

Breathing from the Inside Out

An Interview with Robert Litman

By Gael Rosewood, Certified Advanced Rolfer®, Rolf Movement® Practitioner and Robert Litman, Buteyko Technique Instructor and Continuum Instructor



Gael Rosewood



Robert Litman

ABSTRACT *In this interview, Robert Litman shares the story of breath and integration, drawing on his deep background in breath and movement studies. He offers insight into how to bring ease to the breath – to breathe tenderly from the inside out, rather than forcefully from the outside in – and how this resolves both body tensions and held emotions.*

Gael Rosewood: It's my pleasure to be interviewing Robert Litman. Robert and I have been colleagues and friends for thirty years. We've shared aspects of the Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) world and definitely shared much in the Continuum world, where we've taught together. Robert, how did you become so fascinated with and passionate about the subject of breathing?

Robert Litman: Thanks, Gael. I was born with breathing difficulties and as a child, had emotionally induced asthma. I married a woman with asthma and had a daughter who had severe asthma. These issues, all together, led to my interest in breathing and how I might be able to help myself and my family.

Getting Rolfing sessions introduced me to my body. After my first Rolfing session,

I was walking down the street when, all of a sudden, I felt like, "Oh my God. I'm having an experience of a body. I live in a body." It may sound naïve now, but when you've spent your whole life more or less unaware of embodiment, an experience like Rolfing SI can be more than profound.

I finished the series and my Rolfer invited me to go to an annual meeting. I just loved the way my body felt around Rolfers, and on the spot I decided to become a Rolf Movement [Practitioner]. But that particular moment in time, the Rolf Institute® [now the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute®] was not offering the Rolf Movement program. Annie Duggan and Janie French opened up the Duggan/French Approach for Somatic Pattern Recognition movement education program in Spain, so I flew to Spain and began my somatic education.

On the advice of Annie and Janie, I studied anatomy and physiology with Jon Zahourek in his program, Anatomy in Clay. It was a wonderful connection for me, because I'd always been interested in biology. After completing my study with Annie and Janie, I went to work at the Desert Institute of the Healing Arts massage school in Tucson as an anatomy/movement teacher.

While I was in Spain, I learned about the work of Emilie Conrad, founder of Continuum Movement, and I took a workshop with her in New Mexico a few years later. Right away I knew that studying Continuum with Emilie (and eventually with Susan Harper) would deepen my experience of what it means to live an embodied life and to find and connect with my breathing.

In 2001, I was at a somatic conference in California with Emilie and watched a lecture-demonstration of the Buteyko Breathing Technique. The science made sense to me, and in 2003 I went to New Zealand to study Buteyko in a yearlong program with Jennifer Stark. I've been teaching Continuum, breathing, and some bodywork ever since.

GR: It's wonderful how paths keep unfolding, step by step. Can you speak about integration?

RL: When I started exploring my breathing during Continuum 'dives' using the lens of Buteyko practice, I became fascinated by the relationship of the movement of breath, the movement-response of my body, and the unfurling, the loosening of years of being guarded since early childhood and the symptoms of asthma. Feeling all this, I said to myself, "Breath means you no harm," meaning that this was a safe way to explore my inner landscape. Intimacy with breath and my breathing body increases my capacity for intimacy in relationships and intimacy with the world around me. When a somatic discovery increases my capacity for relationship, I've found, I'm onto something worth following.

GR: And what does *integration* mean to you as it pertains to breathing?

RL: When a body gets Rolfing sessions, structural changes allow new information to enter the system and into consciousness. As the body is organized and shaped differently, the breath moves differently. The first breath that comes in response to a change becomes the breath that carries the possibility of new movement. The body is now vibrating at a new frequency due to the structural change, and breathing will carry that new frequency to every cell and every level of consciousness. With movement and breath affecting each other, the integration process has already begun. For me, *integration* means feeling the new form and the new movement of my breathing. The more awareness I'm able to bring to both these rhythms, and they are rhythms – structure and breath – the more the new patterning becomes integrated.

GR: The other day you were speaking about finding new support via gravity and the way gravity can produce a sense of buoyancy. Can you say a little more about this?

