

Movement, Breath, and Consciousness:
The Theory of Guided Natural Breathing
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Summary: Light, easy movement is a fundamental principle of joyful, balanced living. This same principle applies to the movements of respiration. When the movements of respiration are light, easy, and pleasurable, we attain a state of mental and physical ease that supports full health, vitality, and pleasure in all our daily actions.

Movement brings awareness. The movements of respiration are our most fundamental movements because they are the expression of an urgent, moment to moment need. Attention to the movements of respiration, and to the secondary movements that arise organically from them, enable us to find and feel all the scattered parts of ourselves, to bind them together in a cohesive experience of identity and wholeness. When that happens, we are bound to encounter and recognize our own deepest needs, and to act in accord with them.

1. The Meaning of Movement

"Movement is life. Without movement life is unthinkable," said Moshe Feldenkrais. As a result, it is important to add, the quality of our movement is the key to the quality of our lives.

Light, easy, well coordinated physical movements feel good, and are good for us. They are safe, effective, and enjoyable. Examples can be drawn from any field of endeavor: the master-calligrapher's brushstroke, the dancer suspended for a timeless moment in mid-leap, the laundress simply folding a towel with economy and ease of movement.

The features common to all such movements are 1) that they expend no more than the required effort, 2) they distribute that effort over the maximum number of muscles and joints, and 3) they do so in the most accurate, efficient way possible. Movements of this type always elicit feelings of pleasure and satisfaction in both the actor and the onlooker.

By contrast, awkward, overly forceful, miss-coordinated movements feel effortful and difficult—when they are felt at all. There is an instantaneous sense of strain accompanied by feelings of resistance to further action. Pleasure is absent. Such excessive or misdirected force not only fails to produce the intended effect but rebounds on the body itself, producing strain and irritation and, with repetition, pain and disability.

It is no surprise then that the individual who habitually moves awkwardly and with excessive force gradually loses self-awareness. The withdrawal of attention from the unpleasant stimulus becomes habitual. The result is a kind of sensory-motor alienation like that exhibited by Mr. Duffy, the fictional character of whom James Joyce wrote, "He lived a small distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances." It is the Mr. (and Mrs.) Duffys of this world who most need sensory and kinesthetic education so that they may come to re-inhabit their own bodies and experience their own acts from within their own living, breathing bodies. This is the process of embodiment.

The demands and pressures of modern life lead inexorably to the fragmentation of our self-image, to a sensorial scattering of all the parts of ourselves. Attentive movement restores awareness to all the parts of ourselves that move, allowing us to recover the health, wholeness, and integrity of the self.

2. Movement and Breath

Breath is movement. We move our bodies in a wide variety of ways—both involuntary and voluntary—in order to regulate metabolism of oxygen and carbon dioxide while in action and at rest, while eating, drinking, speaking, or sleeping.

We breathe in accordance with our ever-changing metabolic needs. Standing still, we require about 1000 milliliters of oxygen per minute. Vigorous activity like running can increase demand by a factor of 5; sitting down reduces it by 75%, to as little as 250 ml. As we transition from quiet waking to Stage 2 sleep, oxygen consumption declines a further 15 percent. During deep, Stage 3 or 4, delta-wave sleep, it declines even further, and we require less

breath than at any other time.

In addition to these postural/behavioral factors we must also acknowledge the role of emotion and the environment, which have their own vigorous modifying effects on the breath. Driving a sick child to the emergency room at rush hour reveals much about the interaction of these factors; as does the experience of deep meditation, in which we can reach such a state of physical and mental stillness that we hardly seem to breathe at all.

Our ever-changing, ever-adapting respiratory movements are subject to the same conditions that govern movement in general, as stated above. When our respiratory movements are light, easy, well-coordinated, they feel pleasurable, and they support full vitality and health. As a result, the breath becomes balanced, meaning that we receive exactly the right amount of oxygen we need for each moment of our lives. This is as true during deep rest as it is during quiet waking activities or vigorous physical action.

When this condition is met, the simple, persistent act of breathing in and breathing out is exquisitely pleasurable, and life is beautiful. When the breath is heavy and effortful, we feel suffocated and life seems unendurable. Anxiety, agitation, and hopelessness are typical outcomes.

Light, easy breathing is one of the keys to happiness and joyful living. And the manner of achieving it is simple:

1. Make no effort to breathe deeply or any special way.
2. Simply allow your breath to come and go of its own accord.
3. Take all the time you need for each breath.

