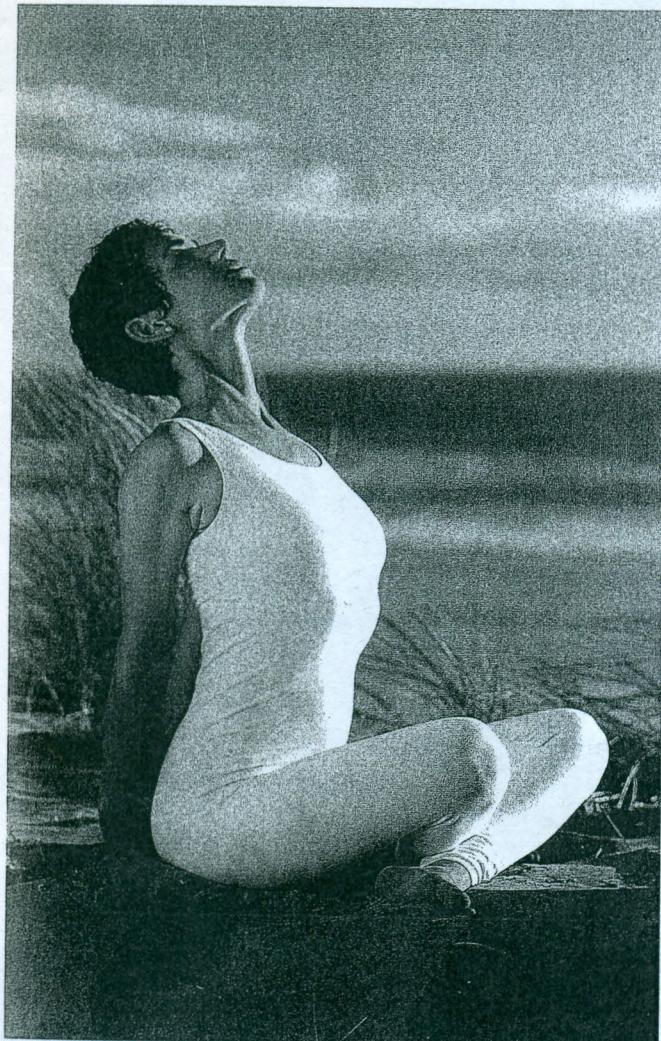


~ *The* ~

BREATHING BOOK



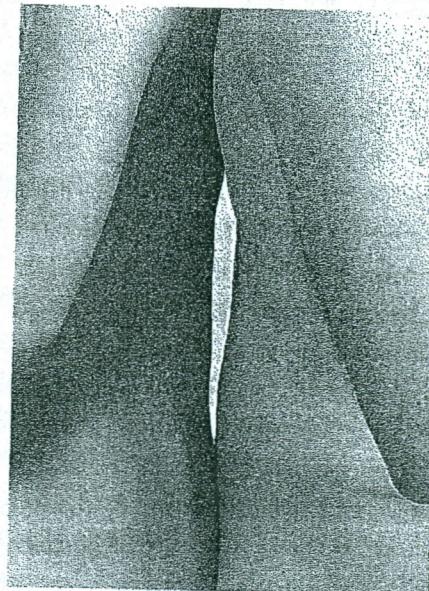
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*Good Health
and Vitality
Through
Essential
Breath Work*

A practical guide to improving concentration, deepening relaxation, and much more

DONNA FARHI

VII

The Shared Breath: Inquiries for Couples



*A man and a woman sit near each other;
as they breathe they feed someone we do not know,
someone we know of, whom we have never seen.*

—ROBERT BLY

*A*s we learn to listen to our breathing we develop greater skill in knowing who we are and what we feel at any given time. We can learn to use the breath as a Geiger counter to sense, locate, and define our experience. The clarity that this information provides allows us as individuals to reconcile what we feel and what we do. It helps us match our words and actions to our values and beliefs. And in relationships we can only communicate with precision if we know what our own feelings, needs, and desires are. This clarity allows us to be honest and loving with one another. Lacking this, our relationships can become a quagmire of confusion and misunderstanding.