RL: The movement of breath is in a primary relationship with – interdependent with – earth (ground) and sky (space). Breathing, space, ground, and awareness are spiraling together.

During the exhale, the body loses some of its buoyancy as the lungs release breath from the alveoli and the internal pressures shift. This lessening of buoyancy brings awareness of our relationship to gravity; literally the body moves toward the earth. At the end of the exhale, the body can rest into being supported. Whether we are sitting, standing, or lying down the earth is holding us. When we yield to this underlying support that gravity is pulling us toward, bodily tensions can release, and our usual holding – or bracing – patterns can settle and soften.

When tensions soften thanks to the support of the earth, the body now has a chance to have a less effortful inhale. The inhale is in relationship to levity and buoyancy. The more receptive I am to these forces of ground and space, the more I'm able to allow breath to 'breathe me'. Allowing breathing to find its own

rhythm is preferable to manipulating breathing to suit your idea of how you should breathe.

GR: Thank you, beautifully said. In my experience through the Rolfing series and Continuum explorations, people's learning curves vary, and breathing habits have a particularly stubborn hold on us. It's difficult to integrate healthier breathing patterns. Can you speak to the art-form you've developed that helps people make changes that really affect their health at this deep level? You were the first person to point out to me a breathing habit I had that was compromising my immune and nervous systems, and the way you pointed it out gave me information I'd never had before; and it was one of the steepest, hardest integration curves of my life. I stuck with it because it was so pivotal to my well-being. Can you speak to the issue of the challenges of changing breathing habits?

RL: I really appreciate your story because it takes that kind of commitment, interest, curiosity, diligence, and time to bring about lasting change. Breathing is an elegant and complex phenomenon. It's happening at the *physical, psychological, and biochemical* levels simultaneously. They wind and spiral around each other. As one changes, the others change, so it's important to pay attention to how *they're all affecting each other*. The thing I've found that motivates people the most is learning the chemistry of respiration.

Carbon dioxide drives the depth, volume, and rate of breathing. Usually we think, "I need to get more oxygen," or "I'm not getting enough oxygen," but the real question is, "What's happening in the end-tidal CO₂ (ETCO₂)?" – which is the amount of carbon dioxide released at the end of an exhalation. That level tells us whether enough carbon dioxide is being carried in the blood to the lungs for exhaling.

When the ETCO₂ levels are low, oxygen distribution from the blood to cells throughout the body is also low, which creates a *cellular starvation of oxygen*, reducing mitochondria's ability to convert oxygen into energy, creating a field open

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to disease. And this imbalance arises, in part, from a dysfunctional breathing pattern – breathing too much, too little, too often, or mouth- or chest-breathing. Using the mouth rather than the nose for breathing activates the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system that can begin over time to feel like anxiety. Once you have a felt sense of this, you can begin to explore the emotional, psychological, and physical habits that underlie this disruption of breath's natural flow. And as you begin to bring these underlying habits into consciousness, understanding what animates and what reinforces them, you begin to have some choice whether to continue the habit or try something new. With effort, I've been able to integrate lessons learned during Rolfing sessions by inviting in breathing rhythms that feel pleasurable, safe, and in integrity with my body's needs.

One way to relieve the distress produced by mouth-breathing is to slow down, let your lips and teeth come together, and switch to nasal breathing. At the end of each exhale, allow gravity to bring your body to rest. Delaying the next inhale for just this moment can soften the tensions you've been holding, which I said earlier allows the next inhale to fill you more fully. Lengthening the exhale and letting the inhale begin effortlessly can rebalance respiratory chemistry, and the effects of dysregulated breathing begin to dissipate. The pleasurable feeling you have doing this becomes a motive to allow your breathing to feed and nourish you on an ongoing basis, and at the same time it increases your lung capacity as you use more of your lung tissue to breathe.