Congruent with this “naturalistic” approach to breathing, we now begin to form an image of the "correct" way to breathe, which is in actuality a myriad of ways, changing from moment to moment, all of them light, easy, soft, and unhurried relative to the level of exertion. (Incidentally, this is as true for vigorous aerobic-type activities that require high oxygen consumption as it is for quiet, restful ones. Can you confirm that through your own experience and observation?) Follow these simple guidelines, and your breath instantaneously

recovers its proper rhythm and pattern, its adaptability and its plasticity. No direct control or manipulation of the breath, no thinking or calculation of any kind is required. The body's intrinsic breath mechanism has its own innate wisdom that is truer and more accurate than anything we know or believe. In order to achieve balanced, healthful breathing, we simply leave the breath alone.

In opposition to this approach are the medical profession and the legions of well-meaning physical educators, therapists, yogis, gurus, and others who have uncritically accepted that the breath ought to be controlled, trained, timed, quantified, and qualified according to this or that ideal image--deep diaphragmatic breathing; precise mathematical ratios of inhalation to exhalation; suppression of mouth breathing; forceful, effortful, aversive movements and postures; voluntary contraction of certain muscles during inspiration or exhalation, or immobilizing of certain muscles altogether—images which, while they have no proven utility, are repeated again and again over generations, until they have acquired the weight of common sense or, better said, dogma. As if the human body itself did not know its own business at all, and required the moment-to-moment intervention of mind—one's own and others'—simply to live and breathe.

Even the most insightful student of the proposed “naturalistic” approach to movement and breath will find it easy to slip into the language and thinking of this exhausted paradigm, to find herself speaking of “deep” breathing, of “sufficiency” or “insufficiency” of breath, of “breath control,” of “correct” or “incorrect” breathing, etc. Therefore, specialized training, group dialogue, and extensive individual experiment, observation, and experience is required to prepare practitioners and teachers of this new approach.

In place of the invasive “breath control” paradigm, in which a fetish is made of “deep” breathing, we advocate “natural” breathing. This corrective concept is simple, yet profound, permissive rather than prescriptive. “Natural” breathing means that every part of ourselves is available to participate in the movements of respiration, as needed. We endeavor to apply and embody this principle in all our actions.

3. Breath and Consciousness

After any prolonged period of stillness—for example during sleep, meditation, or reverie—we become disoriented. In order to reestablish awareness of ourselves, of our orientation in space, our state of health or sickness, our mood, we must move. In this way we make ourselves receptive to dynamic sensations that flood in from every part of the living, breathing body. We yawn, we sigh, we stretch, we look around, we alter our posture, we fidget, and in so doing we find and feel all the scattered parts of ourselves, drawing them together to form a unified sense of the self appropriate to the present moment. Movement distributes awareness to every part of ourselves, and binds it together in an internal image, a "felt sense" of the single, unique self-that-I-am. This image, this sense, must be refreshed on a regular basis, and it does that primarily through movement.

Breath is the most fundamental of all our movements, for it underlies all others. It is continuous, involuntary, rhythmic, and indispensable to life. The breath paces our every action; it engages and enlivens every part of ourselves. Therefore, the movements of respiration are the foundation of all self-awareness, self-nurturing, and self-actualization.

Our social structure and conventional lifeways are organized for the convenience of industry rather than human need. Life in this man-made world overwhelms us with constant demands, displacing our attention from ourselves, from our own urgent, moment-to-moment needs, while asserting the primacy of external social, political, commercial, or religious goals—many of them plainly counter to our own interests. This is the somato-sensory basis of alienation—that is, the feeling that life is meaningless, and that we are not at home on the earth.

Attention to the breath and the full-bodied movements of respiration is a potent antidote. It is a continual, moment-to-moment renewal of our commitment to our own deepest and most fundamental needs, the needs of our own bodies and the needs of life itself. When our attention is fully absorbed in the rhythm and the pattern of the movements of respiration, in "this breath, this

movement, this moment,” we enter a state of profound attunement to ourselves, to our living breathing bodies and their ever-changing needs.

In that potent state, if we are thirsty, we drink; if we are hungry, we eat; if we are cold, we take shelter; and if we need sleep, we fall asleep. This reflects the drive of every healthy organism to maintain balance, or homeostasis—of fluids, of energy, of body temperature, of action and repose. No matter how far we may roam from our ancestral fields, no matter how high our aspirations may soar, no matter how much power or wealth we may amass, it is our willingness to identify, accept, and embody these fundamental drives—not to evade or transcend them—that enables us to become fully human. We can never hope to achieve our highest destiny as a species—whatever that may be—until we have truly learned to satisfy our most basic needs.