To know what we are feeling and what is important to us, we must inhabit the body. We feel the body through the medium of the breath. In the previous inquiries you may have started to make correlations between sensations in your body and your emotional states. When you are angry, sad, afraid, or joyful, you feel certain sensations in your body. You open (or close off) to the information of these sensations by either allowing your breath to move through your body or by holding your breath. When you keep your breath moving you open a vast "body dictionary" of information that is infinitely more accurate and reliable than your ideas and preconceptions. When you are not sure about something you can check your perceptions in this internal body dictionary. For instance, you may be able to recognize how a combination of sensations, tensions, and breathing changes equals "I'm exhausted" or "I don't trust that person!" or "I

feel confused." The more adept you get at comprehending these perceptions the easier it will be to place yourself on a solid ground and engage in an accurate and clear understanding—both with yourself and with others.

At times trusting and following our body-based perceptions can be difficult, as the messages we hear from our bodies may conflict with our preconceptions about the way our life should proceed. These body-based perceptions may also be in conflict with the ideas that other people have about what is right for us, from the job that we hold to whether we should have a child. The good news is that the body doesn't lie. The good bad news is that the onus now falls on you to listen and act from these body-based perceptions. The better you become at doing this for yourself, the more proficient you will become at knowing what you want and communicating that to your partner. You'll also become more skillful at reading your partner's body language.

The wonderful thing about working with body-based perceptions is that you are working with a palpable form. In a relationship one can often become entangled in an endless struggle to gauge and decipher feelings, emotions, and motives. It is far easier to work at the tangible level of the body than to alter emotions, attitudes, or intransigent opinions. When one opens the body to greater fluidity other aspects of the psyche follow suit.

In group classes I often have the opportunity to observe the way couples embody their "issues." As their somatic experience changes, the relationship inevitably undergoes dramatic changes. Chris and Patty began coming to yoga classes at the beginning of their relationship. What was most striking to me about Chris was his inability to relax his body during exhalation. He would breathe out but keep his muscles tense and rigid. As I got to know the couple I discovered Chris was a lawyer who worked long hours. He had a big, expensive home but had little time to enjoy it—an irony he was perceptive enough to recognize. He also seemed to be very reluctant to make any commitment to Patty, and would withhold expressing feelings for her. He was a forceful and opinionated person, which, I imagined, might not make him easy to be around. In short, he was a person for whom life was one long inhalation. One day, after trying a new breathing technique he finally understood what it meant to let his entire body exhale. Not long after this he confided that he was giving up his expensive home so he wouldn't have to work such long hours and he had decided to make a commitment to his relationship.

This chapter is about learning to use your breath as a way to connect with

your own body-based wisdom. It is also about learning to connect with your partner in a more embodied way. Most of the inquiries that follow are designed to be done with a partner. Working with another person can help you to develop the very same quality of attention you need to give yourself. I have noticed in the seminars I lead that when people are partnered up to do an exercise they are more attentive than if they did the exercise by themselves. The beauty of a relationship is that as you learn to listen to another person, you are developing the skills to listen to yourself. As you notice changes in your own body movement and breathing quality you become more adept at distinguishing these things in others. You are then working together to heighten your sensory awareness in a way that will help create and sustain a healthy relationship.

≈ INQUIRY ≈

Mapping Body-Based Sensations

In the next week make special note of the body-based sensations you experience when you have particular feelings. When you notice yourself feeling a certain way, take a moment to breathe fully and to use your breath to locate and define your experience. In particular, notice the body-based sensations you experience when you are in dialogue with your partner. For instance, when I get angry at my partner I tend to contract into a frozen breathing pattern that acts as a fortress between myself and my partner. When I have the courage to soften and open my breathing, I notice that my partner is more willing to listen to me. How do you experience your breathing when there is conflict or ease between you? Are you comfortable enough to tell the truth to each other based on your somatic perceptions?

Fostering Intimacy: Touching from the Inner Body

When we touch each other in a relationship we often touch with our physical bodies but we do not touch each other from the feeling part of ourselves. It is not unusual for people to feel, even during the very intimate contact of sexual intercourse, that they remain untouched and disconnected from their lover. This

superficial way of relating is hard to quantify in words, and no doubt has been the subject of endless futile and painful discussions that give neither partner much help. What can be quantified is the level at which we engage with one another physically and how that translates to a quality of intimacy or a sense of alienation. It is possible to touch only with your outer body, and here I mean quite literally your skin, muscle, and bone, and to withhold from your inner body—the soft organs, the blood, the circulating fluids, and the breath that moves through all of these substances. Although the idea of superficial and deep layers of the body corresponding to levels of connection may sound simplistic, I can assure you that working with the tangible body is far more likely to bring you and your partner a sense of deepening intimacy than endless discussions of subjective emotions. Take a moment to try the following simple exercise to experience for yourself just what I mean.

