

Please formulate the key purpose of Holotropic Breathwork as a psychotherapeutic method?

Holotropic Breathwork is a new powerful approach to self-exploration and psychotherapy that my wife Christina and myself developed in the mid- to late 1970s when we lived at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. It is one of the more recent contributions to depth psychology, a discipline initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud. Holotropic Breathwork uses a combination of seemingly simple means - accelerated breathing, evocative music, and a type of bodywork that helps to release residual bioenergetic and emotional blocks. The sessions are usually conducted in groups; participants work in pairs and alternate in the roles of breathers and “sitters.” Trained facilitators supervise the process and assist participants whenever special intervention is necessary,. Following the breathing sessions, participants express their experiences by painting mandalas and share accounts of their inner journeys in small groups. Follow-up interviews and various complementary methods are used, if necessary, to facilitate the completion and integration of the breathwork experience.

In its theory and practice, Holotropic Breathwork combines and integrates various elements from depth psychology, modern consciousness research, transpersonal psychology, Eastern spiritual philosophies, and native healing practices. It differs significantly from traditional forms of psychotherapy, which use primarily verbal means, such as psychoanalysis and various other schools of depth psychology derived from it. It shares certain common characteristics with the experiential therapies of humanistic psychology, such as Gestalt practice and the neo-Reichian approaches emphasizing direct emotional expression and work with the body. However, the unique feature of Holotropic Breathwork is that it utilizes the intrinsic healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness.

Holotropic Breathwork is commonly used in workshops attended by people interested in self-exploration, inner transformation, and personality growth, who follow the advice of the great Swiss pioneer of depth psychology, C. G. Jung: “The only

journey of exploration of any value is the journey to one's inner self." In the hands of trained professionals, Holotropic Breathwork is a very effective tool in treating a broad range of emotional and psychosomatic disorders – depressions, aggressive and self-destructive tendencies, problems with self-image and self-esteem, various phobias, migraine headaches, psychogenic asthma, and others.

Are you practicing the method yourself? If yes, what is your personal reason for that. If no, please explain why?

Both Christina and I have participated on many occasions as breathers in our training groups when the trainees were sufficiently advanced to lead the sessions independently. We have also joined in a similar way the experiential groups during our reunions. Unfortunately, when we conduct our workshops, I am usually in the role of facilitator; I thus do not have as many opportunities to participate in Holotropic Breathwork sessions as I would like to. However, I find faster breathing to be a very useful catalyst during meditation; there, of course, I do not have the set and setting of Holotropic Breathwork workshops.

When and how to the idea of developing such a method occurred to you?

In 1973, I received an offer from several American publishers to write a book on my clinical research with psychedelics. Michael Murphy invited me as Scholar-in-Residence to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, to write this book there. He offered me room and board in exchange for conducting workshops at the institute. Here I did not have the permission to use psychedelic substances and had to look for a substitute. I remembered some observations during my psychedelic research in Prague indicating that a combination of faster breathing and bodywork was able to activate the unconscious. I also met Christina, who at that time was a yoga teacher and brought to this work some yogic elements.

We started experimenting with this combination and found out to our surprise that – although no substances were used - many people had experiences comparable to

psychedelic sessions – reliving memories from their childhood, infancy, biological birth, and prenatal period. Others experienced episodes from other centuries and countries (past life memories), encounters with archetypal beings, or feelings of unity with other people, animals, the universe, and God. And so Holotropic Breathwork was born. In the following decades, we have then systematically explored the heuristic, therapeutic, and evolutionary potential of this new modality.

How can you describe the effect of Holotropic Breathwork? In other words, how does it influence the life of those practicing it, where does it lead them? How does your method help to improve one’s life and in which particular aspects?

Beneficial effects of Holotropic Breathwork conducted by trained facilitators cover a wide range. As I have already mentioned, the most obvious positive results that we have observed over the years were related to various emotional disorders and to conditions traditionally seen as psychosomatic. However, positive effects of repeated sessions of Holotropic Breathwork typically go beyond the amelioration of the emotional and physical condition; they include distinct changes in the breather’s personality, worldview, life strategy, and hierarchy of values.

