

## **Health, Wholeness and Learning through the Flow of the Natural Breath**

by **NELL SMYTH**

*In breathing there dwells already the whole threefold system of physical man.*

- Rudolf Steiner

Attunement to the rhythms of night and day, the weekly, monthly, and seasonal cycles sustains us by connecting us to the currents of both the earth and the cosmos. Rhythms support us in our being present to the transitions that frame the contrasts punctuating all of life. Many of us directly experience in ourselves and our children the way in which we thrive with the recurrence of these cycles, and how health is compromised and we are thrown off balance when we lose touch with the pulse and phase of time.

The larger rhythms that we live within are also rhythms that live within us. At the same time, myriad rhythmical processes quietly weave our physiology together from moment to moment. And between the envelopes of these ‘larger’ and ‘smaller’ rhythms is the rhythm of the breath, of which we can be conscious in a unique way. When we connect to the flow of our natural breath rhythm we can sense through our body and respond with our spirit and soul to all the other kinds of rhythms that live in our world and which call us towards both the personal and towards a sense of wholeness. In the fundamental rhythm of our breath we can experience directly, the enlivening and sensitizing benefits which offer us integration and balance. And connection to this rhythm of the breath can help us to find flow from moment to moment both for ourselves and those around us.

Each individual’s breath rhythm is an essential conduit for balance in the tension between inner and outer, personal and social. In numerous lectures<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner draws attention to the importance of the breath and encourages the teacher to understand the importance of the breathing in the picture of the threefold human being. Yet in our proper concern not to manipulate or control the breath, our awareness may linger at the borders of our breathing without truly penetrating the meanings and possibilities it holds.

*Amongst all the relationships which man has to the external world, the most important of all is breathing... On the one hand the breath is connected with the whole metabolic or digestive system. On the other hand, the breathing is also connected with the whole nerve-sense life of man.*

The Study of Man  
-Rudolf Steiner

### **The Nature of the Breath**

The word ‘inhalation’ resonates with ‘hale’, an older word signifying wholeness and health. The expression ‘hale and hearty’ may be less used today but suggests a vital life force many of us might look for when we support healthy development. When our hearts engage, another level of

wholeness is possible. When we bring a devoted attention to the quality of our breath we befriend the body and discover the key to strengthening and supporting the heart forces. This listening, sensing and experiencing of the breathing attunes us to our rhythmic processes and the message our body can give us about balance. Wholeness is revealed when we allow ourselves the full potential of each inhalation and each exhalation, together with the pause. In a healthy breathing flow the pause or resting place follows the exhalation, and precedes the impulse at the beginning of each new cycle of breath.

Allowing the breath to come and go, without pushing or pulling, enables us to sense more easily the meaning and contrast in the transitions of each phase of our breathing. With the inhalation the body expands and grows wider, taking in our world and the penetrating oxygenating power of the breath. With the exhalation there is a letting go and the opportunity to sense the fruits of the world and what it has brought us. In the third phase of a full breath cycle we can sense the pause following the exhalation and coming before the next impulse of inhalation. There is an intimate disclosure in the flow of our breath which is inherent in all truly rhythmic patterns. When we learn not to override this spirit of flow as it appears in our breath, the breath becomes a teacher and we find greater coherence and ease in transitions as qualities of receptivity and dynamism find balanced relation to each other.



As we uncover and enable this full flow of the breath and our natural rhythm prevails, we can in turn support this in the young child and those around us. Our feet find their place on the earth when the body, supported by the breath, offers us an anchor, and we step in time to the rhythms of the planet and its 'earth mothering air', that moves all around and through us.

## **Breath in the Teacher**

We are encouraged to underpin our working as teachers with rhythm and with a sense of breathing. The teacher's own understanding of the breath will grow as she offers and participates in movements and verses that follow clear principles: to open, release tension, and cultivate sensing and listening. The movement of the breath unfolds a canvas for our own growing perceptions. As we understand more deeply the meanings of our own rhythms and their potential, we are led naturally to gaining insight into the archetypal movements and gestures that can flow spontaneously from how these rhythms are active for us. The quality of our gesture, voice and posture indicates clearly how we stand in the world and how we penetrate through our limbs into sensing and receiving the world. Breath awareness can strengthen and enhance our relation to our body, breath and being, bringing deep contentment and a capacity for presence.