~ INQUIRY ~

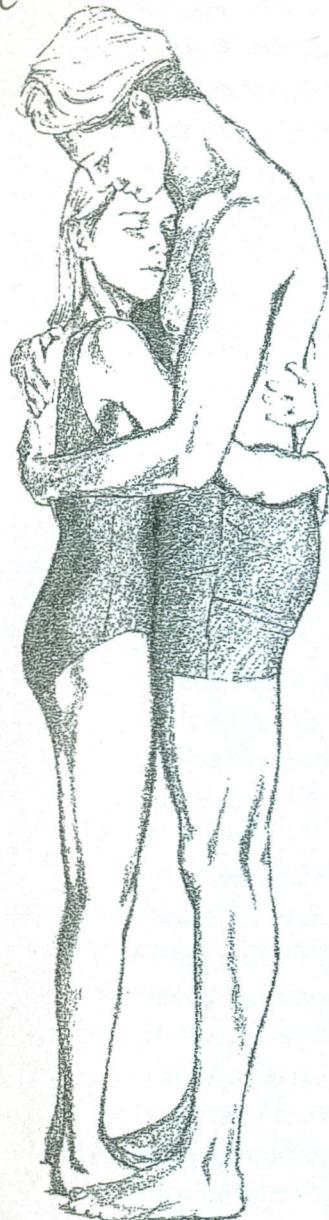
The Inner Body Embrace

This is one of my favorite exercises to do with couples in a group. Once you've tried this it will leave no doubt in your mind about the quality of touch and connection that you would want from a loved one. Because we're talking about particular structures rather than nebulous ideas it also becomes much easier to communicate what you need from your partner.

Stand apart with your eyes closed and take a moment to feel the outer layer of your bodies: your skin, your muscles, and your bones. Feel how this outer layer gives you both containment and separation from everything in your environment. As you hug your partner, embrace him with these superficial layers. Feel your own body as well as the other person's body. Notice where you touch and where you don't. Feel the other person's skin, muscles, and skeleton. When you hug let only this external layer of yourself come into contact with your partner. It's quite likely that your bellies won't even touch and that you move your hips back, away from the other person. Also notice the quality of your breathing. Now stand apart and take a moment for your perceptions to come through.

Now sense into the soft inner organs in your body. Your beating heart, the

*visualize
be helpful can
be*

32. *Inner body embrace*

lungs inflating and deflating, your stomach and your guts and your sex organs. Feel your breath moving through the soft contents in your body—expanding from the core to the skin. Now embrace your partner from these deeper structures. Feel the inner contents of your body making contact with your lover. Feel your breath making contact with her body. Notice how much more of your body makes contact with the other person (Illustration 32). Also see if you can feel where your partner yields to you, where you open and surrender to her, and where you hold back. Did this embrace feel more intimate or more satisfying? What did you feel your partner was communicating to you through her body?

The next time you hug someone notice how much of yourself you make accessible. How much do you soften your boundaries, and how much do people extend this openness to you? It is not always appropriate to give such intimate embraces, but by learning to distinguish the level at which you are engaging you will be more aware of appropriate boundaries for the given situation.

The Movement of Love

Love-making reduced to its basic components is the undulating breath. It is the ebb and flow of a primal wave movement. The source of this rhythm lies in the swelling and receding motions of the pelvis and the abdomen as they open to the incoming breath and draw inward on the outgoing breath. Allowing the root source of the breath in the lower body to move freely generates a wave that can travel both up and down the body. As this happens we also allow pleasurable, but not necessarily sexual, sensations to arise uninhibited. You may want to review the inquiries in chapter 2 that focus on the movement of the abdomen, pelvic floor, pelvis, and sacrum (also see Illustrations 1 and 2).

Just as breathing is a global body experience, love-making is a whole-bodied experience—a “polymorphous sensuous-

ness," as psychologist Michael Washburn describes in his book *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground*, in which the capacity for aliveness and pleasure permeates each and every cell of the body. In a culture as genetically fixated as ours, large expanses of the body are designated irrelevant territory and thus ignored. When this localized focus shifts to a more whole-bodied perspective, we can multiply by a hundred our capacity to love and be loved, to feel pleasure and to give pleasure, and to experience ourselves as a whole rather than a part.

