

Pilates breath techniques were intended to be used in normal, everyday situations. Nose-breathing during other forms of exercise increases performance due to the above-mentioned increase in oxygenation. Nose-breathing, with its numerous positive physiological benefits therefore becomes a mandate for everyday living (see the sidebar Reasons to Nose-Breathe on p. 23.)

By teaching clients to understand the science and art of breathing, we empower them to permanently self-correct their breathing style. As blood chemistry is balanced, mutability and adaptability return, oxygenation of the body's tissues returns, and fluidity of movement once again becomes possible. This is the interface of Rolwing Structural Integration (SI) and the Buteyko Method. Rolwing SI prepares the body to accommodate the various changes in air volume that represent healthy breathing, which in turn facilitates deeper structural change due to the increase in tissue oxygenation that practicing the principles of Buteyko makes available.

The implication for Rolwing SI goes deeper. CO<sub>2</sub> in its role as a hormone (regulating oxygen distribution from the red blood cells to tissue cells and mitochondria) also dilates smooth muscle. It relaxes the breathing airways and the vessels of the circulatory system, as well as the connective tissue. The recent discoveries that smooth muscle cells populate within the connective tissue has implications for the pliability of the connective tissue as well as the ability of Rolwing SI to effect change.

As connective tissue moves into a more receptive and relaxed state due to the dilating effect of CO<sub>2</sub>, the Rolfer finds the tissue more responsive and capable of sustaining the changes that a good Rolwing series can produce. Teaching clients to track their own breath during sessions can bring an enormous sense of aliveness and excitement to the work. Rolfers have a great opportunity to educate clients in the single most powerful resource they have available to them: their own respiration, and its ability to heal, inform, release, and energize every cell of the body. I (Helen Luce) have experienced numerous cases of clients who are, in their own words, terribly anxiety-ridden, nervous, or in a constant state of ill health report within a *session or two* that they already feel like a "new person" – noticing a substantial decrease in their nervous symptoms, better sleep, sharper thinking, etc. Thanks to my study of

the Buteyko Method I have been able to help clients stop an asthma attack in less than two minutes – without use of an inhaler!

The Rolfer's work is less effortful overall, as both the client and practitioner are breathing in a healthy, sustainable manner during the sessions. The positive entrainment that occurs when the Rolfer her/himself demonstrates in every moment what healthy breathing looks – and more importantly *feels* – like, is a beautiful experience. Understanding respiratory physiology enhances every aspect of a Rolfer's work and, I believe, made a huge difference in the well-being of all my clients.

If this brief article has sparked your curiosity and you would like to learn more about the Buteyko Method, you can contact Robert Litman and Helen Luce at their respective email addresses: robert@thebreathablebody.com or helen@thebreathablebody.com. You can also take a look at the Buteyko organization's website, www.buteykoeducators.org or the following books: *The Carbon Dioxide Syndrome* by Russell and Jennifer Stark (Australia: Buteyko Works, 2002) and *Breathing Free* by Theresa Hale (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

*Robert and Helen teach many Buteyko Method classes each year, both in Tucson, Arizona and around the world. They are also available for*

*private sessions, Skype sessions, and classes for other types of educators interested in learning these techniques.*

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*Helen Luce was trained twenty-nine years ago as a Rolfer and got her advanced certification six years later. She has been practicing primarily in Tucson, Arizona. Helen has been a student of Angwyn St. Just in Trauma Energetics, and has studied extensively with Emilie Conrad, Susan Harper, and Hubert Godard. She has also studied craniosacral therapy, visceral manipulation, the Buteyko Method, homeopathy, and herbal medicine. Her Rolwing SI is deeply informed by all the influences of her years of passionate study, but most especially by the sensitive and fluid touch of Continuum and craniosacral work. Her sessions always include much attention to the client's perceptual field and breathing patterns, in addition to structural and movement patterns.*

## Middendorf Breathexperience Work

**By Judith Mayanja, Certified Advanced Rolfer™ and Middendorf Breathexperience Practitioner**

I remained ambivalent for months as to whether I should contribute an article about Middendorf Breathexperience Work (MBW) to *Structural Integration: The Journal of the Rolf Institute*®. Then I read a quote attributed to the Dalai Lama. It is said that when he was asked what surprised him most about humanity, he answered, "Man. Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then

dies having never really lived." The impact from his last sentence catapulted me out of my ambivalence. ". . . and then dies having never really lived." If one could thwart such a pitiable end, it would be of infinite value.

