

The Origins of Rebirthing Style Breathwork

by Peter Mark Adams

Origins

Rebirthing style breathwork evolved from the independent research of Dr. Frank Lake in the UK, Dr. Stanislav Grof in Czechoslovakia and Leonard Orr in the US during the 1950s and early 1960s. All three had in common the fact that their experimentation with altered states of consciousness persistently uncovered intense emotional affects, and very often detailed memories, around a person's birth process. Initially these effects were observed in quite separate arenas.

Frank Lake^[1] and Stanislav Grof were both conducting laboratory research on the medical effects of a new drug called LSD-25. Quite independently, and outside of the arena of medical or academic research, Leonard Orr was privately exploring altered states of consciousness primarily through lengthy immersion in warm water. It was only much later that all of these researchers, again quite independently of one another, realized that the deeper, faster breathing exhibited by people experiencing altered states of consciousness could also be used to induce those states.

They also recognized that during the deeper states of consciousness buried emotions relating to the birth process and, very often, their attendant 'memories' were being retrieved. We need to emphasize that these findings were, so to speak, reluctantly 'forced' upon the medical researchers (Lake and Grof) by the evidence that they were uncovering. The evidence ran, and to a certain extent still appears to run, counter to received medical wisdom:

“The idea that a functioning consciousness could exist in a fetus was in conflict with everything he had been taught in medical school...that he could be aware of subtle nuances between himself and his mother ... astonished him”[2]

However, the memories certainly seemed real enough and the experience of re-living the traumatic experience of birth was found to be profoundly liberating. Each of these early pioneers – Lake, Grof and Orr – would go on to create their own schools of breathwork. Because of the central importance of activating and releasing the negative affects relating to a person’s birth process these forms of breathwork have been generically termed ‘rebirthing style breathwork’.

The Birth Trauma

“All anxiety goes back originally to the anxiety at birth” Sigmund Freud

As the quote above suggests, the notion of a ‘birth trauma’ has been around for some time. It was Otto Rank^[3], one of Freud’s early disciples, who first presented it – in terms of ‘separation anxiety’ – as the single most important factor in the origin of neurosis. Although initially praised by Freud, the theory came to be perceived as challenging the primacy of Freud’s own Oedipal theory concerning the origin of neurosis. Rank’s ideas were ultimately rejected by Freud and his circle as being too much at variance with, and a threat to, the emerging orthodoxy of Freudian theory.

The ‘birth trauma’ is thought to result from the extreme nature of the experiences – which include compression, separation and suffocation – undergone during the normal birth process. This process can be rendered

even more traumatic in the event of complications arising. These can include Nuchal Cord (strangulation from the placenta), breech birth, prolonged, forceps and dry delivery all of which can contribute to increased levels of fetal distress.

Lake, Grof and Orr had all observed that a turning point occurred whenever physical, mental and emotional experiences that re-enacted the client's birth process occurred. This came to be seen as the integration of the primal 'birth trauma' and was associated with a phenomena known as the 'breathing' or 'breath' release,

“The breathing release is the most important aspect of rebirthing. It is a critical release of all of your resistance to life. The breathing release happens when you feel safe enough to re-live the moment of your first breath....This experience breaks the power of the birth trauma over the mind and body”[4]

The 'breathing release' describes a process whereby accession is suddenly made to a greatly expanded capacity for breathing and consequently higher levels of vital energy. The 'breath release', as it is now more usually called, represents a fundamental opening of the energy channels. It gives rise to increased levels of vital energy. This greatly facilitates gaining access to the transpersonal dimensions of experience. It is for this reason that Grof argued that access to the transpersonal is closely related to the resolution of perinatal issues.

“The area of the unconscious that we associate with these four perinatal matrices represents an interface ... to the transpersonal domain ... that lies beyond the biographical and perinatal.”[5]

This claim of an association between the perinatal and the transpersonal was based purely on observation. Grof was not confusing the experience

of oceanic states of bliss in the womb with peak states of spiritual ecstasy. He was merely stating that as a matter of fact, the two are causally connected. But without the underlying model of subtle energy and the relationship between vital energy, consciousness and blockages in the subtle anatomy, the causal connection between the two could not be made explicit.

Whose Trauma is it?

We think of our consciousness as something that we possess, something that defines us ‘essentially’, forming the boundary of our being. But are the boundaries of the self really as impermeable as we imagine them to be? Or do we, at times, share even this most defining characteristic of ours with others?

“A client complained of an acute snake phobia and displayed extreme reactions to any ‘snakelike’ shapes – such as vines and even winding roads. And yet, he had absolutely no memory of any event concerning a snake that would account for his phobia. It turned out, however, that his mother had experienced a shock from discovering a large snake in her kitchen when she was pregnant.”

Despite her experience, the mother appeared to have no phobia concerning snakes, but her unborn son had! In this case, whose trauma was it? During the perinatal period, what exactly are the boundaries between the mother and her child, who is experiencing what, and with what long term consequences? This question is relevant to the study of consciousness as well as to a deeper understanding of breathwork. The reason, as we have discussed, is that so much of breathwork – all of the ‘released based’ / rebirthing styles – are founded upon the basis of an

‘originating’ trauma connected with the birth process. This led Leonard Orr to formulate the purpose of rebirthing as:

“to remember and re-experience one’s birth, to re-live physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually the moment of one’s first breath and release the trauma of it.”[6]

For almost half a century this belief has formed the core of much traditional breathwork theory and practice. But contrary to the idea that the experience of birth is universally traumatic, it has been suggested that, in fact, the experience of birth is rarely traumatic^[7]. The reason given for this is that shortly before birth

“the baby’s body is saturated with endorphins which act as an anesthetic for the actual birth”[8].

If this is true, where do the seemingly universal and well attested ‘memories’ of birth related trauma come from?

“If I accept that the patterns are mother’s emotional-mental patterns then what I am experiencing during some regression therapies are not actually my own experiences – because I am not wholly me yet – but are my mother’s pre-birth and labor feeling patterns”[9].

And this is exactly what a number of our client’s have, in fact, experienced. Perhaps from a practical point of view it does not matter, at the end of the day, whose trauma it is so long as it gets healed!

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[1] Lake, Dr. Frank (1969) Birth Trauma, Claustrophobia and LSD Therapy: The re-living of traumatic first year experiences under the

influence of LSD-25, and their relation to phobic reactions in adults; with special reference to the association between birth trauma and claustrophobia (online resource)

[2] Grof, Stanislav M.D. (1992) *The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Human Consciousness & How They Shape Our Lives* p.34

[3] Rank, Otto (1924) *The Trauma of Birth*

[4] Orr, Leonard & Ray, Sondra (1977) *Rebirthing in the New Age* p.77

[5] Grof, Stanislav M.D. (1992) *The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Human Consciousness & How They Shape Our Lives* p.79

[6] Orr, Leonard & Ray, Sondra (1977) *Rebirthing in the New Age* p.69

[7] Jon, RG & Troya, GN 'Rebirthing or Rebreathing : A Recapitulation' *The Healing Breath* Volume 2 Number 3 September 2000 Page 26

[8] *ibid*

[9] *ibid* page 33.