Unfortunately, just as most of us have misconceptions about what it means to take "a deep breath" few of us arrive as adults without a bulging bag of ideas and concepts about what it means to love and what it means to have "great sex." Just as the strategies of effort, force, and willpower only sabotage full spontaneous breathing, these same ideas translate in the sexual arena to aggressive, exaggerated, and mechanical gestures that serve only to deaden the senses. Just as we are taught to breathe deeply in self-defeating and energetically wasteful ways, the caricaturist love-making styles modeled to us through advertising, books, and film inculcate their own message. "Good sex" in the mind of the collective culture translates to aggressively pneumatic, thrust till you bust, Harold Robbins robotic athletics. We are taught to strive in the sexual arena only to discover that while we can mimic we cannot derive meaning.

It is the predilection of our work-ethic culture to believe that we must make and manipulate all things in our lives, including the desire for and act of sex. We may feel compelled to live up to a routine of sexual activity that does not honor our deeper rhythms. This natural cycle, where sexual desire waxes and wanes like the cycle of the moon, allows us necessary periods of solitude, self-reflection, and regeneration, without which deep connection with another is impossible. When we impose the pressure of schedule and performance on ourselves we interfere with the natural generation of our inner desires and do not allow our-

As soon as the fire and water come together, the whole lodge is filled with white, hot steam—Tunkashila's Breath. . . . Grandfather's White Breath unites us, makes us one. It fills every vein, every cell in our body, and every cranny of our little hut.

That breath, that hot steam, is recycled. It might have been inhaled and exhaled by a dinosaur, a plant, a mouse, or a famous chief of yore. It might be the breath of a dead grandparent of yours. Because of this breath, those who have come into the lodge as enemies will leave as friends."

—ARCHIE FIRE LAME DEER

selves the time and ease of letting the wave of desire develop on its own. In her book *Mindful Spontaneity* author Ruthy Alon describes the way effort can stifle rather than stimulate love-making:

Both men and women recognize the paradox that directly investing more effort, more ambitious motions, and placing more demands on the sexually located movement does not guarantee greater arousal. Perhaps even to the contrary, this effort undermines it. If you express your desire to encourage Nature by making every possible effort, then the flowing wave doesn't have a chance to endure . . . with a mentality that believes in the most and the strongest, people are driven to use the language of ever-increasing force. At the critical moment, when their involuntary system doesn't support their sexual intentions, they deal with it by investing more physical effort, more tension, more rigidity; and here lies the trap. The greater the effort in all other parts of the body, the more blocked will be the fragile wave of sex . . . you think you are stepping on the gas, but actually you are hitting the brakes.¹

The moment opens, in it are contained like tiny seeds a million more divisions.

—WILLIAM KOTZWINKLE

The inquiries that follow are designed to help you explore the ways you can use your breath to enhance feelings of intimacy, raise your pleasure levels, and improve communication in your relationship.

Before You Begin

These inquiries are simple things that you can do with your partner to increase your sensitivity to each other and to open into a greater sense of pleasure in each other's company. It is best not to enter into these inquiries with a specific expectation, such as getting sexually charged, because such an agenda will make it virtually impossible to open to the myriad other ways you can be together. For many of us, sexual interaction takes the form of a mechanical progression from A to B to C, with predictable signals leading to a rote conclusion. What might happen if we didn't know where A led to? What might happen if instead of relating on this mechanical level we let ourselves embrace each moment with no set agenda? What if, as we pause and feel our breathing soften, we followed the nat-

ural flow and let ourselves melt into sleep together instead of feeling pressured to perform our predetermined ritual? Or might it lead us into a very quiet and deep sexual connection that allows us to regenerate, or into a wildness that we had not experienced before? The less investment you have in a specific outcome the more you can engage with one another in a new and renewing way.