I sent this quotation to a breath colleague of mine, inspired by the Dalai Lama's insight. Her reply to it was, "Wonderful! At least we have breath and knowledge of how to be in the moment. I'm learning more and more about that." Living, breath, and the present are inextricably connected, and if I could contribute to even one more person learning about and/or possibly trying this somatically oriented style of breathing work

known as Middendorf Breathexperience Work, it would be worth it.

One might say, "In regard to the breath, what is so original about breath bringing people to the present moment?" Generically speaking, this is not a unique attribute of breath work. No one breath style holds a monopoly on this attribute. Meditation has utilized this vehicle as a guide for eons. So, why MBW? What is its distinction in the family of breathing practices? Why would it be of interest to Rolfers?

Before launching into what distinguishes MBW from other types of breath work, I'd like to take a moment to describe the origin and background of the work. Germany has been gifted with a particular, abiding curiosity and sustained interest in the natural breath, which has existed for over two hundred years. Professor Ilse Middendorf was graced to have been born German, thereby allowing her to take advantage of this rich environment.

Her interest in the breath came from a childhood experience at the age of eleven. She had been looking up at the sky with raised arms, as if to fly away into the ethereal blue, and on one particular occasion, while making this gesture, she heard a voice from inside her say, "You must breathe." This early intuition inspired her to follow the path of breath and what it had to teach her.

The meaning and remembrance of those words echoed through her adult life and professional development. She became a teacher of gymnastics (in the European sense), which explored body consciousness through various schools of movement and exercise. (One of the schools Ilse studied from was the Mensendieck School which, by the way, also had an influence upon Dr. Rolf and the value she later came to place on movement work.) Although accomplished as a gymnastic teacher, dissatisfaction remained with the depth of these methods – the way they emphasized will power, leaving little room for the direct essence of breath involved with human reality. Around this period she found a mature dance teacher, Ewe Warren, with whom she learned about the unity of expression by means of movement, breathing, and meditation.

Ilse's breath exploration took its final thrust toward its full creative bloom and independence from Cornelis Veening,

a member of Carl Jung's circle and a practitioner of breath-therapy. She eventually gained a professorship at the Berlin Music and Drama Academy, a college for higher education of music and the performing arts. She went on to establish her own school, The Institute for Breath-therapy, in Berlin. It was through the hand of friendship from the Feldenkrais® community of San Francisco that her work came to be embraced in this country.

Ilse passed away recently at the age of ninety-eight. With well over sixty years of breath experience she had the ability to sense an imbalance of breath signaling the onset of illness. She could then go within to restore her breath balance. I think it was not an accident that she was long-lived. It was not the number of years alone that made her life impressive, but the quality of her life, which came from her exploration of the breath. Her work is carried on by her former student, and consummate disciple/teacher in his own right, Juerg Roffler, director of the Middendorf Institute for Breathexperience (MIBE) of Berkeley, California. He states:

Through the allowing of the breath to come and go on its own, the source that holds essence and the knowledge about oneness becomes accessible. The sensation of the movement of breath identifies this source, this way it becomes a reality in our body and we can experience, sense our truth. Our participation presence in this, integrates this process.<sup>1</sup>

So, why would MBW be of interest to Rolfers? In a word, the *body* – something both schools hold with highest regard. MBW magnified my experience of my body beyond a mere mechanistic sense to include the greater sensitivities of being human. Here is where it is more useful to go directly to the words of Ilse from her book *The Perceptible Breath: a Breathing Science*. She articulates, far better than I, with words that have been informed by years of experience with the breath:

The human body is often "discovered" by subjecting it to specific physical exertions, in the hope of revealing its secrets by these clumsy external means. The body is sought by supposed "methods of research" that in the end do not take the body into consideration at all.<sup>2</sup>