When our bodies open and allow breath (oxygen) into locations that have been isolated from the whole of the organism for a long time, stored memories and emotional anguish or suppressed joys may surface into awareness. With changes in breathing behavior, the movement of breath itself might express what has been held and is now being released. Moments like these can feel unnerving, so it's important to learn

to *trust* breath as a resource and a vehicle for healing. If you've uncovered grief, for example, and begin to cry, your breaths might be big and sporadic. If you're angry, breath can get fierce and hot. This is breath expressing the body-mind's experience. When you're able to trust and know your own breath to be safe even as the range of expressions widens, you'll be able to stay present with your breathing as it regulates itself, and breath's own vitality can bring some of these past issues to completion.

There's a mutual desire here. The part of the body that has been isolated wants to come back into the whole, and the wholeness of the body needs those isolated parts to integrate back into the whole. Breath wants to enter places where the holding has been the most intense, and it begins to soften those places and allow information that's been held there to rise to the surface and bring our organism back into wholeness and integrity.

Titration – getting small glimpses of discovery and revelation – allows the body to integrate the new while, at the same time, engaging movement and breathing resources. With the support of breath, we can experience feelings that are a recapitulation of something that happened earlier and still feel safe. Suppression is a physical, emotional, and psychological energetic phenomenon that steals energy. Suppressed energy kills the potential of breath and therefore life. Vitality that has been squashed, denied, or suppressed can be released. A reclamation of our breathing integrity is taking place. Breath is life. It's okay to have a fully breathable body.

We have to be ready for breath to be expressive in a way that is vulnerable, which in the past we haven't allowed ourselves to be because it was too threatening. When attention is paid to these deeper stories and we appreciate what is wanting to be revealed, new possibilities of breath, movement, and emotional release can take place. When allowed or encouraged, the body breathes *with* the new openings and integration happens automatically and over time.

GR: It sounds like you're working with the same principles that trauma therapists work with in terms of helping people to resolve past trauma and step into more resiliency. You've created a specific way of working with it through monitoring the expression of breath. Can you say more about that?

RL: I took a series of classes with trauma professional David Treleaven and learned the concept 'window of tolerance'. When we're working with ourselves and our breath and our body, it's essential to stay within a window of tolerance. Outside of that window, breathing and feelings can become dysregulated. That's when it's important to return to a resource that feels supportive – taking a walk, going out in nature, finding ground, being with a friend, something that helps move away from the discomfort and fear. That's what I mean by 'titrating'. Take in a little bit of these difficult materials at a time. The process can take years – dipping in and out of inquiring and exploring somatic experiences and integrating these shifts of perspective. As pieces of the trauma resolve, the window of tolerance widens, allowing breathing behavior to spend more time resting and settling.

Without room to breathe and use of the full capacity of our breathing body, the organism is compromised in its ability to stay healthy. The organs that don't receive the full complement of oxygen become stressed and weakened. These compromises set up a vulnerability to disease. During the current pandemic, many people were compromised and susceptible to the virus due to years of breathing polluted air and breathing habits that weakened their immunity. For example, based on statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO) website and recent news reporting: 9,000,000 people die every year from heart, brain, and lung complications caused by air pollution; nine out of ten people on the planet don't have healthy air to breathe on a daily basis; the WHO considers polluted air a cancer-causing agent; and in India,

the country most adversely affected by air pollution, life spans are shortened on average by six years.

My breathing processes foster an intimacy with my body, my heart/mind, and my health. Like any intimate relationship, I have to nurture it. I've been willing to listen and honor its messages. Through the gift of breath, I've built a connection back to myself. The richer and safer this inner connection becomes, the richer my life feels.

GR: Beautifully said.

RL: Thank you.

GR: Because you've developed such an intimate relationship with your breathing, I wonder if you could describe a scenario where your breath lets you know you need to give it more attention. When that happens, how do you respond to that information?

RL: To answer your question more directly, my breathing body opened my ability to grieve the trauma history. I became familiar with the somatic feelings of the suppression and how shallow my breathing could become, how little movement I was experiencing while breathing. This allowed me to be interested in what was emotionally hiding underneath. I trusted that I could tolerate the grief and tears that were arising. This became the time to finally process and resolve the experiences of the past.