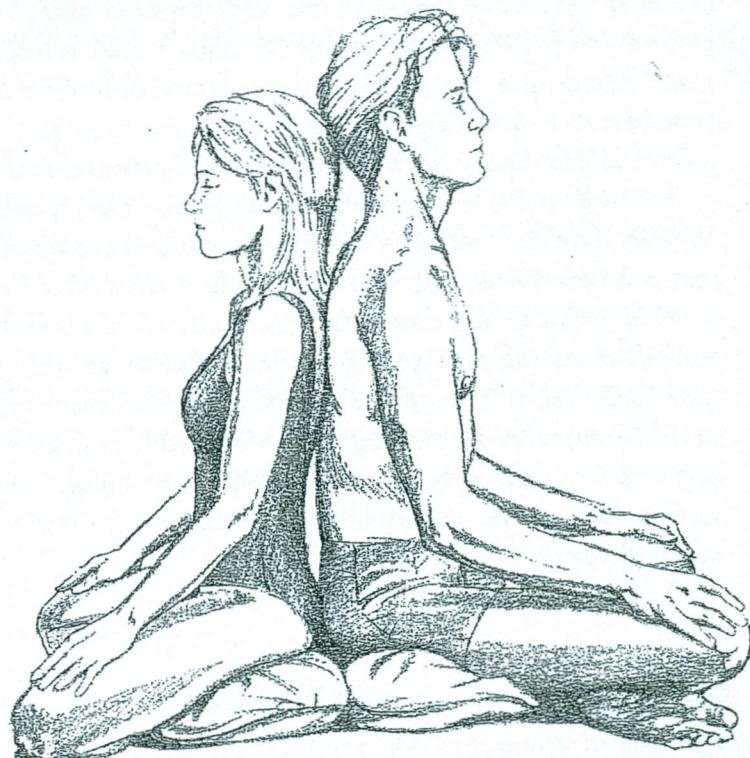
It is quite possible that sexual sensations may arise spontaneously during some of these inquiries, and they are to be neither encouraged or discouraged. You may want to have an agreement with your partner before you do the inquiries as to what feels safe and comfortable for both of you. Read through this chapter and put an asterisk on inquiries that you'd like to try with your partner, and have him do the same. Then make your surroundings special in some way—flowers in the room, a candle burning, the room freshly cleaned and tidy. You may feel silly at first giving such conscious attention to things that you may already do casually, but it is the quality of your attention that can bring about the alchemy of transformation between you.

~ INQUIRY ~

*The Shared Breath:
Back to Back Breathing*

transformer tout
sa (b)reath
& aussi à des
rituels!

(Sit back to back with your partner. Raise your buttocks with a cushion or pillow until your knees are slightly lower than your hips. Take a few moments to find a position in which you feel supported by your partner's back rather than feeling that your partner is pushing you forward. Begin by sensing your own breath, noticing your breathing pattern and rhythm. Then gradually shift your awareness to your partner's breathing. Slowly begin to synchronize your breathing so that you are breathing with your partner. This will take the full concentration of both people. Each of you will be making compromises and shifting your own breathing patterns to create a "shared" breath. As you breathe, open into the warmth of your partner's back against yours and the pleasure of breathing in unison. After about 5 minutes go back to breathing in your own rhythm. Now turn around and face each other with your knees almost touching. Take a moment to look each other in the eyes and to notice your unique breathing rhythm.