The reason why there are so many different keys to corporality are because the body "carries everything in itself," since life and soul, mind and body form a whole. How strong has our discernment to grow, until we are able to realize, what this marvel, "the body" is, and judge it in terms of its overall importance! How often, even in our own times, is the body looked upon and judged as an object. But how could reality develop in human life, in the Now, without the reality of the body?<sup>3</sup>

I am not the only Rolfer or Rolf Movement® Practitioner to embrace MBW; I am in the company of several others in the breath community, both Rolfers and Rolf Movement Practitioners alike. Many times, I would find myself exploding with joy and excitement at the revelation that certain Roling SI principles and goals were being achieved without any external influence – most often the revelation coming during a breath and movement class. "Look, Ma, no hands!" Roling SI results could be achieved through the breath, results associated beyond meditative awareness.

Interaction and exploration with the breath take place in three dynamic modes and this, too, may be of interest to Rolfers (I use the term inclusive of Rolf Movement Practitioners as well). They are: 1) breath and movement exploration; 2) vowel space exploration; and 3) hands-on exploration of the breath addressed to the individual through a breath-dialogue with the hands of the Middendorf teacher and the breath and body of the client lying on a massage table.

MBW is work for the mature adult. Listen to the words of Ilse that help us understand the nature of the unconscious breath and the importance of getting to know it in an unforced way:

The natural breathing movement that you can see in very small children has been reduced to a minimum. Because unconscious breathing is unconscious and also *reacts* unconsciously, we must consider this function as one of the most precise instruments that nature has given us which could bring our life to flower, if it were not fought against throughout our lives, by our thinking consciousness,

movements, and many other influences.<sup>4</sup>

. . . *the unconscious function of breathing* reacts most sensitively to any influence. By supporting all the other functions, it balances all the fluctuations in one's life, as long as "tensions," "limpness," and "congestions" do not predominate.<sup>5</sup>

However strongly we may want to, there is no way to improve (the) unconscious mode of breathing as long as we do not get to know our breathing. But if we employ our *will* the breath becomes conscious and does not reach the profound layers where an effective change in the mode of breathing has to start, and so to start and change bad mental and physical posture at its root.<sup>6</sup>

Voluntary breath is ruled by the mind. It is directed to a special purpose and depends on the way you look at it. . . . these ways of breathing always serve one goal and they make an impression on me, my soul and my spirit *from the outside inward*, they are impressed on, put on, forced on. . . . this doing and making enables you to reach only certain parts of your complex body structures and you cannot judge where, or how this deliberate, chosen breathing is good or bad for you, since your "inner voice," which is a most particular bodily sense, is rooted in body-soul-and-spirit and is eliminated or at best, stays unconscious [italics added].<sup>7</sup>

Examples of voluntary breath include: deliberate deep breathing, professional techniques and methods used by singers, narrators, and newscasters, as well as its use in all kinds of sports, guided movement, and yoga. So, the movement work of MBW is an unfamiliar approach to movement, which differs from the customary goal-oriented mode of our conditioning, particularly in Western culture. It is not uncommon to grapple with periods of frustration, but with patience one eventually comes to befriend this unconscious breath. In Ilse's words, this "perceptible breathing is a centre-core happening, concerning the body-soul-spirit unity of the human being. Once developed and matured it moves from the inside outward, pervading the Self as well as the body and awakens its power. It

clears, orders, harmonizes, heals and finally becomes a *profound joy* [italics added].<sup>8</sup>

Breath and movement work help the breather become aware of the three major breathing spaces, the inner and outer breath, and also to become acquainted with the uprising, descending, and horizontal powers of breath. The three breathing spaces refer to three bodily distinctions and do not refer merely to the respiratory apparatus in isolation. According to Ilse, "the breath opens up three important spaces in us, corresponding to such layers: the lower space consisting of the pelvis and the legs, the middle space from the navel to about the 8th rib (middle of the thorax), including the diaphragm, and the upper space consisting of the shoulders, neck, head, and arms."<sup>9</sup>

