

# Introduction

Breath is the very essence of life. Our entrance into life occurs with that first breath, and it is with a final breath that we depart. The breath we breathe contains the attributes of the Divine. Awareness of breath determines the level of our connection to the deeper meaning of life itself. It is an expression of our humanity, carrying our sighs, moans, subtle praising, and compassion. Breath changes with emotion, with threat, arousal, activity, and so on. When it is held, it can reflect our anger and our fear. The depth of breath, the ease of breath, the rhythm of breath, all change automatically with our condition and mood. A sudden shock brings a gasp or a momentary cessation of breathing. A sneeze is an eruption of breath that makes one so suddenly vulnerable that we wish the sneezer good health and blessings to ward off the incursion of malicious spirits. Recognition of the breath can also transform our lives. Its release can bring us greater emotional, mental and spiritual freedom. Its study can lead us to the source of life's secrets, and the more intention and focus we bring to breath, the more deeply we connect with our original nature.

## Limited Breath, Limited Life

An infant enters life with a full, deep breathing pattern. Her whole being is involved as she takes in the world through her senses, for she is still connected to the unifying field. But as this infant grows and develops, she discovers that the world is not necessarily a safe place. Parental love and approval may be conditional, and the child learns to restrain natural curiosity and spontaneity—and, in so doing, the breath. This same

pattern will, more often than not, be repeated as the child enters formal schooling and conventional religious training; as perceived criticisms and approvals of teachers and peers are integrated into the growing child's self-concept. If the child receives harsh, unloving discipline or encounters traumatic experiences, the breath will be further restrained as this natural life force and the body's musculature retract from full expression. Introjected influences will have entered into the child's intrapsychic world, dominating future beliefs and behaviors, inhibiting creative power, and limiting the ability to live an authentic life.

Television and various forms of electronic media comprise yet another form of introjected influences as people are told how to dress, what to buy, what to believe, and how to behave. According to Elena Serrano and Cindy Bardon's *Kids, Food and Electronic Media* (Virginia State University Publication #349-008, June 2004):

The average American child between the ages of 2 and 17 spends 25 hours per week watching television (approximately 20 percent to 30 percent of their waking hours). One study showed that 19 percent of children between the ages of 2 and 17 watch more than 35 hours of television per week. Most children will have spent more time in front of a television than a teacher. It is estimated that kids will have seen at least 360,000 commercials before they graduate from high school.

As s/he is initiated into mass consciousness and the commercial empire, the child integrates the emotional, mental, and physiological intensity of fast-paced entertainment. In the process, s/he loses the capacity for a natural breath with its own unique rhythm.

These experiences have the power to block emotions and create negative mindsets, thereby contributing to problems in relationships with self and others. The loss of natural rhythm can also be the initiating cause of illness. The late Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan noted in his *Heart of Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999, p 275) that health depends "upon the rhythm of the breath." Breath has the power not only to restore physical health and free us from psychological limitations, it can also lead us into transformation and wholeness, as evidenced in the ancient writings and teachings on the breath from Eastern and Middle Eastern traditions.

## A Brief History on the Breath: Alchemy and the Deeper Side of Transformation

The first known written account of breath training occurred approximately three thousand years ago. However, humanity's reverence and respect for the breath has a longer history than evidenced in ancient writings, as teachings on the breath were originally given only to spiritual devotees. They were deemed secret teachings—only to be given to the initiated.

Eastern and Middle Eastern traditions typically included some form of breath practice as a catalyst for alchemical transformation on physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. Even though explanations and spiritual exercises differed, each depth tradition had techniques for recognizing and integrating masculine (active) and feminine (receptive) energies, emphasizing methods for balancing these two poles as part of the journey to realizing one's unity with the divine. In particular, the ancient Hindu (Vedic) teachings known as the Upanishads were filled with references to the breath, acknowledging its relationship to creation itself. Alchemical practices of Pranayam (elementary breathing practices), such as alternate nostril breathing were intended to balance masculine and feminine (active and passive) energies.