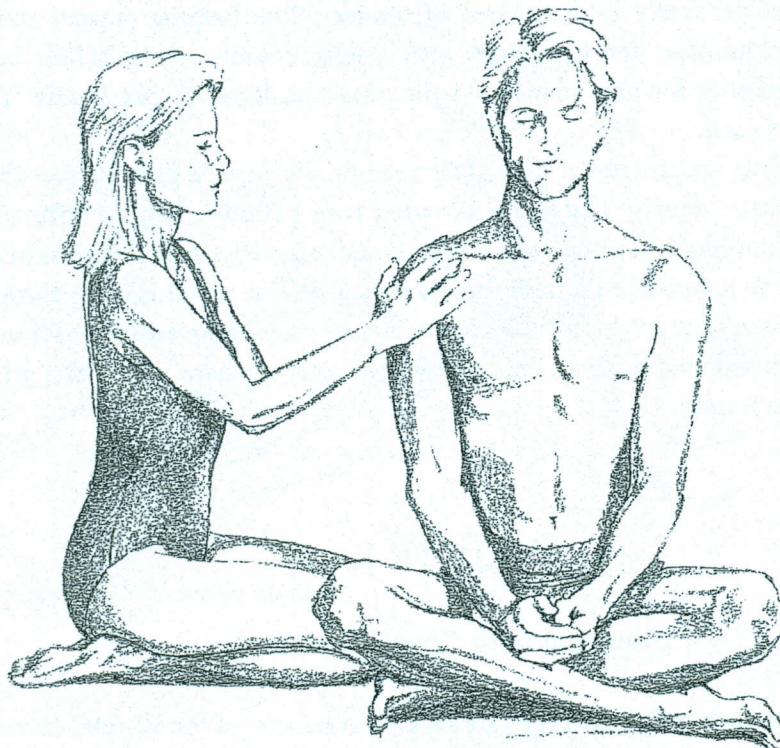
33. Back to back breathing

~ INQUIRY ~

The Gift of Presence

When we hurt, whether physically or emotionally, we want the kind presence of another to bear witness. We do not want explanations, advice, or trite platitudes, but a loving, compassionate attention. This attention lets us know that we are accepted even when we are not feeling bright and positive. Bearing witness to our own pain or providing a loving presence for another serves as an ongoing lesson that as human beings we come as a package of strengths and weaknesses, of positive and negative attributes.

This is an exercise that I often do to relax at the end of a class. After a few minutes of resting in a supine position I ask every person to scan their bodies and



34. *The gift of presence*

find a place that refuses to relax. Everyone has these persistent spots of tension and holding that resist stretching, massage, and all other strategies. These are places where we don't breathe and where we store our greatest hurts and fears. Because of this we need to treat them with compassion and respect. After you and your partner have relaxed for a few minutes sit up and tell each other where you feel the most tension in your body. It might be a spot on your back, a sore hip or knee, or an ache behind your eyes. The next part is simple. You should now lie down again or sit in any position that is most comfortable. Your partner should simply place her hands on and around the area where you feel pain and tension. Her hands should be still and simply act as a presence (Illustration 34). It is not necessary to massage or manipulate. With her hands resting lightly on you, let your breathing move gently into the area. And ask yourself this question: Is there anything that I can *stop doing* in order to feel more breath flow into this part of me? See how much you can disengage from the action of holding. Feel your skin soften and the muscles loosen their grip on your bones. Feel your blood

begin to circulate freely into the area of tension. The helping partner should begin to synchronize her breathing with yours, consciously exhaling more deeply and sensing for any changes in the tissue underneath her hands. Take 5–10 minutes each.

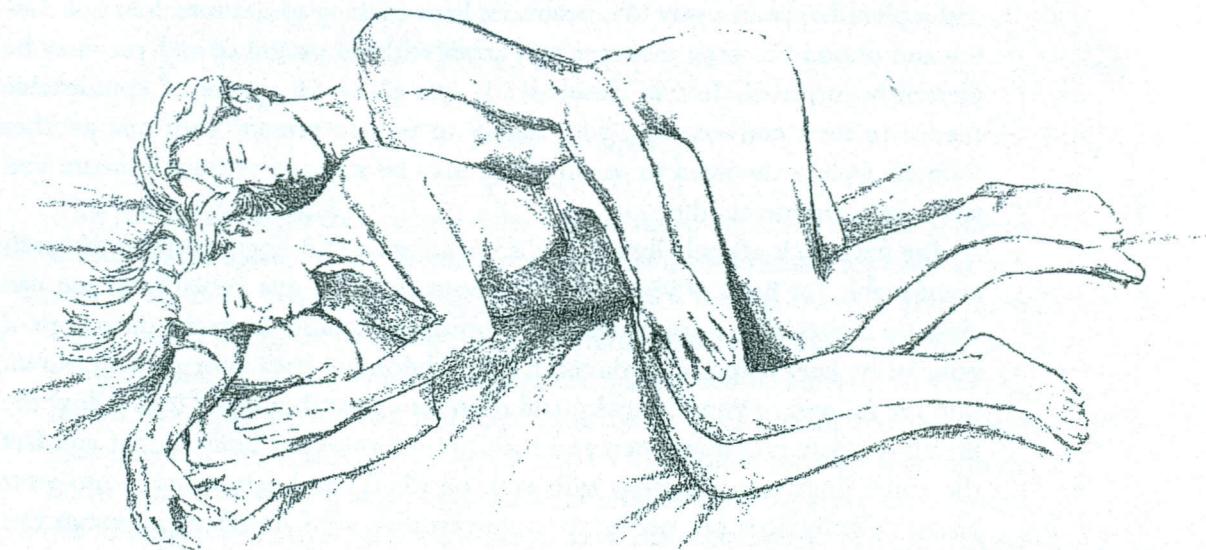
Many people are amazed at how such a seemingly passive exercise can allow them to release so deeply. The key is allowing your partner's help to bring your awareness to this blocked place within you. Frequently, when we feel pain in our bodies we have a truncated consciousness that does not travel into or through that part. Notice how it feels to have your partner's loving presence with you as you enter this vulnerable area. Take a few moments to share your perceptions and then switch roles.

