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Breathing Therapy

I

My present approach to human growth is the outcome of early childhood experiences. When I was young, I loved to skate. Once the river in my hometown was solidly frozen, I spent every free minute on the ice. As my body glided effortlessly, it seemed I was carving handwriting on the mirrorlike surface. After I had practiced ardently for hours, all restraint fell away, and the smooth shift of balance brought with it a sense of weightlessness. The joy of life that flowed through me in those days has never been forgotten. Thinking of it years later evoked the question: what is it that releases life?

In those early experiences was a first realization of discipline leading to spontaneity, of effort leading to effortlessness. In those frosty hours, tireless concentration led to the kind of delicate balance that is a prerequisite for figure skating. Once the will power had been summoned to provide the skill, the same will power could be shed; nature took over once more, so that the genuine movement came through, bringing the sort of release I was looking for unconsciously. The spontaneous motion brought with it the "e-motion" of joy, of being fully alive.

It is a long way from one's own experience to teaching a new sense of awareness to others. The way led me to a degree in physiotherapy from Munich University, through hospital work in Germany, Yugoslavia, New York Medical Center and private practice. In these years I had ample opportunity to explore traditional ways of treatment with the application of breathing therapy to asthma, polio, cerebral palsy and related diseases. Often we witnessed strange and unpredictable results from the breathing exercises that were prescribed for our patients. With one patient the cure seemed miraculous and lasting; with another a quick recovery would reverse itself all too soon into the former misery. One patient would flatly refuse to collaborate, while another one would form an attachment to his therapist that developed into an unhealthy dependence or into a hopeless power struggle. We encountered these irrational responses only during breathing therapy and not in other kinds of treatment, because breathing reaches the unconscious.

Gradually it became clear that cure of symptoms could no longer be expected by predetermined means—fixed sets of exercises and arbitrary manipulations. The whole of the personality had to be taken into account. The question of the *meaning* of the disturbance entered the picture. What unfulfilled needs or underlying conflicts were being expressed by the symptom? The unfolding of the new therapeutic methods came as the development of psychoanalysis shed new light on the psychosomatic character of many disturbances. Orthodox therapy was confronted with challenging questions, and new schools of thought arose. Practical work with some of these schools shaped my techniques to a considerable degree. The strongest influence was the analytical psychology of C. G. Jung.

Experiments had to be created by which the patient became conscious of hindering influences, so that awareness of these obstacles could introduce the desired change. The same principle had to be applied as in psychotherapy, where patient and doctor work together in a common search for the unknown need of the patient. All expectations and former attitudes had to be set aside; each patient had to be met as a new challenge. *Only when subliminal feelings and sense perceptions were allowed to come to the surface could there be a change.*

To achieve this, new methods slowly evolved. Certain breathing techniques were combined with subtle motions to cultivate percep-

tion. The breathing function proved valuable because of its intimate connection with the emotions as well as with the two nervous systems: the voluntary, consciously directed one, and the autonomic or vegetative one which works without the mind. Normally, we breathe automatically, but we can also take a breath or hold it for a time. In this respect, respiration is different from other autonomous functions, such as digestion. The stomach and intestines cannot be contracted at will. *The breath thus forms a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious systems.* By watching it, one can observe an unconscious function at work, learn to exclude interferences, and help self-regulating processes set in. One may be able to yawn before becoming overtired, to sigh before feeling overly restricted.

Because of its close relationship to the circulation, breath equals life. At the moment of birth, the first breath is the signal for amazing change to take place. The blood, until then supplied from the maternal source, becomes within seconds the independent, nourishing agent. With the environmental change, inhalation and exhalation begin to compress and dilate inner spaces as blood and lymph rush in and out of ever-changing vessels. The rhythmic filling and emptying acts like a compression wave, regulating the blood pressure and massaging the inner organs with gentle vibrations. At times of heightened sensitivity, some of these sensations can be experienced.

