

# HOLOTROPIC BREATHWORK

A New Approach to  
Self-Exploration and Therapy

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Foreword by Jack Kornfield



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It is interesting to see how therapy using holotropic states of consciousness can help us to avoid the dilemmas inherent in this situation. The alternative that this work brings actually confirms some ideas about the therapeutic process first outlined by C. G. Jung. According to Jung, it is impossible to achieve intellectual understanding of the psyche and derive from it a technique that we can use in psychotherapy. As he saw it in his later years, the psyche is not a product of the brain and is not contained in the skull; it is the creative and generative principle of the cosmos (*anima mundi*). It permeates all of existence and the individual psyche of each of us is teased out of this unfathomable cosmic matrix. The intellect is a partial function of the psyche that can help us orient ourselves in everyday situations. However, it is not in a position to understand and manipulate the psyche.

There is a wonderful passage in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*: "There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky; that is the interior of the soul." Jung was aware of the fact that the psyche is a profound mystery and approached it with great respect. It was clear to him that the psyche is infinitely creative and can not be described by a set of formulas that can then be used to correct the psychological processes of the clients. He suggested an alternative strategy for therapy that was significantly different from using intellectual constructs and external interventions.

What a psychotherapist can do, according to Jung, is to create a supportive environment, in which psychospiritual transformation can occur; this container can be compared to the hermetic vessel that makes alchemical processes possible. The next step then is to offer a method that mediates contact between the conscious ego and a higher aspect of the client, the Self. One of Jung's tools for this purpose was active imagination, continuation of a dream in the analyst's office (Jung 1961; Franz 1997). The communication between the ego and the Self occurs primarily by means of symbolic language. In this kind of work, healing is not the result of brilliant insights and interpretations of the therapist; the therapeutic process is guided from within by the Self.

In Jung's understanding, the Self is the central archetype in the collective unconscious and its function is to lead the individual toward order, organization, and unity. Jung referred to this movement toward highest unity as the individuation process. The use of holotropic states for therapy and self-exploration essentially confirms Jung's perspective and follows the same strategy. The facilitators create a protective and supportive environment and help the clients enter a holotropic state. Once that occurs, the healing process is guided from within by the clients' own inner healing intelligence and the task of the facilitators is to support what is happening.

This process automatically activates unconscious material, which has strong emotional charge and is available for processing on the day of the session. This saves the facilitators the hopeless task of sorting out what is "relevant" and what is not that plagues verbal therapies. They simply support whatever is spontaneously emerging and manifesting from moment to moment, trusting that the process is guided by intelligence that surpasses the intellectual understanding that can be obtained by professional training in any of the schools of psychotherapy.

#### 6. The role of spirituality in human life

The leading philosophy of Western science has been monistic materialism. Various scientific disciplines have described the history of the universe as the history of developing matter and accept as real only what can be measured and weighed. Life, consciousness, and intelligence are seen as more or less accidental by-products of material processes. Physicists, biologists, and chemists recognize the existence of dimensions of reality that are not accessible to our senses, but only those that are physical in nature and can be revealed and explored with the use of various extensions of our senses, such as microscopes, telescopes, and specially designed recording devices.

In a universe understood this way, there is no place for spirituality of any kind. The existence of God, the idea that there are invisible dimensions of reality inhabited by nonmaterial beings, the possibility of survival of consciousness after death, and the concepts of reincarnation and karma have been relegated to fairy tales and handbooks of psychiatry. From a psychiatric perspective to take such things seriously means to be ignorant, unfamiliar with the discoveries of science, superstitious, and subject to primitive magical thinking. If the belief in God or Goddess occurs in intelligent persons, it is seen as an indication that they have not come to terms with infantile images of their parents; as omnipotent beings they had created in their infancy and childhood. And direct experiences of spiritual realities are considered manifestations of serious mental diseases—psychoses.

The study of holotropic states has thrown new light on the problem of spirituality and religion. The key to this new understanding is the discovery that in these states it is possible to encounter a rich array of experiences that are very similar to those that inspired the great religions of the world—visions of God and various divine and demonic beings, encounters with discarnate entities, episodes of psychospiritual death and rebirth, visits to Heaven and Hell, past life experiences, and many others. Modern research has shown beyond any doubt that these experiences are not products of pathological processes afflicting the brain, but manifestations of archetypal material from