

NEW PARADIGMS FOR STANDARDS IN BREATHWORK

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For the last four years there has been a dialogue amongst breathwork schools about the merits of joining together to promote standards in breathwork training and practice. Is such an alliance useful or even possible in as diverse a field as breathwork?

I believe for it to be useful, new paradigms are needed which are appropriate to a technique which works directly with altered states of consciousness and a holistic model of client/practitioner interaction and organizational interactions. Since 1999, after working on a survey of breathwork schools regarding breathwork training standards for the International Breathwork Foundation (henceforth IBF), I have actively pursued this dialogue. In this article I will present the foundation for a new paradigm, the rationale for and progress towards this alliance.

Many schools have already expressed interest and are ready to begin implementation of cross-country and cross-program supportive relationships. For others this may not be timely. We are at a defining point in the evolution of the breathwork movement. The active dialogue started at the Seventh Annual Global Inspiration Conference (henceforth GIC) in Italy (July, 2000) regarding the formation of an International Breathwork Certification Alliance. There were thirty breathwork trainers and practitioners from around the world who participated in a presentation by myself on this initiative. Most wanted to take part in the ensuing efforts to formalize this organization.

NEED STATEMENT

Over the past 25 years there has been an explosion in the blending of ancient breathing techniques for health and spiritual awareness with contemporary growth and therapeutic practices. The result has been the evolution of powerful and incisive healing and consciousness changing modalities. This has given birth to the field of breathwork which has promoted significant advances in medical, psychological and spiritual domains. This is witnessed by the breadth of contributions to the field's peer review journal, *The Healing Breath: A Journal of Breathwork Practice, Psychology and Spirituality*.

In the proliferation of techniques, there is great benefit to nurturing alignment amongst schools with a common philosophy and regard for quality in training and practice. When such an alignment can be honored and brought forth with a common purpose, the ensuing interchange and dialogue can strengthen all parties. This takes the courage to step beyond the fears of losing the integrity of what one has in isolation in order to join with others to incorporate a greater good. I believe the time is ripe for this to happen on a global scale - a bigger breath.

An alliance of breathwork schools can inspire the upholding of mutual standards for trainers, practitioners and students alike. Such an alliance communicates a clear statement to the public about breathwork as a valid, accessible and professional tool for healing and growth particularly suited to this point in our world evolution. This also highlights the attractiveness to prospective trainees who seek the professionalism of recognized training programs based on a

holistic paradigm.

This alliance also increases the possibility that breathwork students in the future might continue their education in various schools. This could eventually lead to interchangeable training modules similar to the transfer of credits between universities with common educational standards.

NEW PARADIGM

Mutual recognition of one another's certification process is critical if breathwork schools and programs are to advance beyond feudal competitiveness.

Certification has in human history occasionally been negatively associated with policing and control and therefore has created an aura of the defensive, exclusive and punitive. This has been founded on a consensus reality of "right vs wrong" and a system for enforcing the preservation of this reality. Consequently this kind of certification has not promoted creativity or exploration for fear of censure.

Breathwork by its very nature induces altered states of consciousness and its successful practice requires blend of the intuitive and the scientific. It also is avowedly spiritual and cannot be contained by fear-based interpretations of its limits.

Clearly a new paradigm for certification is needed if it is not to become another repressive tool for control. Like any tool, however, it must be recognized that it is only as good and useful as the loving intentions of those who participate in its creation and implementation.

Models of breathwork certification, I believe, will incorporate these kinds of tenants if they are to be mutually respected among schools and programs:

- 1) integrity in practice starts with an inner commitment to use breathwork in one's highest service to self and others,
- 2) certification is ultimately an agreement between practitioners and the Spirit of Breath which is an evolving form of sharing values and standards amongst themselves and with the world,
- 3) training standards are guidelines as to which forms breathworkers currently know best help students develop their awareness and skills in linking the physical breath with spiritual purpose in themselves and others,
- 4) participation in certification is a commitment to honoring the Spirit of Breath and one's growth in awareness of the spirit in all,
- 5) all certification is essentially self-credentialing - a voluntary dedication to a growing self knowledge of who one is, why one is here and how breathwork serves one's deepening awareness of both while helping open the door for others to do the same for themselves,
- 6) a professional breathworker accepts that this dedication is the highest intention as a breathworker and supersedes other motives and commits oneself and one's work to holding this priority,

- 7) a professional breathworker invites honest feedback from colleagues concerning how one lives this priority in serving themselves and others,
- 8) a professional breathworker renews certification and engages in continuing education as a periodic re-opting for this standard,
- 9) certification is not meant to be exclusive or restrictive or comprehensive, but supportive and suggestive in using the highest united intention of the collective consciousness of a dedicated planetary breathwork community,
- 10) breathwork involves non-ordinary states of consciousness and requires a high level of personal integrity in its use and respect for the sacredness of the client's process.

TRAINING FACTORS IN BREATHWORK CERTIFICATION

Movement towards schools and programs mutually acknowledging each others' certification of breathworkers will be enhanced if common factors in training are recognized and agreed upon.

Since heading a committee several years back for the International Breathwork Foundation to survey existing schools of breathwork about their training requirements, I have noted a wide variety of standards. I think this because there is a diversity of factors that go into the training of a breathworker and divergent attempts to address or not address them as the part of training school.

The four broad categories of factors that stand out for me in the training of professional breathworkers are:

1. Skill acquisition.

Theory and practice of techniques in the healing arts and in breathwork in particular are needed. I believe we can come to some consensus on areas of theoretical content and type of supervised practice that are needed to qualify for different levels of Certification. We offer those areas that came out of our IBF surveys and have solicited other areas from additional schools. This might be put these in terms of competency based learning which is most easily communicated to the world of professional education at present. This means dividing skill training into modules that have objective outcome criteria e.g. by the end of this course a student will be able to: a) name types of current breathwork b) identify common inhibited breathing patterns, etc. We do not have to agree on all content. One school might teach three blocked breathing patterns and another might teach six, but this style of communicating our content is quite useful in demonstrating credibility.

