Breathy Musings

A Rolfer's Experience of Breath

By Eric Maklan, PhD, Certified Rolfer™

Eric Maklan

ABSTRACT *The author's Breathy Musings evoke the many layers of breath in our work and in our bodies. Read it and be inspired.*

It is said that sustained attention is a key that unlocks any door in the universe; that no obstacle can stand against an unyielding focus. But towards what do we focus? It should be a process that is continuously on, ever-present, and always available. The breath is one such object. Everlasting from birth to death. Shaping growth of the physical body. Energizing each movement, new in each moment, and ever-changing during this embodied lifetime.

Practitioners of Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) have a fondness for the breath. In my practice, I regard fluent breath as among the highest goals. Guiding the client, we free the breath session after session. We direct awareness towards the inhalation and exhalation, noting its rhythm, duration, and natural effortless pauses. If there is a hallmark of successful integration, let it be in the breath.

How do we as practitioners guide clients into the resource and possibilities of breath? How do we use breath to unlock the body?

Too much has been written about breath. There are many techniques in this arena: vipassana, pranayama, mantra, vocalization therapy, Wim Hof method, and so on. Unlimited varieties with a single goal. At least for some time today, may you hold your attention on this one phenomenon.

For this brief time, put aside your work, put aside your play, put aside your identity and be in the breath. What do you feel? What is there beyond the sensation in your nostrils? What is the foundation for this cycle of inhalation and exhalation?

This once happened: a client came to me; "I don't know how to breathe," she announced.

"But here you are, sitting in front of me. This morning you woke up. You brushed your teeth. You ate and drove here. You are alive. I can see that you know how to breathe."

We spoke about her experience of breathing. Primarily she described being disconnected from her own breath, a foreignness in her core. When she directed her attention on the breath, she experienced discomfort. Not physical discomfort per se. She was at odds with her breathing. "Like, a car running in the wrong gear."

I suspect we have all received this client. I suspect further that we have all been this client. As a bodyworker I like to do fancy things with tissue. I want to blame it on forward head posture, a tight pec minor, constricted brachial plexi. Maybe her liver rides a bit too high and that gall bladder should certainly be drained. I have worked this way before, many times. It is okay. But working with the breath is a deeper experience of embodiment. We should treat it with more sophistication than when working a spastic hamstring.

To generate resilience in the body it is paramount to work with the breath. As a Rolfer I want my clients to touch a new dimension of their being – a dimension that can stay present with the discomfort – and when the time is right, to expand into new possibility. Breath is a process of change. Physical and mental discomfort is also a process of change, though we are often less-willing to accept this. The discomfort encountered is inherent to the system. Ida Rolf spoke of getting the discomfort out. It was already there. Our work is to bring it into awareness. When attention is focused on the inhalation and exhalation it is natural to be drawn into the storytelling mind. We feel the constriction and the movement is away. But we must stay present until the possibility of entry arises.

Before undertaking a process of organization, it is best to appreciate the mess. Imagine this car in front of you, running in the wrong gear. For years the car has run this way. It strains and grows louder. The body is like this too. As the system moves towards disorder we detach from the experience. When we direct our attention back, we feel stuck in the wrong gear.

Today is your First-Hour session. We have our marching order, "Free the breath!" But do step back to appreciate the disorder. Our hands contact the body at first in the most superficial of ways. We are just containing the system. Breathe here, just be here. The breath comes in and out. It is like we want to be a passenger in that car. The engine hums, then gets louder, but we are in neutral. "Let the motor roar," I say. Then it goes quiet again. So, what happened? You took your foot off the gas, that is all.

Rolf said, "Go around the problem; get the system sufficiently resilient so that it is able to change, and it will change. It doesn't have to be forced. It's is that forcing that you have to avoid at all 'costs'" (Rolf, 1978, p. 83).

When we hold the attention single pointedly on one object we discover everything that is not that object. Our client experiences a 'click'. Even without the mind's understanding, a foundation is under construction for future change. Now we can pull out the fancy tissue work. We move deeper into layers of tissue, noting the stuck spots where breath has little access. What does it feel like? It feels left out. Movement goes around instead of through. Hold the tissue. Hold the awareness. Whose awareness? Client and practitioner both must stay present in the tissue. I find it helpful to put my breath into the same pattern. Breathing in unison is good. Breathing into that same layer of myself is better. Maybe it is mirror neurons? I have given up on attempting explanations. I just hold my attention and continuously direct the clients into theirs.

What is the feeling of breath in tissue? It is a feeling of change. It is something that practitioner and client both feel. We often have different words for it. "Ouch," may occur. It is like stubbing your toe in the dark. You were walking just fine until something unexpected happened. You hit up against an object that refuses to accommodate your movements. There is a sudden experience of otherness, of confrontation. This is me, and that is that. But this otherness is also you, separated and foreign. A fragment of yourself that confronts you in the habit of alienation.

