

## **BREATHWORK**

from Trauma Healing and Transformation, Chapter 3, p. 26, 27, 29, 30  
—Patricia Mathes Cane, Ph.D.

Breath is the source of life. During inhalation, fresh energy is brought into the body, energy centers, and pores to nourish the cells, tissues, and organs. With exhalation, accumulated stress, stagnant energy, and toxins are released. Breathing exercises form the foundation of many ancient practices that promote a deepening of consciousness—meditation, mindfulness, yoga, chi kong. In the Middle East the word for breath (ruach in Hebrew and ruha in Aramaic) also means spirit. The way in which we breathe is also the way in which we embody spirit. Deep flowing breath is a sign of health, balance, and fullness of spirit. Normally people at rest breathe between 13 to 15 times per minute. Short shallow breath indicates stress. It is only within the last few decades that breath has been studied in the Western world as a way to promote healing of body, mind, and spirit. Psychologist Gay Hendricks, Ph.D. (1995), coined the term “breathwork” in the 1970s as a tool for healing, stress reduction, and personal development. Breath can be used to release and heal the wounds of trauma. Hendricks says: “When a trauma occurs, the breath is first held and then becomes short and shallow. So releasing a trauma from the body and mind is partly a result of getting the breath flowing again while the person consciously processes the feelings from the events that froze the breath in the first place.” Breath is the simplest most direct way to focus one’s energy and to connect with the center of awareness. In moments of stress the breath can be a way to build energy and endurance. Breathing through a stressful time is an effective way to let go of the tension that accumulates in the body. A few long deep breaths at a difficult moment can completely change the way we handle a situation. The breathing pattern shifts when different emotions are present in the body-mind-spirit. Through conscious breath we can become aware of the flow of these emotions. By changing the way we breathe we can change emotional and physical states. Feelings and emotions can therefore be released and cleared out of the body by working with the breath.

### **Breathing Exercises**

The breath can be consciously used to unblock, move, increase, and balance energy. The following breathing exercises can be done individually or used with groups of all kinds. When doing the exercises it is important to let go of all thoughts and worries of the day and to live mindfully in the present moment, in the breath. The exercises may be tape-recorded using soft background music. The language and images may be adapted to meet the needs of the situation and the culture of the group.

#### **• Observation of the Breath**

Sit comfortably with your back supported and your feet touching the ground. Close your eyes, breathe normally, and become aware of the air flowing into your body. Observe the quality of the air, how it circulates around, where it goes inside your body. Now breathe out and observe the air leaving your body. Do this inhalation and exhalation several times, observing (not judging) how you normally breathe. Do you breathe in through your nostrils or mouth? Where does the air seem to circulate—does it stay in the throat or upper chest area?

Does it move down the trunk into the abdomen? Do you exhale through your nostrils or your mouth? Do you notice any sensations in your muscles as you breathe—tightness, constriction, warmth, softness? If the air is clean and fresh how does that feel? If the air is stagnant or contaminated how does that affect the way you breathe? Continue breathing normally for several minutes, observing your pattern of breath, appreciating your ability to cleanse and nourish body, mind, and spirit with air.

#### • **Abdominal Breathing**

Sit or lie comfortably with your back supported. Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and center yourself in the moment letting go of all thoughts and worries of the day. Place your left hand gently on your abdomen below the navel, and your right hand on top of your left hand. Take a slow deep breath through your nose, and imagine the air moving down through your body and into your abdomen. Fill your abdomen with air as if it were a large balloon. Feel your ribs expanding outward and upward, as your abdomen expands and fills. Hold your breath for a few seconds, and then exhale slowly through your mouth, contracting the muscles of the abdomen, letting go of all tension in your body, as you release your breath. Pause for a few moments and then repeat the full abdominal breath for several minutes. If thoughts come into your mind, gently release them and return to the image of the warm air moving in and out of your body.

#### • **Visualization, Imagery and Breath**

Breathing exercises can be combined with visualization and focused on different parts of the body to alleviate pain, anxiety, or discomfort. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, completely relaxed. Close your eyes, breathe deeply through your nose and into your abdomen. Now imagine that the air is a color—a peaceful lilac or the green healing energy of the earth. Imagine that you are able to breathe in this warm healing energy to relax the tense places in your body and to breathe out the stress, pain, and anxiety you have stored there. You can work for a longer time with any areas of pain or discomfort. Start first with your feet and legs. Breathe in deeply the energy of the earth and imagine that this energy circulates through your muscles and bones down into the cells of your body cleansing and relaxing you. You might want to flex and tense your legs and feet to get in touch with any tension there. Now breathe out fully and slowly, releasing any stress that you may have in your feet and legs.

Breathe in again and imagine the warm earth energy moving up into the trunk of your body, circulating through your pelvis, abdomen, chest, back, and neck area. Flex and tense the trunk of your body to get in touch with the stress you are holding in any area. Breathe deeply and exhale letting go of all the tension you may have in the muscles and cells of your trunk. Feel deep peace and relaxation in all parts of your body. Breathe deeply and imagine the warm earth energy circulating throughout your body and now flowing into your arms, forearms, and hands. Stretch and flex your upper arms, elbows, forearms, hands, and fingers to increase any tension you may carry. Now breathe deeply and let go, releasing all the tension from your body. Breathe deeply again and imagine the warm earth energy moving up your spine and into your head. Stretch and flex the muscles of your jaw, face, forehead, and scalp to get in touch with all the tension you hold there. Breathe deeply and now let go, feeling your face and head completely relax. Take a moment to enjoy this state of peace and harmony in your body, mind, and spirit.

- **Breathing in Nature**

Trees and plants are tremendous sources of energy for grounding and healing us. Often with traumatic stress we feel unbalanced and ungrounded. This exercise should be done out of doors or in a garden where there are plants and trees. Otherwise you can do this in front of a plant in your home, or in front of a picture of a garden. If you are able to remove your shoes and place your feet on the ground even better. Breathe in fully and imagine that your feet are like the roots of a tree running deep into the earth. Imagine that the soles of your feet have centers through which you can breathe in the earth energy. To a count of 7 breathe in the earth energy through these centers in your feet. Hold your breath for a count of 3, and then breathe out slowly to a count of 7, releasing any tension you may have in your body. Continue to breathe in this way for several minutes, imagining that you are filling your entire body with vital life force energy.

- **Breathing through the Pores**

This exercise is especially helpful for releasing any pain caused by physical or emotional wounds. Do deep abdominal breathing for several minutes to center and focus your energy. Scan your body and become aware of any places where you are carrying pain, tension, or difficult memories. Breathe in to a count of 7 and imagine that the air is like white cleansing light that comes into your body through your pores, circulating through the areas that are tense and painful. Feel the white light penetrating and cleansing the dense, heavy, and painful areas of your being. Hold your breath for a count of 3 as your cells and tissues retain the white healing light and release all the toxins and gray diseased material. As you breathe out to a count of 7, you breathe out the gray material through your pores. Do this cleansing pore breathing for several minutes, directing the white light to any areas that need special attention. Feel your body becoming lighter and brighter.