2. Integrated holistic perspective.

Since breathwork is by its nature a mind/body/spirit oriented practice, one who teaches, models and uses it as a healing art, does so most effectively if she or he has incorporated holistic principles into their lives. I have conducted research in the area of consciousness over the past thirty

years and know that this is not just a subjective science. There are quantifiable differences in practitioners' values and behavior (Gunnel Minett (ed.) *The Spirit of Breathwork: Lectures from Global Inspiration 1949-1999*, pp. 319-333. UK: International Breathwork Foundation). However, we have few objective techniques with which to measure this at present. This is complicated by the fact that we do not grow in all areas of our psyche at once. A breathworker may demonstrate competence with one type of client, but have great difficulty with others or revert to less healthy patterns themselves under certain kinds of stress. This is why many trainers prefer to work with students over a long period of time and in a variety of situations. Some trainers like myself have schools that teach personal growth and leadership besides breathwork skills. We often feel more confident in students who have done both under our supervision. Herein lies a challenge. How confident must I as a trainer be on the student's integration of a holistic perspective before I think they are qualified to handle clients on their own? And secondly, must I be the one who has trained them in these values?

I have had some students go through my three year School of Spiritual Psychology and receive breathwork training in whom I do not have as much confidence as a breathworker as others who have just taken several breathwork courses, either from myself or others. This is because there are many who have already integrated a holistic perspective in their life and simply needed to learn breathwork skills. They might well have already been quite competent in other holistic healing arts before they started with breathwork. I cannot get attached to their needing my personal growth training, but I must be assured they have enough integration to practice holistically before I can endorse them. Trainers vary here from trusting God to handle whatever goes on beyond one week of breathwork training to needing trainees under their personal supervision for four years.

This I see as the biggest challenge to a Breathwork Alliance. Clarity is needed on what we are certifying. I believe both skill acquisition and an integrated holistic perspective are necessary, but trainer's diverge in their emphasis on how much of each. Old paradigms of certification or credentialing require uniform standards as measured by training hours and objective tests to insure quality. This then would have to be backed up by a judicial branch or ethics committee to adjudicate who was violating the spirit of the law and impose sanctions or removal from certification.

A new paradigm would allow for individual schools' certification with a range of standards agreed upon to open the door for working trusting relationships and a responsible message to the public about practitioners' training and values.

3. Personal and Social Responsibility.

The third factor I see important for a breathworker is responsibility to themselves and their community. This usually comes under the heading of ethics. In a holistic model, ethics is more than protecting the rights of others. It involves self-care as a commitment. I cannot truly serve others if I am not caring for my own body, mind and spirit. That is why on the proposed ethical Standards Agreement (Appendix B), breathwork practitioners must make a commitment to self care. In addition continuing education is a requirement for continued professional as well as personal growth. This is a new model of professionalism and must include training in conventional

ethics and professional practice as well as the holistic perspective. This also involves an agreement to giving responsible feedback to fellow practitioners and receiving it from them.

4. Commitment to Breathwork Practice.

A student may have all of the first three factors, but still not be really called or committed to what it takes to be a successful breathwork practitioner. Schools requiring updated Attestation Forms and Continuing Education will help to make it clear to the practitioner as well as the public who is committed to practice and growth in their profession.

APPENDIX A

Preliminary Purpose Statement International Breathwork Training Alliance

The IBTA is an international association of breathwork schools, trainers, practitioners and trainees who agree to uphold common standards and ethics in the practice of breathwork. The purpose of the IBTA is to promote integrity and peer review among breathworkers to help define their scope of practice, self-monitor the quality of their work and communicate their commitment to the public to provide service based on mutually accepted principles.

Definition: Breathwork is the art and science of teaching the use of breathing techniques for healing, maintenance and improvement of the human physical, mental emotional and spiritual condition.

APPENDIX B

Sample Ethics Form

International Breathwork Certification Alliance

Ethical Standards Agreement

Given that an ethical code is essentially an agreement in good faith between a professional and the public she/he serves, I, _____, as a professional breathworker do endorse the following standards and pledge to practice in adherence to them. At any time I am not in compliance with them I agree to voluntarily withdraw from professional practice and to return and rescind my Practitioner certificate from the school in which I have been certified.

I agree to:

- Practice within my scope of training, to make this clear to my prospective clients and to not make claims for my service that can not be substantiated or to guarantee results,
- Establish clear contracts with my clients regarding the number and duration of sessions and financial terms,
- Refer clients to appropriate resources when they present issues beyond my scope of training or when my service would present a detriment to their health or well being,
- Maintain clear practitioner/client boundaries, eliminating any exploitative relationships, and respecting the rights and dignity of those that I serve, as well as protecting their confidentiality within local legal regulations and other professional codes to which I have pledged,
- Seek consultation if issues arise that jeopardize the welfare of my client that I cannot resolve with them in a reasonable period,
- Give constructive feedback to other certified practitioners who we believe have failed to keep one of these agreements,
- Continue to develop personally, practicing the techniques that I offer to others, pursuing self examination and peer feedback and/or supervision,
- Enrich myself professionally through continued education, while maintaining reverence for my calling and keeping a balance in my work and self-care,
- Practice social responsibility through integrating breathwork into my community and on my planet,
- Provide community networking and educational opportunities and resources for my clients as well as have a supportive relationship to my own breathwork community.

Signed this _____ day of _____, 20__

About the Author

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