring balance into that process. Both participants involved in the treatment remain autonomous. Movement work and individual sessions can be a good complement to each other.

After working through all the preliminary stages, breath awareness becomes so strong that we can access the actual goal of this work – the movement which grows out of breath. We have already developed awareness for center and breath substance. The dialogue with ourselves becomes defined in movements and expressions coming from our conscious and unconscious – free of control of mind or ego. We move with our breath in a way that our soul, our spirit, our body, our whole Self wants to unfold. We learn about what is inside of us that calls for expression: a conflict, a sadness, a cheerfulness, an insight, or an inspiration, etc. We experience and see ourselves in the movement. We turn towards the world around us. We feel changes happening within us, while we move through our breath. We realize that we are participating in the primal basis of all moving, breathing life. We see our Self, our life, our destiny, in the reflection of our breath movement. We see the becoming and the being, the distant and the attainable.

We walk step by step, experiencing our breathing and being guided by it. We see the young within us growing into the mature, aging without fading away. Sometimes we find ourselves standing on the threshold of balance between introversion and extroversion. This leads us with courage to a broad horizon.

Take the next step and embrace your breath, which from now on will not abandon you – or you will notice when it does not carry and stimulate you. You are breath aware!

### Breath Exercises

Since breath work is experiential, it is useful to have someone lead us through the first steps to discover our natural breath. Exercises in the beginning are more internal, helping us to become aware of our breath by sensing and focusing on it. We ask ourselves, “Where is breath?” And “How is my breath?” We start to discover how breath responds to our movements. As we become more and more breath aware, we arrive at the moment when breath initiates our movement.

To offer a taste of the potential that breath can bring, give yourself and hour’s time and let yourself be lead on a journey of exploring your Self through breath, in a way that you might never have experienced before.

You will not regret spending time in this way. You may even come out of the exploration with the delicious feeling of having met yourself in a place that you somehow knew existed, but had never reached before. And this will only be the beginning of a life-long adventure!

We suggest that you choose a quiet place in your home, sitting upright on a stool with a firm, flat seat. Plant your feet firmly on the floor, and rest your hands on your upper thighs. Close your eyes, and for a few minutes, focus inside, bringing your full presence to your breath. Without controlling it, let your breath come and go on its own. With neither expectation nor plan, become aware of where your breath is moving you. Sense your breath movement. For the next few minutes, continue to simply sense this movement that breath creates, following its rhythmic coming and going – as it naturally happens.

Staying connected with the sensation of your breath movement, now start to stretch/expand throughout your whole body – in a gentle, not-forceful, and spontaneous way.

Resonating

Sit down and again, with eyes closed, for a few moments, focus on your breath, and resonate – collect what has happened to your breath as a result of the previous movement exercise. Become aware of any changes. Maybe in stretching, is there already more space available for your breath?

### Resting

After resonating, let yourself rest for a few minutes, in a sitting position on the stool, rocking back and forth a little bit over your sitting bones, clasping both hands around one knee, lifting it while you rock.

When you are ready to continue, stand, with feet parallel, hips-width apart. Bend your knees slightly. Place more of your weight on the balls of your feet.

Raise your arms loosely to the level of your head. Swing with your arms and trunk forward and down, allowing your inhalation to stream in through your nose, without pulling it in.

Then let your exhalation stream out through your mouth with a little sound, like a warm wind. Allow yourself to be pushed or grown up, by the uprising power of this exhalation.

The uprising power of breath can bring you a strong sense of vitality, which leaves you pleasantly stimulated and alert.

Keep swinging downward and upward, according to the natural rhythm of your breath. No effort should be involved in this exercise. Go as far down (on

inhalation) as you feel comfortable, and let yourself “grow up” again as far as breath (uprising power of exhalation) takes you.

Trusting your breath, you will find ease in your movements and will become more aware of your back as a flexible part of yourself.

### Resonate

As you resonate, you may feel strongly stimulated and more open to allowing breath to claim more space inside yourself.

### Rest

With the next exercise, begin in a standing position. With eyes closed, become sensory aware of your breath movement, with its natural undisturbed rhythm.

