

What is Breathwork?

Breathwork is a contemporary method of deliberately allowing oneself access to non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC) by breathing consciously in a safe and supportive setting; into this environment the astonishing hidden depths of the psyche can finally emerge.

Because breathing is our first act of individuation, it commands a special place in our psychic consciousness and has been utilized by many ancient mystical traditions; Tantric yoga, Taoist meditation and the Indian practice of Pranayama have all valued its unique ability to subtly alter the body chemistry and lift the veil of perception.

Supervised by experienced facilitators and accompanied by evocative, non-verbal music, breathwork participants are actively encouraged to permit a falling away of ordinary consciousness; awareness of our true Self then arises in NOSC.

This may involve insights and deep emotions related to an individual's biography, experiences of the four stages of birth from conception to emergence as well as transpersonal experiences, including memories from the collective unconscious, encounters with the world of mythology and spirit, and mystical, numinous experiences.

As with dreams, the NOSC with which we are most familiar, the psyche delivers from the subconscious exactly that which most urgently needs to emerge into our ordinary awareness. The significant difference between these occurrences during sleep and during breathwork, however, is that during breathwork one is awake, and capable of experiencing and remembering them at the very moment of their emergence. The images and sensations, whether tumultuous or tranquil, are immediately experienced in such a way that they become a part of one's consciousness.

Once the subconscious material is consciously experienced in a safe, benevolent and supportive environment, previously held ideas, self-limiting definitions and self-destructive impulses can cease to hold with the same power. We become freer to define ourselves more by our possibilities and less by our limitations.

Breathwork is a process of allowing, of giving permission to, of saying yes to a part of ourselves which we have denied, the true Self; it sets no limits upon the boundless potential of consciousness. It can touch a wellspring of memories and emotions, the subtle effects of which may continue after the individual has returned to ordinary consciousness. As a way of communicating the content to others, each breather is invited to share their experiences with the facilitators and other members of the group, bringing each session to closure.

*But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds
and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognised as your own,
that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world,
determined to do the only thing you could do;
determined to save the only life you could save.*

-Mary Oliver

What happens in a Breathwork session?

"The workshop begins with introductions of the group members. The breathing session begins with the breather lying on a mattress, on his/her back with eyes closed, the sitter alongside. The two have discussed the breather's needs; the sitter knows to provide help only when asked but otherwise not to interfere with the breather's experience.

"The facilitators lead a guided relaxation, at the end of which the breathers are instructed to breathe consciously.

"At the conclusion of the relaxation, rhythmic and evocative music begins. As the breathers continue the conscious breathing, they begin, at their own pace, to enter a non-ordinary state of consciousness, a trance-like state which alters the usual relationship between the conscious and subconscious, allowing into conscious experience the subjective memories of childhood, memory experience which seems to be pre-verbal and pre-understanding; impulses to physical movement or modes of physical expression which, while they often do not seem to make sense at first in any logical way have a powerful heuristic and / or empirical value to the psychic process of people who allow them. People often experience, in a cathartic purge, long suppressed emotional responses to situations from the past, re-experiencing threats to their physical well being and releasing long held negative emotional residue; they may have profound insights into the roots of their disorder in a meditative stillness, impossible to interpret by outside observers. These may include experiences that can recalibrate long-held ideas, and participants can redefine themselves after such events, introducing new understanding with the potential for significant behavioral changes.

It is through such powerful experiences that participants may literally redefine themselves. This redefinition often brings whole new levels of understanding into the decision-making criteria of the individual, which can result in significant behavioral changes.

The Healing Potential of Breathwork:

"Tell me, and I will forget; Show me, and I will remember; Involve me, and I will understand".

Lao Tse

There may be no better way to introduce the action of Breathwork than by quoting Freud's contemporary, the influential Harvard psychologist William James, who in 1902 wrote in his seminal book, "The Varieties of Religious Experience":

"Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch they are there in all their completeness."

Breathwork is a simple and effective method that gives "the requisite stimulus" for individuals to experience, encounter and engage with aspects of their psychic structure that may be hidden from them.

Supervised by trained and experienced facilitators, participants lie on a mat and breathe consciously whilst listening to selected evocative music in a safe and supportive setting. The non-ordinary state of consciousness (NOSC) that occurs allows participants to recall, own and embrace whatever memories, experiences and visions may arise. Engagement with this material may result in cognitive understanding and emotional release that can reduce the power of the subconscious to influence the individual's behavior.

Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness

The term Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness (NOSC), deserves our attention and understanding. On the simplest level, such everyday phenomena as daydreaming and fantasies are NOSC, characterized by their brevity and familiarity. Similarly, the every-night phenomena of dreams are also NOSC, during which the individual's subconscious, finding the ego-self literally asleep, expresses its contents that become part of our conscious life once they have been remembered upon waking.

