

Radar to the Infinite

Holotropic Breathwork and the Integral Vision

Martin Boroson

The Inner Door, 10(4)5-6, November 1998

Boroson provides a major exposition of Holotropic Breathwork and its place as a meta-technique — one which embraces and assists many paths and processes.

Martin Boroson is the director of the Temenos Project, an Irish-based organization that produces spiritual/art events (www.temenosproject.org). He is the author of *Becoming Me*, a modern spiritual parable based on his holotropic experiences of love and play at the heart of the Kosmos. (www.becomingme.com). He was certified to facilitate Holotropic Breathwork by Stanislav Grof, M.D., in 1994.

In the last four decades, the West has seen a flowering of new forms of therapy, new spiritual paths, and the unprecedented availability of Eastern spiritual traditions. But with so many products in the supermarket of transformation, how do we find the product we need, when we need it? Many people have spent years — and a small fortune — in some form of therapy or spiritual practice that was not well-tailored to their needs. Finding the appropriate therapy is made even more difficult by the outright disagreement amongst the various schools of psychology and spiritual paths about technique, values, and even about the nature of reality itself.

The integral vision

Ken Wilber, considered by some to be the “Einstein of consciousness,” has carefully developed a theory that gives coherence to this problem. It is a blueprint for a “total” path of self-exploration, a vision that he calls “integral”. Marshaling considerable evidence, he suggests that consciousness is arranged as a spectrum, encompassing matter, life, mind, soul, and spirit. In modern times, each of these levels has been the concern of a different branch of knowledge: physicists look at matter; biologists look at life; psychologists look at mind; and mystics have focused on soul and spirit. Unfortunately, each discipline tends to ignore or downplay the importance of the others. A truly holistic or integral path would encompass all levels of the spectrum, acknowledging that we are composed of all of these dimensions.¹

Wilber suggests a “plan” for therapy or self-exploration that would address each level:

Take a practice (or practices) from each of those levels, and engage whole-heartedly in all of those practices. For the physical level, you might include physical yoga, weight lifting, vitamins,

nutrition, jogging, etc. For the emotional/body level, you might try tantric sexuality, therapy that helps you contact the feeling side of your being, bioenergetics, etc. For the mental level, cognitive therapy, narrative therapy, talking therapy, psychodynamic therapy, etc. For the soul level, contemplative meditation, deity yoga, subtle contemplation, centering prayer, and so on. And for the spirit level, the more non-dual practices, such as Zen, Dzogchen, Advaita Vedanta, Kashmir Shaiivism, formless Christian mysticism, and so on.

I hesitate to give that list, because, as you know, there are literally thousands of wonderful practices for all of those levels, and I shudder at excluding any of them. But please just focus on the general idea: take one or more practices from each of the levels of your own being — matter to body to mind to soul to spirit — and exercise all of them to the best of your ability, individually and collectively.²

This is a noble path, a truly royal road, and one that gives a radically new and expansive way for individuals to develop their potential. This spectrum idea, Wilber suggests, can also be used by physicians and therapists to diagnose patients — to ascertain where in the spectrum the patient's illness originates, and then create an appropriate treatment plan.³

But Wilber's approach, although typically thorough, probably strikes most people as an impossible challenge. Imagine coming home from a difficult day at work, after a long commute, and then doing the chores, spending quality-time with the kids, and then beginning a regimen of jogging, Tai Chi, psychotherapy, chanting, and meditation (not to mention community service and political activism). It is a great theory, but hard to imagine in daily life. However the work of another leading light of transpersonal studies, Stanislaw Grof, may provide a more efficient and practical solution, embracing the entire spectrum in one path.

The Holotropic practice

Stanislaw Grof, a Czech psychiatrist, is one of the pioneers of clinical consciousness research, and has been cited by Wilber as "arguably the world's greatest living psychologist".⁴ With Christina Grof, he developed a technique called Holotropic Breathwork, in which clients gain access to a non-ordinary state of consciousness through deep, fast breathing. This process is strengthened by evocative music, and is supported by a considerable degree of preparation and personal attention. Clients lie on a mattress and close their eyes, but are free to move their bodies, or cry, scream, sing, chant, shout, move, spit up, meditate, laugh, yawn, *etc.*, as the inner experience demands.

In this state of consciousness, clients can remember, discover and explore any level of the spectrum of consciousness. They can experience aspects of their own birth, repressed or unfinished trauma (*e.g.*, childhood abuse, car accidents), bioenergetic release, unconscious family dynamics, intuitive

wisdom, psychic awareness, shamanic journeys, past lives, deities, angels, and formless mystical consciousness. In addition, each of these experiences is normally carried into consciousness by a particular *form* of practice (one of the “thousands of wonderful practices”), helping the client to explore it in the most appropriate way. *Holotropic* means *moving toward wholeness*, and Grof believes that each holotropic experience moves the individual to the next appropriate step on his or her journey toward wholeness.