Begin to roll down and forward, one vertebra after another. Start with your head; continue with the seven cervical, twelve thoracic, five lumbar vertebrae, and finally the sacrum with the pelvis, until your torso hangs from your hips, securely supported by your legs, with knees slightly bent.

Let your shoulders and arms hang loosely.

Bring your full presence and focus to each vertebra as you bend forward and down. Even though you may not be sensory aware of every individual vertebra when you start practicing with this exercise, project your presence to that area

where you expect the particular vertebra to be. Go down as far as it feels comfortable for you – preferably all the way down – until your spine is hanging down, out of your pelvis, and your hands or arms touch the ground. After a while, begin to grow up again, bringing one vertebra on top of the other, until the head tops this growth like a crown.

The key for this exercise is to allow the breath to flow freely, at all times, without holding or pushing.

If you allow the breath to come and go naturally, you will experience the effect of a strong transformation. Your inner structure is reorganized, with an understanding that is free from the influence of your mind and ego. Your structure is actually created by the balancing and healing power of your natural breath.

Sit down again in an upright sitting position, and while resonating with your breath, place your hands firmly on various places on your torso, to find out how and where your breath is moving yourself.

You may discover that breath is different in its appearance and feeling in various places on your torso. Also, by staying awhile at a specific place and bringing your full presence there, you may experience more fullness and ease for your breath – perhaps a welcome change.

It is a natural principle that wherever you bring your presence or have a clear sensation of breath, if you allow it to happen naturally, breath will move into this

area, clearing and integrating its restrictions. You will feel increased freedom and openness. Even more, depending on what space you are working on, you will learn about the deeper meaning of these changes. See the description of the three breath spaces (lower, middle, and upper) and their meaning, as previously mentioned in this article.

Rest for a while.

Let's finish with an exercise which includes breath and your hands in free play.

While sitting, place both hands on your upper thighs, palms facing the ground.

Now open one hand and arm like a flower to the space around you, palm facing out, and fingers fully unfolding. Let your hand/arm spontaneously find its direction and distance. After fully unfolding, bring your hand back to your thigh. Without pausing too long, continue in the same way with your other hand. Alternate between your two hands for quite a while, before you open both hands at the same time to the outside and bring them back together onto your thighs. Each hand may have chosen a different direction and distance in unfolding.

Meanwhile, you may find that not only your hands and arms are involved, but your whole body as well. Continue in this way as long as you feel comfortable. Allow breath to flow freely. Let your inhalation enter through your

nose without drawing it in – and let your exhale stream out through your mouth with a little sound.

You will reach a point where you sense that this kind of breath movement could go on forever.

This is the moment where breath has come into balance. Inhalation, exhalation, and pause will be in accordance with your movements. You become one. You may realize that the balance does not happen from your conscious will, but from a place deep within yourself, that know more.

Thank you for participating!

## Background

Prof. Middendorf began practicing her work in 1935. Her interest in movement and dance brought her into contact with a group of people known by the name of “Mazdaznan.” Their main purpose was to develop a healthy body with a strong emphasis on principles of nutrition and methods of breath. Ilse was trained in these particular breath exercises and in a form of massage for the nervous system. Her success as a somatic teacher was not enough for her.

Ilse was searching for the essence of a person’s Self within the movements, and for a medium to relate to that essence or to create one. An intuition from her childhood and her deep conviction made her want to follow the path of breath, and

what it had to teach her. Ewe Warren, a dancer, taught her about the unity of human expression by means of movement, breathing, and meditation. A Jungian analysis furthered her personal and professional development. C.G. Jung mentioned the psychological root of the world of breath and Gustav Heyer emphasized it. Cornelis Veening and Margarethe Mhe intuitively knew about the potential of breath, and elaborated on their original insights along a “breathing-psychological” path. They made clear that connecting with breath in depth meant connecting with the essence of Self and its creative and inspiring nature. Veening became a very important teacher for Ilse, supporting her over a long period of time in the search and development of her own work. In 1965, after many years of research and practice, she founded the Institute for The Perceptible Breath in Berlin, Germany, to train practitioners in her artistic form of breath education – which she now calls The Experience of Breath. Since its inception, her work has achieved international attention for its effectiveness as a process leading to therapeutic, artistic, and personal growth as well as a way to support the healing and re-balancing processes of one’s self as a physical, emotional, and spiritual being.