Ilse developed the vowel space work by following the development of breath through breath and movement work. It sprang from wanting to help a student recognize the sensitive moment in breath-therapy by seeing if he could "*participate* in the moment of his inhaling breath without reflecting upon it rationally or interfering with it."<sup>10</sup> Again, back to Ilse:

This moment is of extraordinary significance for the entire breathing therapy. Nevertheless, there are many difficulties arising, especially when you try to become aware of your breathing, while it flows in without using your will, but when we succeed in becoming part of this event we shall be aware of our breathing coming of its own accord. We become conscious of our bodily, as well as spiritual (psychic) way of Being, which is crucial: *we have learned to wait*. [italics added]<sup>11</sup>

The vowel space work is less active bodily than the breath and movement modality and demands more of us emotionally to be with the breath movement and space. Different vowels have their breath spaces, or home (when breath process becomes more transparent or unhindered throughout the body), in different bodily spaces.

The vowel space work is an example of how the breath "not only reaches our inner world and moves us, it connects us to the world outside. It brings us closer to each other and breaks down our sense of isolation."<sup>12</sup> Language is the vehicle we ordinarily associate as being the bridge to one another, lessening isolation. Yet, how

often do we consider the breath that powers that speech? The vowel space work dissects language, in a way, into its incremental components of vowels and consonants until we can build back up to words and full-sentence use with the bodily awareness of breath, which is largely unconscious in normal language usage. This is a sensitive and wonderful exploration of our humanity.

Hands-on breath treatment is the third modality of MBW. Generally, breath and movement work and vowel space work take place in a group class setting. A hands-on breath treatment addresses breath to the particular individual. An individual breath treatment augments the group learning.

One of the reasons I enjoy receiving a hands-on session, even though I may be educated to the same lesson of breath from class, is the way it affords me the luxury of greater receptivity to my breath. Even with the best of intentions, in the sitting stool work or standing work, my "doing" unknowingly has crept into play. At the same time, the receiver comes to learn that it is not the hands of the practitioner that make something happen. Rather, there is an independent responsiveness of readiness by the breath in hands-on dialogue either by active offer or by being from the practitioner's hands that can best be described as the wisdom of the breath.

A person wishing to reap the full reward of this self-healing art form must come to take responsibility for his breath. Each of us has a way that our breath is developing towards balance, particular to the individual's body and being. The nature of the breath is trustworthy; breath is something that can be relied upon not only by the breather but also by the practitioner. This makes for a level of honesty that is refreshing, and at times challenging and demanding of respect. The breath simply will not respond to force because of its inherent knowing. This dialogue is composed of a very simple, yet not to be underestimated, profound conversation between the practitioner's hands and the receiver's breath of "yes, I will develop" or "no, not in this way" – or "no, not now."

The intrigue and appeal that this aspect of MBW may have for the Rolfer, as it did for me, is to be relieved of a touch that is communicating the unwanted intention of agenda. The education that comes with the use of the hands from MBW will unequivocally convince the

Rolfer that effectiveness can be achieved through gentleness. There may be periods of frustration that one goes through from the habituated use of the will through the hands, but just as one eventually opens to consciously sense the unconscious, natural breath without the use of the will, so one can learn, in time, the same with the use of the hands. This is a great liberation for ourselves and a kindness to our clients.

Breath, ultimately, remains a mystery beyond our comprehension. I feel quite certain in saying I did not make my breath; breath is a gift beyond my understanding. There is a scriptural reference with the most passionate theology that articulates my sentiment about breath. This is expressed by a Jewish mother who has just witnessed the death by torture of her seven sons. To remain true to their faith they accept death rather than break the law by eating pork under duress. I regard this as a proper perspective of the hierarchy and order in distinction between the Giver of breath and breath in the creature. She exhorts them with these words to encourage them in accepting their noble deaths. "I do not know how you came into existence in my womb; it was not I who gave you the breath of life, nor was it I who set in order the elements of which each of you is composed. Therefore, since it is the Creator of the universe who shapes each man's beginning, as he brings about the origin of everything, he, in his mercy, will give you back both breath and life."<sup>13</sup>

To further investigate Middendorf Breathexperience Work, please visit <http://breathexperience.com>. To view a short video of Ilse Middendorf please visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7Ys151xqhg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7Ys151xqhg).