One wonders if this intricate process of birth might not better be named re-birth, since life exists already in the womb. Could it not be compared to the metamorphosis of certain animals and be a first transformation into a different kind of existence? From here on growth means constant change, continuing through a lifetime. It always implies abdication of nourishment by means of past methods in favor of the opening up of new resources. Being ready for the impending changes, like the infant's preparedness for meeting the atmosphere, leads in the direction of life. Resisting or evading the new situation leads to stagnation. Sensitivity and alertness are therefore valuable tools for dealing with the ever-changing demands of life.

Just as we behave, move, act, according to our specific make-up and express ourselves uniquely through gestures, so does our *breathing pattern express our inner situation*, varying in accordance with

inner and outer circumstances. The usual arrhythmic respiration goes with our normal diffusion of attention, and changes with emotional states: agitated in anger, stopped momentarily in fear, gasping with amazement, choking with sadness, sighing with relief, et cetera.

With neurotics, we frequently find the so-called reversed breathing pattern, which reduces the breath to a minimum. The abdomen is pulled in; no breath can enter, since there is no exhalation. The bottle is filled with consumed air.

Normally, when at rest one breathes more with the diaphragm, like the abdominal breathing of the infant. Complete chest breathing, where the ribs expand and lift, occurs only at times of maximum effort. It usually starts the moment we pull ourselves together for action, or if we focus our attention toward outer events. To put it in oversimplified terms: abdominal breathing goes with sleep, rest, inertia, letting things happen. Where it is disturbed, the inner life is disturbed; one is driven, unreceptive, and lives too intentionally.

On the other hand, those who cannot open their chest cage are often anxious, inhibited, self-conscious, and tend toward feelings of inferiority. In between, there are endless variations and combinations, slightly different in rhythm in each individual. Where the pattern is reversed, the chest is lifted abnormally high, which means that only the auxiliary breathing muscles are used, those we need for maximum adaptation, as in the effort of mountain climbing. The diaphragm is excluded and becomes flabby, so the circulation is disturbed and the inner organs suffer. By relearning the use of the diaphragm, the warmth of returning circulation can be sensed in different areas of the body when one concentrates on them.

II

Instead of correcting faulty habits one takes as the point of departure the individual breathing pattern, disturbed as it may be. One concentrates on the act of breathing, observing its inner movement until the breath, left to itself, can find the way back to its own rhythm. This kind of playful attitude counteracts purposive, directed movement, so that one learns to experiment with one's nature and harmoniously trains the body for its own purpose. This is very

different from training for any kind of performance or outward goal such as sports or other competitive exercises.

The technique lends itself to self-exploration by concentrating in an introverted attitude upon oneself. The mind is set aside, so that quiet contemplation can allow for awareness of one's inner state. One may, for instance, suffer from too spastic or too atonic (flabby) conditions in his system, or from both. Since these are often below the level of consciousness, we tend to feel these disorders only when they have already done some damage. Experiments are therefore set up by which we learn to feel and sense ourselves before a symptom is forced upon us. Gradually we recognize that every physical rigidity is simultaneously a psychic one, *that relaxation is not collapse, but the appropriate degree of contraction, the life-giving tension called tonus*. Through subtle movements, we discover for ourselves that in the simplest motion there are always two opposite muscle groups involved, which balance each other in their opposition. If an arm is stretched, one group contracts, the other extends and holds; both work, so there is a "yes" and a "no" in each action. Instead of making arbitrary corrections, we look together ingeniously for the simplest, most natural ways of making small movements.

Many intelligent people have developed in a one-sided manner, to the extent that they live without using their senses. Some do not taste the food they eat or see what is before their eyes. Some are unaware of the state of their own body.

Everyone knows that he can sharpen his perception, simply by having observed that he may not hear the ticking of a clock in a room or the singing of a bird under the window unless he concentrates on the sound. The sound is there all the time, but one becomes conscious of it only if he focuses his attention on it. Otherwise, the sound does not really exist; it is unconscious. The same is true of our physical sensations, pulse or heartbeat for example; normally they are not felt.