When I hear 'awareness of breathing', it translates in my mind to what I call 'the triple helix of breathing'. What will become breath is the air that surrounds me. Before the air enters my respiratory system, we call it air. As soon as it enters through the nose, it's called breath. Of course, it's still air, but now it has the life-giving force of breath. Air travels in waves and spirals and is always coherent. What I do in my body allows it to stay coherent or interrupts that coherency. When I am present with the movement of my breathing, I don't judge whether it's right or wrong. I merge my awareness with the moving tide of breath and the sensations that are activated as breath touches my inner landscape. My awareness, sensations, and the wave of breath spiral together. The three 'helixes' are inseparable as long as I keep my awareness on the movement and sensations of breath and the body's responses, and not try to make either the breath or the body respond in a particular way. I am *breathing with awareness*. The three helixes are in relationship to one another and respond to each other's

movement. In a meditation practice, this is called following the breath. For me, it is following *the movement of breath, body, and awareness*.

Breath follows awareness. That is its nature. Sometimes, rather than following breath as the starting point, I turn my attention to the *sensations* I'm experiencing and consider them to be an invitation to receive and be touched by breath's movement. I trust that my body intelligence is sending up this sensation as a way to bring into awareness a location that needs to move with breath. By creating movement, breath is waking up what has been lying dormant. The *movements* in the body and the *movement* of breath itself are as nourishing as the exchange of gases during breathing.

As I keep the process going, I attend to the sensations that arise toward the end of the next exhale. If it's the same location as a previous breath, the quality of sensation and the movement by breath are usually different than earlier. Breath is beginning to reshape how the body moves with breath. Or, the exhale may awaken sensations in a different location, and if that is the case, I breathe with awareness of this new sensation and location. Repeating this process over and over for five to twenty minutes awakens the body to move more completely with my breathing. My capacity for deeper, subtle movement increases. Over time, as the body and breath move more in harmony, breath arises from deeper within and less volume of breath is needed. I prefer this way of finding a fuller breath than the instruction to take a deep breath. Usually when we're told to take a deep breath, it means a big inhale followed by a big release of breath through the mouth. This might feel relaxing in the moment, but in the long run it doesn't change our relationship to breathing or do anything to increase our awareness of our inner landscape and how best to nourish it by following its needs.

The concept of breathing with awareness of sensation is preferable to the instruction to breathe into someplace in the body. For me, that's too vague. I would rather follow an impulse from my body as an invitation

to *breathe with* what has entered into consciousness.

When I have a pain in an area of my body that isn't moving well, I can be more directive. I inquire and begin a conversation with that area of pain, and ask something like, "What kind of breath would you like to receive that would feel nurturing?" Then I notice how my body breathes, the texture and pace of breath that arrives in that area. I trust that my breath will deliver the kind of movement that touches the area and can be received without defense. It's usually slow, kind, and tender, and this begins to transform the complex of pain. Feelings or memories might arrive in this process. I don't judge or try to figure out what they mean. I breathe with what I'm experiencing, with what comes into view, and merge my breath with my experience. *I breathe with the experience*. The feelings, memories, images, and thoughts are now connected to breath. It is the movement and the gift of the life force of breath that begins to *shift the scene*, as my teacher and mentor Emilie Conrad, creator of Continuum, used to say. Shifting the scene gives me new perspectives to integrate.

As these body, mind, and heart sensations show themselves and I continue to breathe with them, my body builds inner connections. The accumulation of these local connections eventually leads to a tipping point and then the entire body begins to breathe itself. My process disappears, and I drop deeply into my inner life as my body breathes without any manipulation on my part. I am allowing the process to self-regulate.

This is the triple helix of *breathing with*: awareness, breath, and movement. I'm breathing with awareness of my body and breath in movement and sensation, and I'm breathing with the awareness of my awareness.

