

Breath—The Third Dimension of Touch

In the last 20 years more progress has been made in the realm of touch than at any other time in history. This is a phenomenal cultural and evolutionary event. The proliferation of modalities arising from new theories and practices is both inspiring and bewildering, much as the sudden appearance of a thousand butterflies.

The predominant development in the therapeutic landscape over the last 10 years has been linked to our anatomical coming of age. Sports massage, deep tissue massage, myofascial release, trigger point work—these and other approaches owe their popularity to the practitioner's skill and frequent brilliance in applying advanced anatomical knowledge. Many therapists are now competent, if not expert, in their ability to understand and respond to the needs of human structure.

The strength of these structural approaches has allowed us to put our work on a solid scientific footing and thus help our

clients more effectively. The limitation is that there is more to people than just their structure. They are also energetic, feeling, thinking, and spirited beings. A strictly structural approach is therefore not effective in relieving tensions that may arise from feelings, thoughts, and restricted energy flows. Any time we imagine we are merely working on muscular tissue, we have dehumanized the person and put our efficacy as practitioners into jeopardy.

I believe we are now seeing and participating in a new and appropriate phase of our growth, one that will be perhaps even more exciting and fruitful than our achievements in anatomical understanding. This new phase is the conscious development of knowledge and skill with regard to the energetic aspect of bodywork. In our present world, needs beyond the structural are crying out to be competently addressed.

Until recently our culture has defined progress mostly in terms of structure, tech-

nique, and training—the software of intellectual understanding, the hardware of machines and manufactured products. This chronic over-emphasis on technology has exacerbated our ever more desperate need is to address the unanswered question: how shall we live? How can we optimize a healthy relation to ourselves and the natural environment of which we are a part?

Our answer is: through touch.

In the last 20 years we have seen more advancement in the realm of touch than at any other time in history. Touch is unconsciously identified as a source of solutions to fundamental issues humanity must now address if we are to survive and hopefully thrive.

Touch therapy heightens physical experience, helps us attain a new emotional balance, vitalizes the spirit, and inspires new thoughts on the appropriate relation of nature, mind, emotion, body, and spirit.

Thus the incredible momentum propelling the rise of sophisticated touch therapy is explicable because it is advancing our evolution as whole beings, not just technological automatons. If this therapeutic op-

portunity were restricted to massage as a structural, orthopedic modality it would be a tragedy of historic proportions.

Let us enthusiastically accept our good fortune—the opportunity to evolve new ways of being in touch with ourselves and in touch with the world.

An enlightened experience of being-in-touch recognizes the ways we are connected subjectively and objectively. Even though touch takes place in space, it has many more dimensions than those comprised by the three spatial axes. Refined qualities of touch also convey new worlds of sensation, feeling, intuition, and insight. Each dimension of touch has a structural and energetic aspect.

When we initially touch the body, establishing a one-dimensional point of contact, where and how we lay our hands can convey radically new ways to meet each other with compassion, curiosity, and courage. Where and how we then move our hands, establishing two-dimensional planes of movement, can illuminate how we are structured and enhance energy flows along the pathways of our being.

The Source of Our Work Is Not Our Hands

The third dimension of bodywork arises from the miracle of breath. The life-defining expansion and contraction of breath fuels

and refreshes every cell in the body. Each time we heighten our capacity to breathe—through our therapeutic impact on the

nervous and endocrine systems, the muscles and fascia that define the excursion of our lungs, and all other bodily tissues—we facilitate more oxygen delivery, and enhance and enliven every cell in our body.

This is energy work! We don't need to get esoteric to understand energy work. Let us expand our understanding of energy work beyond the arcane obscurity of some of its devotees. Every enlivening breath helps open us up to greater life, greater vitality. Each exhale lets go of unneeded metabolic and energetic waste products—emotional tensions, old patterns of thought and feeling, and habitual behaviors. The carbon dioxide we exhale is made available to the plant kingdom. Trees have a structural and energetic role as the lungs of the earth. We human animals, having the tree-like structures of our bronchioles, participate in the grandeur of this

planetary breath exchange.

It is easy to overlook the amplitude of breath as an energy source. We take an average of 20,000 breaths each day. Compare this frequency to our consumption of food and drink. Perhaps every book on nutrition should begin with a chapter on breath!