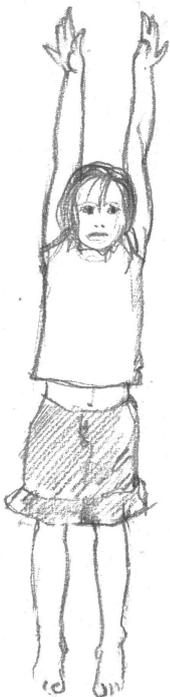
Presence naturally creates trust and a receptivity out of which imagination, intuition and inspiration can become more readily available. Greater possibilities emerge for oneself as a

teacher and for mediating the flows of life with the children and others around one. Such presence can inform the artistry of how we work and heightens our perception of how we can work with rhythms in ways that are therapeutic and health giving. It is an important distinction that, as adults, we intend to understand and experience the breath explicitly, through building breath awareness. With the child, however, we support the breathing rhythm more indirectly and at no point are we seeking to control or manipulate the breath

### **Supporting Breath in the Child**

Young children can be brought to the sense of rhythm and to a fuller, more contented breathing through the way in which we work with the senses. Images, and the rhythms of language, can invite the child into movement in a playful way and open up a canvas of possibilities for exploring a wide range of movements. These can encourage release, expansion, exploration and sensitivity, along with a growing sense of being anchored in the body. The sense of being at home which the body can offer us, and also offers the spirit, fed by the breath, a way of expanding and delighting in the world it inhabits, both inner and outer.

Stretching, rolling and circling open up the body to the movement and the freer flow of the breath. Tapping games and gentle stroking can then bring the child into a greater sense of body boundary and the sense of feeling at home. How a child learns about boundary supports the development of the proprioceptive faculties, strengthening the sense of where he is in space and how he mediates the world. The skin, the mediating organ between inner and outer worlds, and the tissue of muscle and nerve endings that comprise our body walls, are all nourished by the breathing exchange. Specific kinds of movement and contact can give children the kind of immediate feedback they need, and lay foundations at a physical tactile level for developing social skills and the sense of the other. The breath rhythm changes as the sense of flow finds itself in relation to the boundaries of the body. Liveliness and animation, well being and warmth radiate, as the breath deepens and settles and as new sensations are assimilated into deeper levels of the child's being.



#### **Stretching Verse for the Child**

Stretch me stretch me stretch me high!  
Stretch me up to the deep blue sky!  
Stretch me stretch me stretch me over!  
Roll me around, roll me around, roll me around  
Till I'm rolling in clover!

The breath naturally offers us the *contrasts* that come with the inhalation, the exhalation and the pause. When we play with these contrasts and follow the natural rhythm of quiet after lively, fast and then slow, big and then small, open and closed, expanded and contracted, we teach the child through these contrasts. Remembering to pause and sense the nature of the experience and its fullness then allows everyone to feel satisfied and content.

When, as guiding adults, we sense the rhythm of our breath, we develop the capacity to resonate with what the experience has brought. This deepens our capacity for

sensing others. Attunement to rhythm and the tactile and sensory function together help to develop important faculties for how we find ourselves in the world. Many of us already appreciate that this is crucial for the young child. For a conscious adult, the breath becomes a lens of perception towards what is needed next, priming the sense for readiness and ripeness, showing what is apt *now*.

After large and expansive movements we can sense, without needing prescriptions or formulae, the contrast the children may need. Perhaps the children need to curl into balls like hedgehogs or snuggle like baby bears going into hibernation, so that they may resonate with what has gone before. This enables them to digest the fruits of lively movement while resting with the quality of the picture that meets the need of that moment. And so we can educate the child to love the variety of expression in creation. Indeed, the rhythms of language and picture, by which we express the diversity of experience, ride on the contrasts that flow with breath and movement. An essential conditioning to language and meaning takes place through the ease and flow given through a lesson or a day that 'breathes'. Such experience also shapes patience. Discovering contentment and a sense of satisfaction with what has been given mitigates the constant seeking for the next stimulation which is so endemic to our time. The habitual seeking of stimulation and the challenges of attention disorders are characteristic of the child who is stuck in an over-dominant inhalation and therefore unable to sense the benefits that come with an exhalation that allows a resting place.



Watch what happens when swinging on a swing. We go forwards and then we go back, we go up and then we go down, legs, arms and diaphragm engage as the breath finds balance. If we were always to live in the upswing or forwards swing we would of course be out of balance. Yet that is increasingly encouraged as the forward momentum and the dominance of vision, at the expense of the other senses, becomes formative in shaping the child's will. The inner chatter that pervades more and more of our world undermines the capacity for resting and pausing. Pausing helps us digest and know what we have begun to experience. The capacity for deeply giving in and allowing our bodies to find rest is ever more challenged. Nervous systems jangle and classrooms and nap times are interrupted by the tension and lack of ease which growing numbers of children feel when invited towards the land where we can 'hear the grass grow', the place of deep green repose.