*Author's Note: The use of italics in Ilse's quotations was added by me and was not in her original text. If Ilse's words seem cumbersome it is due to the translation from the original German. This article came about from a lengthy paper I wrote entitled "My Work Philosophy." If anyone is interested in reading this lengthier version where I refer to the influence of Middendorf Breathexperience Work on myself, I would be happy to send you a copy; contact me at [judithmayanja@yahoo.com](mailto:judithmayanja@yahoo.com).*

## Endnotes

1. Personal communication from Juerg Roffler.
2. Middendorf, Ilse, *The Perceptible Breath: A Breathing Science*. Paderborn, West

Germany: Junefermann-Verlag, 1990, (translation by Gudula Floeren and Dieter Eule), pg. 9.

3. Ibid., pg. 10.
4. Ibid., pg. 24.
5. Ibid., pg. 25.
6. Ibid., pg. 26.
7. Ibid., pg. 25.
8. Ibid., pg. 29.

9. Ibid., pg. 33.

10. Ibid., pg. 60.

11. Ibid., pg. 60.

12. Middendorf, Ilse and Juerg Roffler, "The Breathing Self: The Experience of Breath as an Art to Healing Yourself." The Middendorf Institute for Breathexperience of San Francisco, December 1994.

13. 2 Maccabees, 7: 22-23.

# The Breath That Breathes Us

By Carol A. Agneessens, M.S., Certified Advanced Rolfer,<sup>TM</sup>  
Rolf Movement® Instructor

*Listen – Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?<sup>1</sup>*

Mary Oliver

Breathing: life's most vital function. Countless writings and techniques, from ancient Sanskrit texts and yogic practices to innovative holistic therapies and medical interventions are devoted to the cultivation, understanding, and repair of respiratory physiology. Every physical, psychological, and emotional problem is to some degree connected to a lack of oxygen and the interruption of full breathing cycles. Yet how many individuals pay attention to their personal respiratory habits? Or notice how respiratory health affects the depth and fullness of their breath and life? What happens to the breathing cycle when stressful events occur?

Too often breathing is taken for granted. Mistakenly, we assume that this function will always be working. Developing a kinesthetic awareness of breath broadens and expands our conscious participation in living. To breathe is to live, and respiratory freedom is a measure of life's potency. Maternal waves of breath transport the growing embryo from its miniscule genesis at fertilization through the birthing process. The first inhalation ignites a continuum of breaths; the last exhalation dissolves individuality into "the eternal mystery" at life's end.

At one time or another, you've probably experienced the sudden and shocking realization that you've been holding your breath during a stressful encounter, high-action thriller, or while waiting or anticipating news. Once you feel you

haven't been breathing, do you ravenously grab for oxygen? How many reminders have decorated your desktop, refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or the dashboard of your car reminding you to "breathe"? Recall the clients who describe their breathing as shallow or those who experience limited sensory awareness of the movement of their diaphragm and rib cage. With patience and guided kinesthetic directives, they may quickly begin experiencing greater excursion of their ribs and the impact that easier and fuller breathing effects in their lives. Through anatomical illustrations and directed touch, practitioners ignite a clients' felt sense of the expanding dimensions of their thorax, the depth and reach of their lungs, and the ease beneath their exhalation. We may work with athletes or singers whose beliefs about "how to breathe" actually complicate their quest for a fuller inhalation and passive exhalation. Or perhaps it is the child, teenager, or adult whose nervous system and breathing patterns carry the fight/flight/freeze imprint of birth trauma or the hypervigilant attitude of an early home environment lacking predictability and safety.

The respiratory control center within the brain stem demands oxygen, and respiration is triggered. However, bracing, slumping, accidents, injury, faulty education, or longstanding beliefs can undermine the ongoing and involuntary nature of breathing. As a longtime swimmer, I used to think that getting to the end of a