≈ INQUIRY ≈

Speaking with "Breath Words"

Cuddling up against each other belly to back must be one of the all-time favorite pleasures for couples. "Spooning" can be done clothed or unclothed lying in bed or on any soft surface. Lie on your sides with one person curling around the other person's back. Make sure you both have pillows to support your necks. Now sense into the parts of your body that are in contact with your partner. Imagine that you are speaking to your partner with your breath—an intimate conversation that tells him how much you love and care about him. Feel these "breath words" arising from deep within your body and be receptive to hearing the breath words of your partner. Notice what sensations, images, and feelings arise. Allow yourself to move very slowly and gently as the urge takes you, but keep all movement small and smooth. As you relax your outer muscles do you notice more of your breath penetrating through to your skin and "speaking" to your partner? Be completely present with each other and the movement of each breath cycle.

You may want to stay in this position for 10–30 minutes, changing around as you feel the desire. If you are practicing the exercise in the evening, let yourself shift into a comfortable position and drift off to sleep together. If you are exploring the inquiry during the day, how much of this intimate communication can you maintain with each other throughout your daily interactions?



35 Speaking with breath words

~ INQUIRY ~

Belly to Belly Breathing

This inquiry can be done in many different ways and at different levels of intimacy. You can do the exercise completely clothed or naked, lying belly to belly on your sides, or with one partner lying on top of the other, and you can also do this exercise during sexual intercourse. Choose an option that feels comfortable to you. Although you may decide to explore this exercise during sexual intercourse its purpose is not necessarily to become sexually charged or to reach an orgasmic level of excitation. This may happen spontaneously, but you should not feel any pressure to produce a certain result or arrive at a predetermined conclusion. My partner and I often work with this inquiry and find that it works very nicely as a way to promote a very casual afternoon lie down, or to connect after we've been apart for weeks. When we explore the inquiry during sexual intercourse it doesn't always lead us to a highly charged state. However, since we do not have such expectations there is no disappointment if it doesn't happen; in fact, we often find the deep pleasure of quietly being with each other nourishes

and replenishes us in a way that strenuous love-making sometimes does not. Listen and respond to each moment as it arises without prejudice and you may be pleasantly surprised. Just as close friends can allow for spaces of comfortable silence in their conversation, your ability to remain present with one another without feeling the need to do anything may be a gauge of how intimate you truly are with one another.

Lie with each other belly to belly, embracing and finding a position that feels comfortable for both of you. You may want to make eye contact, or you can close your eyes. Once again allow your breathing to arise from the deep core of your belly. Feel it spread throughout your abdomen, into your genitals, down into the fullness of your buttocks, and even into your thighs and legs. Allow the breath to dilate into your chest and back throughout your body so that you feel the entire body move slightly with each breath. Then begin to tune into your partner's body. It is not necessary to synchronize your breathing although this may happen spontaneously. Simply feel each other breathing and the expansion and contraction arising and subsiding as you breathe. If you are inside each other, be still with your body rather than thrusting or rocking. Simply feel your breathing. Notice the swell of the breath as it touches your body and allow whatever sensations and feelings that come on that tide to arise without suppression. Remember, you don't have to do anything with these sensations. You don't have to act on them. I often find that the longer I stay with my partner in this way the closer and more intimate I feel with him. Sometimes, without making any large movements or specifically orienting our attention genitalily, the sheer act of breathing together can build a powerful sexual charge, as if a light were growing brighter and brighter. Again, this is not your goal, but if it happens spontaneously, do certainly enjoy it! By remaining still and continuing to breathe together you may be building a level of intimacy and pleasure that goes far beyond the pneumatic and mechanical sex that so many of us have experienced. Take as much time as you need to conclude the exploration. And remember that resolution doesn't necessarily mean having a mind-shattering orgasm. Each time you engage in this inquiry it may take you to a different place. The less you project your expectations the more potential there will be for something new to happen.