Freud characterized dreams as being "the royal road to the unconscious". Breathwork recognizes the wisdom of this statement and offers another way to access the realms of the human unconscious. By breathing consciously we slightly increase the speed as well as the depth of breathing, and by moving a greater volume of air through our respiratory system, two events occur. The middle, or mammalian brain that includes the amygdala, our emotional control center, becomes more activated with expression of feelings. At the

same time, our cerebral cortex, or thinking brain, becomes less activated. Both actions result from brain complex biological mechanisms that are inadequately understood.

The experience of the inflow of increased feelings indicates that the individual is in a NOSC condition. Dreams are by definition remembered only upon waking, whereas with experiences in breathwork the individual is awake and can choose to engage with at the very moment of their emergence. The deliberate choice to engage these psychic artifacts in real time radically amplifies the opportunity for the unconscious material to be understood experientially.

Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness

Set and Setting

The purpose of breathwork is to activate the healing potential of Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness, and the protocols of this work establish certain conditions that create this possibility.

First is the willingness of the participant to understand that these states are benevolent and to willingly surrender to them understanding that we are being shown something of value. This is known as the "set", the inner condition of the individual as he or she deliberately evokes NOSC by relaxing, listening to music designed to activate the psyche and by breathing consciously.

Second is the support of the authentic presence of trained facilitators, individuals familiar with supporting people in NOSC and experienced in creating and maintaining a safe place within which to support them. This is the "setting", the outer condition into which the NOSC experiences can emerge.

When both "set and setting" are in effect, the outcomes from NOSC experiences that occur within this safe and supportive set and setting can have profound heuristic value, and it is this extraordinary effect, though largely unknown and inadequately understood, that defines breathwork.

Meeting With Ourselves

Breathwork creates and maintains an environment free from interference by external factors, including unsolicited intervention by facilitators, for the three or more hour duration of the session. At the same time, full permission is given to the breather to request facilitator intervention, to not self-censor,

and to honor any and all visions and memories by giving free and complete expression to emotions that may arise from them.

Guiding Principles of Breathwork

This imperative has venerable roots, expressed over two thousand years ago by St Thomas in The Gnostic Gospels:

"If you bring forth that which is within you, that which you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth that which is within you, that which you do not bring forth will destroy you."

The guiding principles of this modality can facilitate the mobilization of innate healing mechanisms that are not usually accessible within traditional treatment methods. By activating this healing potential, a transformative process is initiated guided by deep inner spiritual intelligence. Inherent in us all is the desire to thrive, and a service we may offer clients is the time, conditions and support necessary for them to explore their deepest unconscious in such a way that they may, as St Thomas suggests, save themselves.

Holotropic Breathwork Described

Holotropic Breathwork offers individuals the opportunity to become involved in their own healing process, and all participants are given basic instruction into breathwork methodology prior to their arrival at the workshop location. The following describes a typical 12-hour workshop day.

Relaxation: Conscious Breathing

One facilitator leads a guided relaxation, during which participants are encouraged to allow their daily life to become background and to focus their attention in the present moment; to feel the weight of their bodies lying on the mat, to know that they are safe and that all is well, and to concentrate their energy and focus on breathing consciously.

In normal circumstances we all breathe well under our capacity. By breathing consciously, using the breath as we would use a mantra in meditation to keep us focused upon the simple task at hand, our breathing patterns become a little deeper and faster than usual resulting in a greater volume of air passing through the respiratory system. This increase is all that is required, within the safety of the group setting and accompanied by evocative music, to create the necessary change in consciousness.

At the end of the relaxation the evocative music starts and participants begin within a few minutes to enter a non-ordinary state of consciousness. This trance-like state allows the breather's sub-conscious memories of childhood, including memory and somatic experience which can seem both pre-verbal and pre-understanding, to emerge.

3 Hour Music Trajectory

The music continues for three hours. Beginning with percussive selections, many of which are ethnic in origin, the trajectory becomes less rhythmic and more multi-instrumental, fuller, and more heartfelt during the second hour. It can include singing and chanting, (always non-English), orchestral and operatic pieces, and many selections are from "world music". During the third hour it becomes markedly calmer, using chamber music, solo voices and instruments such as piano and flute.

NOSC, Dreams and Expression

During breathwork, participants are able to choose to stay with the subconscious material and experience it at the moment it emerges. This includes physical movement and modes of expression that may not make sense in any logical way, but which may be of considerable value to the participant's psychic process.

Session Conclusion

The session continues until each breather has reached a satisfactory conclusion. In addition to supporting participants throughout the 3+ hour session, the primary responsibility of breathwork facilitators is to ensure that participants have completed their experience and returned to stability and ordinary consciousness at the conclusion.