The sensory cortex of the brain is the storeroom of past impressions which may rise to consciousness as images but which more often remain unconscious. A present sense perception may get linked to the store of earlier perceptions and evoke a response that belongs to the past. Memory can be held in the body and awakened by certain disciplines. A muscular contraction once caused by the emotion of

fear or joy may exist long after the accompanying experience has subsided. With the physical release of that specific tension, the psychic experience may return, to become a steppingstone for further development. How far the message can be used in the direction of growth depends on the individual's psychological capacity. Here we enter the realm of psychotherapy.

All physical changes in this work occur spontaneously and may or may not lead to insights. The experience of a young musician illustrates that such recollections need not be highly charged events: This man recently returned to his vocation after having had to abandon it for a while because of external pressures. During his sessions, he visualized lovely sketches from his past life; these he looked at in a meditative mood and felt greatly enriched by them.

It all depends on the attitude of consciousness how the unconscious reacts. If one is in tune with the unconscious, as it seems that this young man was at the time, the psyche reacts in a favorable manner and compensates the outer life in a pleasant, rather than a menacing, way. The process often comes close to the work of psychotherapy, where this kind of listening is encouraged, leading to the needed associations and images from which healing occurs. While psychotherapy starts on an intellectual level by using words, *the approach through the physical sensations is predominantly nonverbal*.

Practical work with artists has taught me over the years that the need can be of another kind. Creativity is easily buried under ambition and the strain of being trained for a specific skill. Certain schools of dance and drama, in striving for top performance, are often unable to consider individual inclinations. The very different discipline of concentrating on one's genuine responses helpfully balances this shortcoming and may prepare for more genuine modes of expression.

It becomes evident that body and psyche act as a unit, so awareness can come by approaching one or the other. This is so because body and psyche are two aspects of the same reality, two poles of life, two manifestations of the whole of the personality that are in steady interaction. To bridge the gap between these two extremes, we may start from the point of view that *our physical behavior corresponds to a psychic pattern, according to the law of synchronicity, not of*

causality. With this in mind we need no longer explain a symptom reductively, but can try to grasp what it wants to convey and can thus discard any kind of criticism or attempt at arbitrary correction.

A sunken chest cage, when expanded, brings a natural sense of self-assertion; legs tightly held together in the manner of a Prussian soldier speak their own language. No explanations are needed once a person becomes aware of such habits. *The distortion will correct itself when it has been experienced, since consciousness has been brought to it*. The different techniques applied in this work permit the mind to be a quiet observer while feelings and sensations are questioned and imagination is used.

In attempting to describe a method designed to lead one toward genuine experience much is omitted, since the living experience defies precise formulation. Therefore it may be helpful to indicate a few of the subtle, simple directions which are given in our sessions.

For example, one experiments with the weight of one's body (or its parts) by trying to give it over to gravity. This leads to the experiencing of one's heaviness and releases tensions.

One is asked to bend one's knees, to find the place where they are in balance, so that they have to be neither held in support of each other nor manipulated in any other way.

One learns to visualize an inner body space, while simultaneously concentrating on one's exhalation, as if the breath were sent into that particular space. This may change the blood pressure and lead to a sense of lightness.

One examines the distances between certain joints, or the relationship between one's limbs, which touches on the body image.

Experiments are introduced that involve contact with another person, by hand or by sitting back to back. By way of sensing the other person one learns to get in touch with one's own sensations.

One is asked to concentrate on scanning¹ a certain area of one's body and to combine this with one's inhalation. Gradually the two tasks will connect, as if one were breathing with that particular area, or being breathed by it.

¹ Scanning is defined as focusing one's energy on a particular part of the body—chosen at will. One mentally breaks up this area into small units or points and directs one's concentration progressively towards each successive point. This allows for a fresh sensory perception of the chosen area.