Alchemy, the spiritual process of transmutation and transformation, is believed to be a Hermetic tradition, dating back to ancient Egypt. Although the deeper practices within yogic, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions are based on alchemical processes, the actual practitioners known as *alchemists* were primarily Sufi mystics and Jewish Kabbalists who had been influenced by Hermetic teachings. Some of these practices were also woven into Greek and Roman esoteric teachings, resurfaced during the Renaissance, and are now part of the tapestry of contemporary Western thought.

Carl Jung's *Collective Works*, volumes 13 and 14, reflect his research into alchemy and coniunctio, the union of the opposites, male and female, spirit and body. His research led him to study both Kabbalah and Sufi writings. Jung found that each of these schools of thought emphasized the process of unifying masculine and feminine energies as a prerequisite to achieving cosmic unity. His research led him to conclude that the awareness of the breath encouraged recognition of different ego states, sub-personalities, and archetypal forces. As with ancient traditions, the

practitioner in more modern forms of breathwork is fully engaged in a journey toward wholeness.

While alchemical breath practices aid in the recognition and balancing of opposing poles, they also integrate the elements: air, fire, earth, water, and *Ether*. Teachings and rituals related to these elements are found in Eastern, Middle Eastern, and most, if not all, indigenous cultures. For example, most readers may be familiar with terms such as the “four corners of the earth,” or “the four directions” more commonly used in Native American and other indigenous traditions. Each of these directions is equated to an element, either air, fire, earth, or water. Ether is representative of the unifying field.

In a sense, Ether is synonymous with *Om* (or *Aum*). Most Westerners are familiar with this Sanskrit mantra, which is often chanted with the intention of harmonizing with cosmic energy. Max Mueller, one of the first English translators of Eastern spiritual texts, explained the use of Om in *The Upanisads* (New York: Dover, 1962, pp xxv–xxvi) as the “symbol of all speech and all life. . . . Om means Ether (akasa) and that Ether is the origin of all things . . . and that Ether is in fact one of the earliest and less perfect names of the Infinite, of Brahman, the universal Self.” It is the subtle field of creation—the place where all is united. It is the divine creative force.

## Opening the Field

The very breath we breathe unites us with this universal mind and creative force; and yet we choose to limit our lives, trapped in pits of despair, mediocrity, and held breath. Our awareness of and connection to the life energy is forgotten, until that magical moment when a knowledge deep within us begins to awaken. We are stirred by an inner remembrance that there is something more than the mundane goals and unfulfilled aspirations that have entertained and limited our minds. It is at this moment that the process of attaining wholeness and reexperiencing a unifying breath begins.

This book provides a variety of theories and methods evidencing the wisdom, power, and beauty of the breath. The first three parts focus on Eastern, Western, and Middle Eastern breathwork, respectively, whereas part IV addresses further considerations of the miraculous power of the

breath. Each chapter within these sections contributes to this kaleidoscopic view of universal perspectives on the breath. It is noteworthy that different forms of breathwork tend to elicit different responses in the breather. The results seem to mirror the tradition's intention. For example, rebirthing, a Western practice, leads one to early life traumas and heals them, whereas the Eastern yogic breathing practices can systematically awaken the sleeping serpent (Kundalini) at the base of the spine, opening the psychic energy centers. These differences alone evidence the profound creative intelligence of the mysterious breath we breathe.

Breathing practices have the potential to reverse detrimental effects of the past, for the breath provides the impetus for healing, and for reconnecting to the fuller potential imparted by the gift of life. The following glimpse into the history of the breath has the potential to deepen our understanding of its power, while drawing us into ever expanding revelation. This revelation is the intention inherent in this book, a collection of essays on the various ways that breath can affect our lives. Each chapter encourages readers to rediscover the healing power of the breath, each page pays tribute to the immensity of this innate power, its wisdom, and its beauty.

As Puran Bair notes in the last chapter of this book, "the exhalation is one's primary means of affecting the world." Through our conscious breathing we can bring greater peace and harmony into the world, and, in so doing, benefit all sentient beings.