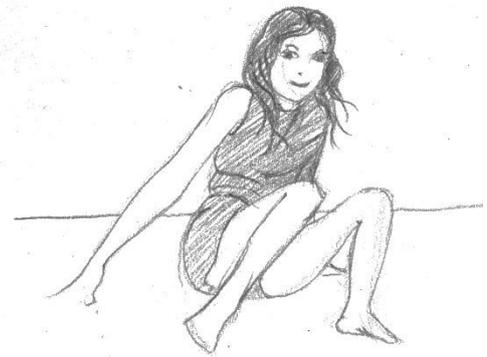
The voices and rhythms of parents and teachers can embody that capacity for finding the natural resting places. How we speak, our pace and the timbre of our voices, how we tell stories and flow through the day with a child brings great gifts to adult and child alike. A voice supported by a flowing breath can strengthen the adult. The quality of resonance and sound benefits speaker and listener alike. When a good voice carries the treasures of pictures and rhythms, the child is offered a path into other worlds and a relief from the pressure of squeezing all of life into the short moments of their young presence. Tension drops away as we signal how the fullness of each moment flows into the next. It is not always necessary for immediate verbal response in order to signal receptivity or that one is in fact present with the child. The next breath cycle comes and goes on its own and without the need to push or pull. Touch can be through the quality of the voice itself, the quality of our gaze, as well as by the actual touch of a

hand. All of this can offer the child a sense of ground and help both child and adult in building an etheric field which supports serenity, dynamism and joy in both activity and rest.



The *sense of touch* works powerfully with the breath and it can bring the breath awareness immediately throughout our body. Movements that support this can include wrapping games, as well as stroking and patting games. Rolling on the floor as seals and crawling on our bellies brings us to the instinctual and creature archetypes. These encourage a warm vital breath, waking up the body and the sense of boundary, as we offer the resistance of the floor and stimulation to all sides of our body. Larger gross body

movements can be guided through verses that evoke a range of creatures from hippos to gorillas to lions and birds. The teacher benefits too. Attuning to her own breath, trust and depth lead the way, and allow for observations and an intuition for what comes next. Large movements lead to small. Vigorous, joyful roars open up our diaphragm, creating warmth throughout that can then be followed with a gentle wrapping game or a slow rocking verse. The qualities of a sensitive silent sea anemone, clinging to its rock as the waves lap around it, can immediately plunge us into an evocative world, rich with a different quality of sensing. We know ourselves through the drama of expression that fills us and our world.



### **Deepening the Breath for the Adult**

Further exercises for the adult to deepen understanding of the breath can include stretching, swinging, tapping and circling, shifting the weight from one side to the other, and releasing the breath through the limbs as arms and hands and legs and feet engage and move in relation to the spine. As the adult grows in sense awareness and the body becomes a template for experiencing the breath moving, so all the senses, including touch, sound, vision, smell, balance, the sense of life and the sense of our own movement, come more fully alive and more fully into connection. My book *The Breathing Circle* explores a repertoire of movements for the adult as well as the child. One of the fundamental exercises follows here. It offers a release from ‘monkey-mind’ imbalance, and brings the teacher into a greater wholeness before class or at the end of a day. By connecting to our feet and sensing how they connect to and are supported by the earth, we come more into real time and into the sustaining strength that the breath offers our entire being.

#### **Shifting the Weight, Finding Balance: an exercise for adults**

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and sense your feet in contact with the ground.

Let your breath flow freely as you bring your awareness to your ankles and knees, pelvic floor, and your lower back and shoulders.

On the inhalation, the breath grows wide and then swings back on the exhalation.

Allow yourself to sense the movement of the ribs, because it is a place where it is easier to feel this fundamental movement. Placing your hands at the base of your rib cage can initially help you sense the movement.

Let the breath come and go without pushing or pulling

Gradually, without your feet leaving the floor, bring your weight forward on to the balls of the feet and then let yourself swing back to the middle.

Now let your weight go into the heels of your feet with a light pressure to the floor and then let yourself swing back to the mid point.

Repeat this as you allow yourself to discover at which point the inhalation comes and when the exhalation follows

Keep the movements quite small to avoid pushing, pulling or overriding the flow of the breath. You might want to let the palms turn facing forwards or backwards, depending on which direction you are bringing your awareness at the time.

Allow the joints to participate as you let the breath build and roll through you. Wherever you bring awareness, breath movement can come.

Do this for a number of breath cycles and then stand, allowing yourself to resonate. How do you experience standing? Where do you have sensory awareness? Do you feel stronger or denser, more substantial or more rooted on the earth? Explore the qualities you sense and the quality of the breath for 3 or 4 cycles only and then open your eyes.

Footnote:

1 Steiner's lectures on the breath include Lecture 1 of his *Study of Man*.

***Biographical details:***

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