The ways people describe their feelings are of endless variety, since no two experiences are ever quite the same. Often the pleasurable sensation evolves, that the breath carries one upright so that no effort is needed for sitting or standing in good posture.

In the use of motion and breathing as therapeutic agents, one can roughly distinguish two basic tendencies. One is the rigid, tensely controlled attitude, "running on rails," incapable of spontaneous reactions, and therefore out of touch with the deeper layers of the personality. This picture reflects a life lived as a product of one's environment and upbringing, performed according to what is expected by tradition and convention.

Such an attitude was apparent in a young dancer who came with the intention of learning my methods in order to use them in her field of teaching. She suffered from severe anxiety attacks from which long years of psychiatric care had brought no relief. She was an overly intellectual woman who relied exclusively on her reasoning capacity. When I asked her to exhale gently, then wait and observe how the next breath came in, she became extremely anxious. She realized through this experience that she could not trust anything to happen of its own accord, not even respiration. Only what she controlled could occur. After an initial sense of confusion, this insight brought her great relief. It led her to the roots of her fears, which she felt went back to her childhood, in which no father was present to counteract an overburdened, dominating mother who knew no natural tenderness. She saw how far she had parted from Mother Nature and was glad to find this new channel through which she hoped to regain the lost contact with herself.

The opposite tendency is shown by the flabby, overflexible, unstructured dreamer with too little life-giving tension in his system, the person who is too close to unconsciousness and easily collapses into it. With this type, one may expect quietude without repose, phlegmatic disinterest, apathy, inertia, and depression. Whereas the rigid type has deviated too far from his nature, this type has not yet evolved. His ego got stuck somewhere between the womb, nursery school, and adolescence; the world is taken either as the benign parent who is supposed to provide for its child, or as the evil one against whom one must rebel at any cost.

One finds many less extreme combinations of both tendencies in

most people, probably because the growth process itself contains the two alternating phases. Parting from the natural, unconscious state so that a differentiated ego can emerge, and periodically returning to it, constitute the cycle of human development.

The one-sidedness, with its loss of balance, which is so typical of modern man's development, may arise from two opposite tendencies: On the one hand, it can come about by overconsolidation of the ego, which blocks the reception of impulses and messages. On the other hand, it can come about by a state of unconsciousness that threatens concentration and the continuity of the ego by unchecked emotionality, daydreaming, or instinctive drives. In nature itself, the balance is not firmly established. A sexually excited animal may endanger itself, forgetting security and hunger while following a single drive.

The acting out of every impulse is often mistakenly taken for freedom. In practical work, it is important to know the difference between acting out and befriending the suppressed instincts. It is only after having made our first adaptations that, in order to become individuals, we find it necessary to rediscover what has been left behind. By definition, *individual* means indivisible, a separate unit, a whole; not split; in psychological terms, comprising both the conscious and the unconscious elements of the personality.

Education toward the goal of individuality must cope with the difficulty of trying to prepare people for life's tasks with the least *interference with their inherent nature, so that the desire for further growth can remain the motivating force throughout life*. Repeatedly, in the different stages of life, patterns which once provided security have to be renounced so that new potentials can take their place. Since this cannot be brought about arbitrarily, it requires that time and again we return to our roots. In the past, religions took care of this need by enacting the periodic return and re-emergence in the mystery rites of death and rebirth. Today there is confusion about this process.

We have to learn again that to contact one's depths is not to sink back into trance-like oblivion, but rather to submit to the difficult discipline of quiet attentiveness. This is a forgotten product of our culture that requires conscious effort. Culture means to tend to. Much as a gardener tends to the soil in order that his plants may

grow in their own way and season, so attending to the depths of our own nature tills the soil in which, firmly rooted, we can develop into healthy individuals. The somatic approach of breathing therapy is aimed at providing the climate for this kind of growth.