There are times when I can set aside the time and just focus on breath, movement, and sensation. At other times, I may be walking the dog or sitting at the computer or talking with my wife or a friend and I notice that I need to check in with my

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breathing, because I sense I'm not really connected to my body. I'm in my mind in a way that has me feeling anxious. My first step is to make sure that I'm nose-breathing. Usually when I'm not connected to my body, I notice that my mouth is open. I then touch my lips and teeth lightly together and place my tongue on the roof of my mouth, which is where it belongs to allow the airways to be as open as possible and complete the energy circuit of the body. Then I inquire, "Where's my support? How am I being held and what part of me is currently connected to the Earth or a representation of the Earth such as a chair or mat if I am lying down. I need support right now." As soon as I feel support, I breathe with the awareness of that support. Support allows more room for breath and breathing begins to slow down.

Breathing through my nose and finding support usually allows insight into the message my breathing pattern is relaying. Perhaps it's to help me to recognize my emotional state: "I'm really depressed, and I hadn't even noticed." Or physically it's pointing out how contracted my body feels: "My breathing is shallow." Then I try to give my body what it needs, which is usually gravity, space, and quiet, so it can wake up to its full rhythm of breathing. As I become more aware of my body in connection with breath, the slower my breathing becomes and the less air I need. When my body needs less air, it feels as though breath is arising from deep within, with less noticeable movement at the surface.

As the body softens and opens, breathing slows down and goes deeper. We only need half a liter of air per breath while we're engaged in everyday activities. That's a little more than a can of Coke, which isn't all that much. But when I envision 300,000,000 alveoli receiving each breath, it shifts the orientation from outside-in breathing, to breathing *from the inside-out*. Rather than trying to suck breath in forcefully and using more of the superficial muscles to *pull* the body open, I'm breathing and opening *from the inside*; and when I exhale, I can feel the wave of breath traveling outward toward the skin. Allowing the body to open from the inside like a flower can be, and is for me, incredibly sensual and comforting. I'm allowing myself to be touched profoundly by breath.

GR: That was very articulate and helpful. I have one more question now, which arises from how detailed and articulate you've been about how you tend to yourself via

your breathing, gravity, and awareness. Do you want to give us anything we could take toward a daily practice if we wish to?

RL: What I've described is part of my daily practice. Awareness, gravity, and buoyancy or space. Gael, you've coined a term for our everyday pattern of breathing: 'breathing signature'. Our breathing signature has been formed from all the breaths that came before that were responding to conditions current at the time. Breath is a hologram of our history, and the light of awareness can shine on any particular breathing pattern and bring to awareness a past memory, in the way a familiar smell brings back memories from the past. Unfortunately, we get locked into certain patterns of breathing, habituated ways we breathe based on these past experiences. This includes how we use our muscles and structure. The breathing practice I'm offering bypasses, or goes beneath, the breathing signature, the habits. Doing this can give you a different experience of your breathing and the way you respond physically and emotionally with each breath.

Here's an easy practice to help soften the breathing musculature and other body tensions, allowing the lungs to *breathe you*:

Place your hands on your chest while taking a fairly large breath in and notice if the muscles in your chest tighten or relax. Most people find that their chest muscles tighten. It's antithetical to breathing, to make the container smaller while you're trying to take in more air, but that's what happens when you tighten your chest muscles. It's why some people say they "can't take a deep breath" or "get enough air."

Now, while keeping your hands on your chest, as you inhale think the syllable *sa* (sah). Only one *sa* during the entire inhale. You are only thinking the syllable, you're not saying it aloud. When you think something, you hear it in your head. See if this time while inhaling, your chest muscles soften and allow the lungs to fill with more ease. Notice too, whether instead of *pulling* air through the nose into your body, the air *is being drawn* through your nose with less resistance. Go back and forth between the way you usually breathe and what it feels like while thinking *sa*, until you get a feeling for the difference. If you want to take a very large breath, continue to think *sa* for a longer period

of time. Can you sense that your lungs are *drawing the air in* instead of efforting to *get* air into the lungs? This way of breathing, the lungs can draw in as much air as they need and direct the air to the parts of the lungs that have the capacity to receive more air.

During the exhale, think the syllable *ha*. This allows the lungs to release the breath with less effort. Try it. Is it true? With less effort on the exhale, more attention can be focused on how your body is moving toward the Earth and receiving Earth's support.