~ INQUIRY ~

The Wave of Breath

This last inquiry is for those of you who would like to explore the wave of breath during sexual intercourse. Choose a position that is comfortable for both of you and be open to changing positions at each other's request. As you enter each other, take a moment to pause in great stillness and rest. Feel each other and allow yourself to relax completely. Enter completely and be entered. As you rest in this moment of potential, feel the oscillation of your breaths and the subtle movement of the breath as your waves meet and rebound through each other's body. Instead of making large, impressive, or ambitious movements, allow yourself to remain receptive, feeling the presence of the other and your own internal sensations. Notice if you find it difficult to trust the process of allowing your sexual energy and connection to build of its own accord without "making it happen," and without manipulating each other's energy. Notice if you feel fear at this moment. Are you worried that you won't have an orgasm? Are you concerned that this sexual energy will dissipate or disappear if you cease to strive with effort?

As you remain in this position let your breath deepen throughout your belly. Spontaneously follow any impulse to move, letting yourself embrace, stroke, and enfold one another. Over time, a wave or charge may begin to form. If this does not happen it is not a sign of failure. You can continue to enjoy the pleasure of being with your partner. It can often take many sessions together before a charge will build. As you feel this, let this wave carry you, making very small, slow movements. As you begin to move slowly within and inside each other, notice how the smaller you make the movements the more you can feel. As you slow down you can feel the magnitude and power of each other.

Whenever you feel like pausing and remaining still, follow your instincts and allow yourself to be suspended in the feeling. These periods of stillness may last a minute or an hour. Let yourself swoon inside the buoyancy of those quiet moments. Let your love-making be an epiphany to the breath, honoring all phases

The seeds stir and tremble
as if the sky moves back and forth
between us, like this, like this

—SHARON GLADDEN

of the breath—the entering, the leaving, and the spacious pauses in between. Let this energy take you wherever it will, finding its own conclusion and resolution. When you have reached a resting place take some time with your partner to share your perceptions, listening to each other with your full attention. Are there elements of this love-making exercise that you might incorporate into other aspects of your relationship?

Knowing oneself and knowing another are two sides of the same coin. Just as the glaze on a piece of unfired pottery does not shine until fired, it is through the intense kiln of relationship that we come to be transformed. Many of our most deeply held fears, insecurities, and negative emotions will only arise and be resolved in the close quarters of a relationship. And many of our most intensely joyful experiences may only come through the alchemy of a relationship. With two psyches, two histories, and two perspectives, a relationship can become infinitely complex and potentially confusing. For this reason, it is crucial that each of you have a self-reflective practice where you can witness your own habit patterns, feelings, and sensations. This may take the form of a daily walk, a formal meditation session, or a nightly journal writing ritual, but it can also be a moment to moment conscious awareness of the breath. Each breath enters us, becomes a part of us for a moment and then is cast back into the world. For that moment we have a chance to know both who we are as an individual and who we are as the integral part of a greater shared breath.

Practice Guides

*N*ow that you have a repertoire of movements, inquiries, and breathing explorations you may want to incorporate them into some kind of daily “feel good” practice. This section is about taking the alphabet of what you’ve learned and making stories that work for your body and your specific needs. Generally, a breath work practice should consist of movements that open the body and stimulate your breathing followed by deep relaxation and a breathing inquiry of your choice. You can choose from the many movements you learned in chapter 5 as well as the breathing inquiries in chapter 6 to design a program that meets your needs. Don’t feel compelled to stick to a formal practice structure; use the exercises creatively.

If you don’t feel confident putting together your own program, you can try the suggested “Feel Good” programs below. They take about 30 minutes each. Once you’ve learned Programs A, B, and C you can alternate them throughout the week, or you can focus on one program for weeks or even months at a time. If you haven’t the time to do an entire program in one session, consider dividing the program into a morning and evening session. Or you may want to focus on the practice sessions designed for retraining specific breath holding patterns. Although having a formal practice can be important for establishing and sustaining your sense of well-being and vitality, don’t ignore the “rest” of the day, which can offer an opportunity to integrate what you have learned about breathing. In this way, all of life can become a practice of growing awareness.