As the content of the deep levels of the unconscious (which I call “perinatal” and “transpersonal”) emerges into consciousness and is integrated, the individuals involved in this process undergo radical changes. They experience considerable decrease of aggression and become more peaceful, comfortable with themselves, and tolerant of others. The experience of psychospiritual death and rebirth and conscious connection with positive postnatal or prenatal memories reduces irrational drives and ambitions. It causes a shift of focus from the past and future to the present moment and enhances zest, *élan vital*, and *joi de vivre* - ability to enjoy and draw satisfaction from simple circumstances of life, such as everyday activities, food, lovemaking, nature, and music.

Another important result of this process is emergence of spirituality of a universal and mystical nature that - unlike the dogmas of mainstream religions - is very

authentic and convincing, because it is based on deep personal experience. What began as a process of psychological probing of the unconscious psyche conducted for therapeutic purposes or personal growth automatically becomes a philosophical quest for the meaning of life and a journey of spiritual discovery. People, who connect to the transpersonal domain of their psyche, tend to develop a new appreciation for existence and reverence for all life.

One of the most striking consequences of various forms of transpersonal experiences is spontaneous emergence and development of genuine humanitarian and ecological concerns. Following this transformation, these individuals develop a deep sense of being planetary citizens, rather than citizens of a particular country or members of a particular racial, social, ideological, political, or religious group, and they feel the need to get involved in service for some common purpose. These changes resemble those that have occurred in many of the American astronauts who were able to see the earth from outer space (see Mickey Lemle's documentary *The Other Side of the Moon*).

This radical inner transformation has interesting sociopolitical implications. It seems likely that it would increase our chances for survival if it could occur on a sufficiently large scale. We seem to be involved in a dramatic race for time that has no precedent in the entire history of humanity. What is at stake is nothing less than the future of life on this planet. If we continue the old strategies, which in their consequences are clearly extremely destructive and self-destructive, it is unlikely that the human species will survive. However, if a sufficient number of people undergoes a process of deep inner transformation, we might reach a stage and level of consciousness evolution at which we will deserve the proud name we have given to our species: *homo sapiens sapiens*.

What is the key difference between Holotropic Breathwork and yogic breathing technique “Bhastrika Pranayama?”

It has been known for centuries that it is possible to influence consciousness by techniques that involve breathing. The procedures that have been used for this purpose

by various ancient and non-Western cultures cover a very wide range from drastic interference with breathing to subtle and sophisticated exercises of various spiritual traditions. Various breathing practices and techniques have been used since time immemorial in the context of shamanism, native rituals, and spiritual practices of various religious groups. They also form an important part of many therapies developed in the course of the twentieth century – Johannes Schultz’s autogenic training, various neo-Reichian approaches, Leonard Orr’s Rebirthing, and Gay and Kathleen Hendricks’ Radiance Breathwork, to name just a few.

What characterizes all these methods, ancient and modern, is that they give very specific instructions how to breathe. Bhastrika Pranayama can be used here as a prime example. It recommends forceful rapid diaphragmatic breathing at the rate of one to three per second; intensity of the breathing is reflected in the Sanskrit term *bhastrika*, which means “bellows.” Although the air is forced both in and out, the emphasis is placed upon the expulsion or explosion of air. Practitioners are asked to keep their head, neck, shoulders, and chest still while their belly moves in and out. Each round of bhastrika begins and ends with a maximum possible inhalation and exhalation, and so on. These instructions are very specific.

Like these other schools, Holotropic Breathwork uses breath to initiate a process of psychosomatic self-exploration and healing, however with a different focus and emphasis. Unlike the representatives of these schools, we do not give specific instructions for the way the breath should be used during the session. After a period of faster connected breathing, when participants enter a holotropic state of consciousness, we encourage them to let the depth and pace of their breathing be guided by their own inner healing intelligence and to develop their own unique style of working with the breath.

Are there any physical or mental conditions under which it is not allowed to practice the method?

Holotropic Breathwork often induces very intense experiences associated with strong emotions and a considerable amount of physical stress; it has thus important physical and psychological contraindications that have to be taken into consideration. Our primary concern is about serious cardiovascular disorders – high blood pressure, aneurysms, a history of heart attacks, brain hemorrhage, myocarditis, atrial fibrillation, or other similar problems.