We are used to thinking that we do bodywork with our hands. To teach about breath as a part of good “body mechanics” misses the deeper point. While it is true our hands are the structures we most commonly use to contact the body, they are not our essential energy source. It is from our breath that energy flows into our hands.

Hands are the structural tools for our work. Breath is our fundamental energetic tool. Breath is the “origin”; hands are the “contact.”

Breath as Autonomic Modulator

Holistic bodywork leaves out nothing. Since people aren't actually divided into parts, we cannot but work with the whole. We work with body, emotions, mind, and spirit. Breath is one of the primary access points to spirit. Unlike the heartbeat, for example, which is fundamental but not under the control of the conscious mind, with breath we are given the unique opportunity of conscious control of one of the deepest

actions within ourselves. Through conscious breathing we can modulate the autonomic nervous system. We can fine-tune our spirit through breath.

Breath, while personal, is not experienced in the realm of ego. It is deep inside us but not of us. As we breathe, we take in from the outside and give out to the outside. Quite simply and profoundly, the experience of breath amounts to a life-giving movement

of air through us. It is for this reason that many meditation techniques instruct us to focus on the breath. To the extent that we place our awareness on breath, we move beyond ego. Living beyond narrow self-centeredness is a central theme within all spiritual disciplines.

Breath then is an avenue to autonomic

self-modulation and a direct-access way to the spiritual. As therapists wanting to invest our spirit fully in our work, we bring ourselves into an honored, conscious awareness of breath before we begin each session. This intimacy, this alignment with our own spirit, continues throughout the session as we breathe easily and fully.

The Experience of Three-Dimensionality



Most people experience themselves as having only two dimensions, a front and a back, both with height and width. They know they have a front because they see it in the mirror. They know they have a back because it hurts sometimes. Another structure that has a front and a back is a piece of paper. In their self-image such individuals experience themselves as having no more depth than a piece of paper.

The self-imaging of their body structure as two-dimensional is itself a source of disease. Firstly, the image is out of sync with three-dimensional physical reality. Secondly, on an energetic level, if we do not feel depth within ourselves, we experience a diminished capacity for emotion, because emotion requires a sense of spaciousness, or internal room to move. In an experientially two-dimensional world, the organs themselves lack enough room to function optimally.

The key to the therapist and client ex-

periencing their dimensional depths is breath. Breath, with its unceasing rhythm of in and out, is the most dramatic experience we have of three-dimensionality. When we slow down, we sense the three-dimensional tidal movement of inhaling, becoming larger, feeling our borders widen, broaden, and deepen. On exhaling we sense the out-rushing air and our boundaries easing in toward center. The three-dimensional waving and pulsating that breath continually presents to us, accompanied by the pulsing of our beating heart, is a primary way we know we are alive.

As therapists it is imperative that we fully inhabit our three-dimensionality and pulsation through a conscious and enthusiastic relationship with breathing. Firstly we energize ourselves through the effects of heightened cellular respiration. Secondly we let go of held tension in our bodies, so as to move more effectively and impart a tone of ease to the session. Thirdly we set a

therapeutic example for the client. Your breath as a therapist gives assent and blessing to the breathing aliveness of your client. Watch the client virtually inhale your permission to inhabit their living three-dimensionality, communicated purely by your breathing.

Hold your breath and touch yourself. Notice what is lacking. In various ways, a touch without sufficient breath feels un-alive: unmoving, not waving, not caring. There is a sense of waiting. Without breath we really haven't begun. Just as in the birth process, we joyfully anticipate the infant's first breath.

When it starts, we rejoice as the waves of new life begin! We feel care, presence, the promise and spontaneity of relationship.

We don't and can't touch with just a part of ourselves because we are not divided. We touch with all of us. A fundamental aspect of touching is the breathing—the re-inspiration and the “ex-piration” of our beings that takes place within a conscious breathing atmosphere. We see how fundamentally doing therapy is breath touching breath.