We can now consider Holotropic Breathwork in three ways — as diagnosis, healing, and prescription — each illustrating its benefits as an integral or full-spectrum path:

1. *Diagnosis*: Holotropic Breathwork selects the level of the spectrum at which a person’s effort is most effective.

When we enter a holotropic state with an open mind and no agenda, the psyche seems to “select” the experience that is most charged or “ripe” at that time. Grof calls this the “radar function.” The experience that emerges could not have been predicted or planned, but it invariably turns out to be highly relevant to the participant’s growth. It is as if we open ourselves completely to discovering what is really going on at the deepest levels of our being at that time, and we allow that experience to evolve and teach us. *In other words, the holotropic session brings an individual directly to the cutting-edge of his or her personal evolution.* From Wilber’s point-of-view, we could say that Holotropic Breathwork determines the level of the spectrum that is most efficient for present growth. The radar function is like a highly sophisticated diagnostic tool that instantly pinpoints the problem or potential that is most charged emotionally and most significant. Like a form of internal triage, Holotropic Breathwork sorts out what is the most urgent. Some examples:

A person believes that he needs to express anger toward his mother, and has been talking about this for years in therapy. But during his holotropic session, he re-experiences a car accident he had many years ago. Revisiting the moment of impact, the sudden fright, the need to scream, and the way he froze in terror, he is able to release his scream from a frozen state. This unlocks his anger.

A person feels blocked in her practice of meditation, is starting to despair, and may give up practice altogether. During her holotropic session, she re-experiences a moment of her birth when the passage was blocked, and she went into fetal distress. She releases this trauma at physical and emotional levels, and then finds that her concentration and ability to sit still in her meditative practice has improved.

A person who has taken drugs recreationally is being overwhelmed by mystical images, and is desperately trying to avoid a psychiatric admission. During his holotropic session, he re-

experiences a near-death experience in childhood in which he “left” his body. Working through this trauma emotionally and physically helps to “ground” him back in his body.

A person who has been in therapy for many years, working on issues of sexual abuse, feels locked in a pattern of blame. In her holotropic session, she encounters an angel who opens her heart. She is overwhelmed with compassion and is able to forgive her abuser.

In these cases, intensive work at the wrong level of the spectrum would be inefficient, if not actually counterproductive. It would be far simpler to invite the psyche to choose the appropriate level for the next step.

2. *Healing: Holotropic Breathwork selects the form of practice that is most appropriate to an individual’s present needs.*

Every form of therapy or spiritual path has its list of do’s and don’ts, and its own prescribed method for treatment or spiritual progression. In meditation, you sit absolutely still, and in trance-dancing, you move until you’re ecstatic. In bioenergetic therapy, you express your anger, and in kundalini yoga, you direct this energy internally. But Holotropic Breathwork is extraordinarily method-free. Clients are simply encouraged to allow whatever is emerging as they breathe deeper and faster. They are only “required” to keep their eyes closed, so that the experience is not projected onto others, and to stay on their mattress, so that they can be kept safe. There is no time limit, no noise limit, no rules of posture or diet, no institutional hierarchy, no guru, no sacred text, and no dress code. If the inner experience wills it, clients can scream, cry, chant, pray, regress to infancy, speak in tongues, meditate, move into yoga postures, laugh, yawn, leave their body, enter their body, punch a pillow, shake, sweat, gyrate — the list is endless. An inner healing mechanism is allowed to do whatever is necessary for healing and transformation of the individual, dictating the actual form of practice or therapy, without imposition of anyone’s academic framework, cultural background, or religious belief. The Holotropic Breathwork session provides a physical and emotional space in which the deepest dimensions of our being are given encouragement to work their magic. The actual form and method of transformation is chosen by the emerging experience. We could say that Spirit itself chooses the form and method of its evolution.

3. *Prescription: Holotropic Breathwork directs a client to forms of self-exploration that will be most effective outside of the holotropic experience.*

Holotropic Breathwork provides a prescription for other forms of healing. In this sense, it is like an all-embracing referral agency. If you are confused about what therapy or spiritual practice to pursue, simply gain access to a deep, non-ordinary state of consciousness, and see what emerges naturally. One client found herself vacillating between a commitment to *T’ai Chi*, *hatha yoga* or *zen* meditation. But after a series of holotropic sessions in which her body spontaneously went into yoga postures, each accompanied by physical

healing and spiritual insight, her path was clear. She committed herself to a formal practice of *hatha yoga*. Another person found that in spite of his intense spiritual quest, his holotropic sessions focused on a lonely part of his childhood. This was an important “prescription” to do some inner child work, or supportive psychotherapy, outside of the sessions. In this sense, Holotropic Breathwork is not simply one of the “thousands of wonderful paths”, but is a meta-path, a post-modern clearing house for everything from biofeedback and psychoanalysis, to Alcoholics Anonymous and past-life regression, to Sufi dancing and *kriya yoga*. These additional therapies can augment the practice of Holotropic Breathwork, until, perhaps, the inner dynamic shifts and a different form of practice is “prescribed”.