Over time, you'll build muscle memory and be able to access this way of breathing without thinking *sa* and *ha*. You'll be bypassing old habits and receiving a more satisfying breath under any condition. This can train the body to actuate a one-breath reset of the autonomic nervous system from sympathetic overload to a balance between sympathetic and parasympathetic responses, leading to more of a sense of resting and settling while breathing. Breathing becomes less stressful, more nourishing, and the full capacity of the lungs is engaged. Learning to breathe by thinking *sa* and *ha* during each cycle of breath also leads to greater use of the diaphragm and the larger lung space in the lower back. This is what I do: ground, space, *sa* and *ha*, and attention to direct experience of sensation.

GR: Beautiful. Is there anything else you want to say to feel complete? This is very full and rich. Take it where you want if you would like to add anything.

RL: My favorite book that lays out step-by-step instructions on how to manifest from spirit to body is *The Radiance Sutras* by Lorin Roche, PhD. Manifestation begins with breath. Here is a quote that I think says it all (Roche 2014, 39):

At the end of the exhale, breath surrenders to quietude. For a moment, you hang in the balance, suspended in the fertile spaciousness that is the source of breath. At the end of the inhale, filled with the song of breath, there is a moment when you are simply holding the tender mystery. In these interludes, experience opens into exquisite vastness with no beginning and no end. Embrace this infinity without reservation. You are the vessel.

No two breaths are alike. Each breath is a response to momentary shifts in

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metabolism, which is receiving information from the mental, physical, and emotional states, which are in response to current conditions. I am grateful for each breath. I don't not know that I will receive another breath after this one. There's no guarantee. Walking the edge between life and death with each breath is the ultimate impermanence, the mystery of being alive.

In the words of Emilie Conrad (2007): "Everything begins and ends with breath. I enter . . . inhale. What happens in between is the story of our lives. Our breath maintains us through the twists and turns of life. I exit . . . exhale."

GR: Thank you. The connection between spirit and breath and body.

RL: Yes, and awareness. I'd like to give thanks and deep appreciation to the teachers I mentioned here as well as Peter Litchfield; my wife of thirty-six years, Nell Luce; and all the students I've taught over the past thirty-three years. Thank you, Gael, for more than thirty years of friendship and collaboration.

Robert Litman has guided clients and students in the use of movement, breath, and sound for the past thirty-three years. He founded The Breathable Body in 2004. He is a Certified Breathing Behavior Analyst from the Graduate School of Behavioral Health Science in Wyoming. He co-developed the Continuum Wellsprings Movement Practitioner Program with Emilie Conrad, the founder of Continuum, and co-taught and co-developed additional programs with her for eighteen years. Robert has been a faculty member and head of the departments of anatomy and physiology and movement education at the Desert

Institute of the Healing Arts Massage School, Tucson, Arizona. He teaches the Buteyko Technique of Breathing Retraining and is founding member of the Buteyko Breathing Educators Association (BBEA) in the United States as well as trainer of educators in the Buteyko Technique. He was a preceptor at the University of Arizona School of Integrative Medicine, teaching the Buteyko Technique to visiting doctors for Dr. Andrew Weil for five years. Robert has an advanced certification in the Duggan-French Approach to Somatic Pattern Recognition, a structural alignment modality in the lineage of Ida P. Rolf, PhD. He recently studied with David Treleavan – Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness. Robert now makes his home on Vashon Island, Washington, continuing to offer private sessions and classes in movement and breathing. He regularly leads classes and workshops worldwide.

More information on Robert can be found at www.thebreathablebody.com and www.wellspringsofcontinuum.com.

Gael Rosewood met Ida P. Rolf, PhD, in 1968 and began studying with her in 1969. In 1978 she joined the Rolf Institute faculty to help develop and teach Rolf Movement Integration. In 1989 she became a Rolfing Instructor. Although she is no longer an active member of the faculty, she still teaches CE classes in both modalities. Gael also studied with Emilie Conrad and Susan Harper for forty years. She has been teaching Continuum since 1991. Her other studies have included Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing® training, visceral manipulation, nerve sheath release, and craniosacral, scar, and bone work.

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