*I add my breath to your breath that our days may be long
on the Earth, that the days of our people may be long,
that we shall be as one person, that we may finish our road together.*

— Laguna Pueblo people

Palpation with Air



Too often we imagine that the client's restrictions are things we have to remove through force. We can fall into an earth-mover/bodyworker approach, plowing the fields of flesh in an attempt to re-route the fascia. Structural work can tend naturally to emphasize this way of working. But imagining the body as a fascial substance that we need to remodel gives rise to unnecessary

conflict within and between the therapist and the client.

Previously we have noted that in substance we are mostly water, and that this water itself is mostly empty space. The ratio of empty space to matter in an atom is the same as the ratio of empty space to stars in the universe. The most tangible experience we have of this open space is through breath. When we have the experience that


air is in a fundamental sense what we are, we become vastly more conscious of the open space inside us which constitutes our reality more deeply than the blip on the mind screen that is our conscious ego.

As a therapist you can communicate this essential experience and insight to your client by breathing freely, then touch with the imagery that you are both breath—breath touching breath. When we breathe freely, we palpate with the imagery of touching air, and thus heighten the client’s perception of their own pulsating aliveness. We are working in a manner that is both structurally more accurate and energetically more connected.

Your hands energetically and structurally modify the fundamental energy of breath, in much the same manner as your mouth, teeth, and tongue shape the air column of breath into speech and song. In Hindu philosophy sacred shapings of the hands are known as *mudras*. We can view each beautiful shape the hand makes of the breath in energetic touch as a healing *mudra*.

When we touch with the air element,

Window to the Spirit



The eyes have long been considered the windows to the soul. The intimacy of looking into someone’s eyes stems from soul-to-soul contact. The joy of gazing eye to eye is a sign of love. Even more intimate is the

our touch is all-perfusing, in the sense of fresh air flowing into a region. Consciously breathing, we bring air into our touch so as to penetrate without effort. We use our hands to shape and direct this energy as beautifully and powerfully as a singer shapes each moment of a song, as the poet savors the sound and profound meaning of each word. With this spiritual and aesthetic attention the client will experience change naturally and almost effortlessly.

This way of working evokes Gandhi’s manner of encouraging political change: *Satyagraha*, meaning “soul force” or “insistence on truth,” is a concept pivotal to his advocacy of non-violence. What a privilege it is to approach the body with soul force! Often the tensions we find are those created by the structural and energetic violence committed against us and by us. The soul force of breath shows us a way to end the violence against our beings, the traces of energetic and physical injuries, that we all hope to heal with this thrilling work of ours.

contact of breath to breath. At a personal level, this is usually reserved for friends and loved ones. A prolonged hug, curling up with a partner, noticing the sleeping

breath of your pet or your child—these are experiences of profound connection.

At a professional level, the therapist feels with their hands and sees with their eyes the breathing of the client. From moment to moment it changes—slowing into sleep, breaking rhythm with a sigh like a cresting wave, breathlessly talking with excited insight, shaking when the client experiences the gently insistent surfacing of emotion. The breath is a window to the spirit.

As therapists, once we are aware of this, our gaze and our touching are transformed. Just as in the Biblical story of Creation, as we work, we can observe if “it is good.” The client’s breathing indicates how the spirit is being affected. Through it we can track the paths of being that the client takes throughout the course of the session. When we touch breath to breath, sensing the moment-to-moment shifts of being, both therapist and client are alive fully in the presence of spirit. It is—in the therapeutic sense—an act of love as palpable and real as a song in the open air.

As we feel the waves of being, the living swells and tides of breath controlled both

consciously and unconsciously, we fully experience that we are alive. Breath reminds us that being alive is a continuous miracle.

The rhythms of living breath inform the rhythms of our hands and our body movements. They synchronize feelings, thoughts, and being, giving rise to a profound body-work/bodymind experience. When we participate in this rhythm together we experience a moment together, the infinite life that we share.

“Between the conscious and unconscious the mind has put up a swing,” wrote the Indian poet, Kabîr. As we swing with our focus through the vast dimensions of being—the structures, consciousness, feelings, energy flows, spirit—we know we are not alone. We are all on a great swing. WE ARE ALL ONE WAVING WORLD.

The waving that carries on through us reminds us that we can neither divide ourselves into parts—feelings here, body there—nor can we truly divide the outer world into parts—air here, fire there. Everything is connected and swinging. From a rigorous physics view of energy, the universe is one incredibly complex waveform.