Breath conjures up many analogies. It is ripe terrain. Waves are crashing onto the beach. The waves are obviously dynamic. But if we watch the beach we see that sand is also moving. The body is like this too. That stuck spot is not inert. There is life there too. Hold the attention. Remember the key. Feel the little in and out, a pulsation of possibility. My hands surround the scapula and clavicle. My palms are in fascia. My thumb rests on the 'stuck' biceps tendon. I find the body often assumes a global reorganization before tissue changes. It is like the system gains momentum. The shoulder girdle swings up with the inhalation like a cresting roller coaster. Every exhalation is a possibility. And this one brings a softness to that biceps tendon. And now that tendon too can participate in the coming and going.

The truth is that a single perfect breath can accomplish what otherwise takes an entire Ten Series. Focus your attention: you will discover that breath takes on a different pattern with each movement of the body. Each posture has a unique rhythm. Like water flowing along a river bed, its speed, turbulence, and depth changes with each bend. There is a possibility for perfect correspondence. Right now your breath is not complete. You are missing a spot here and over there. This is like bubbles trapped in the waterway. The water goes around instead of through. In my experience this sensation creates the feeling of being out of gear. There is unnecessary turbulence in the system.

This happened to me. As a boy I broke my arm jumping from a tree. It was a hairline fracture that would have healed without event except for an infection that took hold. A year later after rounds of intravenous antibiotics and two surgeries I was declared healthy. But growth of my forearm was stopped cold. The epiphyseal plates were destroyed. Moreover, the ulna and radius developed out of sync. To this

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day I have my eleven-year-old radius and twelve-year-old ulna. Many years later I was living in Santa Cruz, California. Every day I rode my bicycle to campus. I carried an over-the-shoulder messenger bag with my laptop and books – maybe ten pounds in total and always on my left shoulder. Every night I climbed at the local gym. I did not think much about the body. I thought even less about my breath. Both were reliable enough to be an afterthought.

I remember straining to catch a hold on the rock face. Afterwards, looking up to belay my partner was agonizing. The next day I could hardly move. I laughed because of the intensity of pain. Laughing also hurt. You know the rest of the story. I went to the doctor. I took the pain pills and muscle relaxers. I sat in my chair for days. It got better. Then I rode my bike or climbed and the cycle repeated. Some small saint intervened. I do not remember who said it but I will never forget the words, “Hey, there is a Rolfer in town, he is good at fixing things.” (Side note: Rolfers don’t fix things, we integrate. Whatever you call it, sometimes ‘fix-it work’ is exactly what we do. It is okay.)

Session scheduled and I am on the table. My Rolfer, as he shall be called, is delightfully heavy handed. Just on the edge of tolerability. In hindsight I can see the session was a thorough First Hour. Free the breath! Pec-minor, subscapularis, serratus anterior. My short left arm was all twisted up. My breath was sequestered into whatever spot I could fit it without pain. My Rolfer’s hand was fully under my scapula, a space that likely never existed and was certainly not experienced. The roller coaster crested and something changed. Something big changed.

There was an undeniable shift in my discomfort. Like a deep-set thorn was removed, I could breathe again. I felt at home in my body. I could keep my attention on the breath. Not only that but it was wonderful to be in the breath. This little story has all been in service of the next point. I asked him, “Could I have done that on my own?” At the time, his response made no sense. He said, “Sure, you would just have to find it.”

My intuition was that ‘finding it’ meant being able to put my finger on the right spot. It took me years to discover his meaning. I went through the Ten Series, twice. I began a yoga practice. I began to extend with inhalation and flex with exhalation. I held my attention on my breath in every movement.

Like wringing out a cloth I chased the breath in and out of every forgotten hiding spot. I came to see that every sensation had a counterpart in the breath. As every ripple in flowing water has a counterpart in the terrain over which it flows. In time I learned that holding attention single pointedly on the breath allowed me to find space, capacity, and resource within myself. Physically touching the restriction was helpful but unnecessary. As when walking in the dark a flashlight will illuminate the rock in your path, but it is awareness that lets you step over it.

There is no set-in-stone technique for keeping awareness on the breath. It would be good if every day you spent some time watching the breath. It would be better if you spent every session with the breath. Right now, just check and see: “Am I breathing? How about my client?” You are on the right track. You will both be distracted by the engine sounds and lurching gears. Rolf said, “Put it where it belongs and ask for movement.” We may equally say, “Find where it wants to be and wait for breath.” There will be little ‘clicks’ along the way. Seek these *aha* moments and allow a deeper embodiment to root.

Eric Maklan is a yogi and Certified Rolfer. His practice, Chattanooga Rolfing and Integrative Bodywork (www.rolfingchattanooga.com), is located in the ‘Scenic City’ of Chattanooga, Tennessee. He is a fan of fancy tissue work and encourages everyone to breathe.

Reference

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