Another important consideration is pregnancy. Women who are reliving their birth in a holotropic state of consciousness tend to experience themselves also as delivering, either simultaneously, or in an alternating fashion. This often involves intense contractions of the uterus that could trigger a miscarriage or in advanced stages of pregnancy a premature delivery. A condition that requires attention is a history of convulsive disorders, particularly *grand mal* epilepsy. It is known that hyperventilation tends to accentuate epileptic brainwaves (spikes, sharp waves, and spike-and-wave discharges). This phenomenon is actually used by neurologists as a diagnostic test for epilepsy. We were thus justifiably concerned that in participants with a history of epilepsy faster breathing could induce a grand mal seizure. Some commonsense contraindications are a recent operation or injury, and a contagious or debilitating disease.

Holotropic Breathwork also has very important emotional contraindications. While the physical contraindications are independent of the circumstances and apply whenever and wherever this method is used, what we consider emotional contraindications depends on the set and setting. If we are conducting a short-term workshop, the criteria for screening are much stricter than we would use for work in a residential facility that has provisions for an overnight stay and a trained staff experienced in the work with holotropic states. If these conditions are not met, it would not be wise to conduct breathwork sessions with individuals who have a history of serious emotional problems which in the past required psychiatric hospitalization.

Holotropic Breathwork can actually be used in the therapy of a wide range of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, including spontaneous episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness (“spiritual emergencies”), if we have the appropriate facility and support system. However, until the theory and practice of psychiatry is revolutionized and centers based on the new paradigm readily available, history of psychiatric treatment will represent a contraindication for participation in short Holotropic Breathwork workshops.

And on the other hand, in which conditions do you find it mostly recommended and efficient?

The ideal use of Holotropic Breathwork is in people who suffer from what Viktor Frankl called “*noogenic depression*” or “*noogenic neurosis*.” These are individuals who are physically healthy and do not have any serious emotional and psychosomatic problems. They might also have a decent familial and professional situation. And yet, they experience what Frankl called “*existential frustration*.” They feel dissatisfied, cannot find meaning in their lives, and do not live up to their full potential. The life of people in this category can be radically transformed by several sessions of Holotropic Breathwork.

As I mentioned before, Holotropic Breathwork can be effective in a wide variety of emotional and psychosomatic disorders. However, this requires a longer time and the sessions are usually more challenging. I would like to add one more category where this approach can be very useful – recovering alcoholics and addicts. After a period of withdrawal, many of these individuals have successfully used Holotropic Breathwork to practice what Alcoholics Anonymous call the “*Eleventh Step*,” defined as “using prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with a higher power, as we understand it.” This approach has helped many people to achieve high quality sobriety, which is more than just abstinence from alcohol or drugs.

As we know, in Russia there are only a few officially certified facilitators, who have gone through a number of serious and intense trainings under your personal supervision. What can happen to those people who will try your method with other not qualified specialists? What kind of risks are there for them?

I will start by responding to the first part of your question. It is true that in the past there was in Russia only a small number of certified facilitators. However, in recent years, Doctor Vladimir Maykov, President of the Russian Transpersonal Association, who has completed our training in the USA and is a very experienced and knowledgeable therapist, has introduced this method to many hundreds of people in Russia and other Eastern European countries. For some time now, he has functioned as the director of professional training of Holotropic Breathwork facilitators for Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Just several weeks ago, more than seventy people were certified in the training that he is heading as senior staff member of our organization (Grof Transpersonal Training or GTT).

And now to the risks of Holotropic Breathwork when it is conducted by people who do not have adequate training. This method seems very easy, but this impression is very deceptive. It is not difficult to get people into a non-ordinary state of consciousness by letting them breathe faster and playing powerful evocative music. However, working with people in a non-ordinary state and handling adequately all the situations that might emerge requires rigorous training and experience. The major risk here is that the unconscious of the breather remains open and the session does not reach a successful closure. The non-ordinary state can continue for extended periods of time and interfere with the individual's everyday life.