A big experience of everything

Grof acknowledges the importance of working through all levels of consciousness. From extensive clinical observation, he discovered an extraordinary phenomenon that is consistent with Wilber’s concept of the spectrum. Grof noticed that an individual’s issues are grouped along certain themes. There are common patterns linking one’s emotional issues, physical problems, birth dynamics, and profound universal spiritual questions. Grof calls these threads or chains “systems of condensed experience”, or COEXs for short.

Here is the way a COEX might emerge in a series of Holotropic Breathwork sessions:

Samantha has suffered most of her life from persistent throat infections. Emotionally, she feels inhibited from expressing herself. During her first Holotropic Breathwork session, she remembers a music teacher from elementary school who viciously told her that she “couldn’t sing a note.” In another session a childhood incident emerges in which her brother tried to strangle her. In re-experiencing this, she screams and screams — releasing long-held muscular tension in her throat. As her process deepens in subsequent sessions, she experiences a moment of her birth when the umbilical cord was around her neck, and she realizes that at a deep, unconscious level, she has always confused the drive to emerge and be free with a life-threatening, choking sensation. When her process deepens to the transpersonal level, she re-lives a past-life as a man be-headed for his religious convictions. And then one day, she has a shift on an entirely symbolic level. She experiences herself as a swan, singing as it dies. For the first time in her life, she has an image of singing *while* dying, rather than singing *or* dying. In this session she feels her voice restored to her, and her fear of death is diminished. Having released so much fear and tension in her throat through this process, she now rarely gets a throat infection.

According to Grof, COEXs are finally resolved when they have been addressed at all levels.⁵ This embracing vision offers hope to those die-hard

seekers who have been through encounter groups and re-birthing, psychoanalysis and magic mushrooms, but have found that the same old problems keep reappearing. To those many weary souls, Holotropic Breathwork offers the possibility that other dimensions of the psyche, and other forms of release, when accessed, will do the trick. The most transformative experience may have been right there all along, awaiting only the humility of the ego, the freedom from method, and the openness and safety of the setting.

Most spectacularly, in Holotropic Breathwork, we can have experiences that touch on several levels of the spectrum at once, or even embrace the entire spectrum. It is common for individuals to have a profound spiritual realization at the same time as a major physical release. In this simultaneous experience, we also become aware that all levels of Being are deeply interwoven. Long before the end of our journey, before we have solved all our problems or united with the Infinite Divine, we experience an ever-deepening awareness — in the fabric of our Being and the fibers of our body — of the seamlessness of Creation.

The whole spectrum embraced

Ken Wilber has been credited with unifying Freud and the Buddha, creating an integral vision that spans the past and future of consciousness, and more. And Holotropic Breathwork, free to meander everywhere and anywhere across this spectrum, brings us directly to the cutting edge of our evolution. It requires only that we lean toward the truth that is emerging now and here, in the deepest and farthest reaches of the present moment. With unprecedented openness — in theory and method — it embraces all the ancient forms of worship and all the modern means of personal growth, and even holds space for those paths yet to be invented. Through it, we can gain access to the entire spectrum of consciousness, to all the magnificent dimensions of Being, and we can travel along any or all of wonderful therapies and paths, aiming always, steadfastly, at the one, integral goal.

Endnotes

¹ A truly integral path, he maintains, would also include the inner (“interior”) and the outer (“exterior”) of everything, as well as the cultural or social aspect of each level. Following his lead in the citation, I am simplifying his work here.

² Wilber, K. (1997.) “A Ticket to Athens”, an interview in *Pathways: A magazine of psychological and Spiritual Transformation*.

³ Wilber, K. et. al.(1986.) *Transformations of consciousness*. Boston: Shambhala. 144-146.

⁴ Wilber, K. (1997.) *The eye of the spirit*. Boston: Shambhala. 165.

⁵ In Grof’s version of the spectrum, these are the sensory, personal unconscious, perinatal, and the transpersonal.

References

Grof, S. (1992). *The holotropic mind*. HarperSanFrancisco.

Grof, S. (1988). *The adventure of self-discovery*. State University of New York Press.

Wilber, K. (1993). *The spectrum of consciousness*. Quest Books.

Wilber, K. (1996). *A brief history of everything*. Shambhala Publications.