

The 1998 Mystics and Scientists Conference

The Breath of Life

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Each year the conference of Mystics and Scientists takes as its theme a word that can be approached both from a spiritual and a physical perspective, challenging us to envisage the way in which these two aspects are intermingled in the world. In some of the meetings (on the Heart, for instance) I have struggled to hold together the physical and the spiritual; but this year in the case of Breath a true unity was presented, reflecting the fact that, in practically all languages other than modern European ones, the same word is applied literally to both aspects of reality. This unity made it for me one of the most enjoyable conferences yet this together with the gentle structure and the way in which all the speakers integrated experiential work into their presentations.

The meeting opened with a general session, in which the tone of the meeting was set by Jill Purce. leading us in chant, as she did at appropriate points throughout. David Lorimer and the other speakers touched on the main themes to come, and many participants were able to share their own aspirations. This led well into Jill's main presentation the next day, when she invited us to a conspiracy for the healing of our disenchantment. Her theme was the transformation of the breath, its inner unfolding, which took place when one's attention rested on the breath. For her, chant was the supreme way of assisting this transformative attention, which turned breath to prana, prose to poetry and noise to magic. Rhythm was crucial, at all time scales; as when, for example, the pattern of the traditional monastic offices matched the interstices of the natural rhythm of the day, allowing its participants to engage with the rhythm of the cosmos.

The cosmic aspect of breath was a common theme, particularly with Neil Douglas Klotz, who presented the context of thought in which Jesus had taught, and illustrated how, by using the Aramaic text of Jesus' words, it was possible to recover their original sense before they had passed through the distorting filter of Greek translation in the early church. To give one example out of a rich array: the Beatitudes revealed a natural progression of spiritual development, from breathing into harmony with the primal light ('Tuned to the Source are those who live by breathing Unity; their "I can!" is included in God's'), through the mourning that comes from the breath's contacting the emotions seated at the diaphragm ('Healed are those who weep for their frustrated desire; they shall see the face of fulfilment in a new form'), which leads in turn to the softening of internal blocks that enables one to open up to Nature. Many of us then had the opportunity of entering powerfully into these ideas in his later workshop, through chant and dance. The workshop, by the way, is the annual Mystics koan in which one is faced with a choice of three equally exciting and attractive activities led by superb teachers, solvable only by abandonment to the working of the Universe which ensures that whatever transpires is Right For You. But I still wish I could have gone to all three.

The role of the diaphragm was picked up later in a short presentation by the musician and psychologist Catherine Butler Smith. Her research, based on extensive interviews with musicians, had shown both the mystical depth of their peak performance experiences, into which the audience and other players were drawn, and also the anguish of those singers and wind performers who had touched their internal pain and reacted by blocking contact with it

through the seat of emotions at the diaphragm. This hindered the flow of breath and crippled their performing ability, poignantly illustrating the interleaving of physical, emotional and spiritual. Then later on the rhythm of the diaphragm, affecting the pulsations of the entire body, was illustrated in a different way through a brief NMR video as part of Philip Kilner's presentation. He conducted us through a meditation on pictures (often his own drawings) of the various bodily organs related to breath, emphasizing their interconnection into the totality of the organism. This was reinforced by accounts of embryonic development, emphasizing the emergence of lungs and trachea within the in-folding formative processes of the shape of the whole. Two approaches based on an Eastern perspective were presented by Joy Manné and Peter Glover. Both were grounded in a scholarly analysis of the foundation texts of, respectively, Buddhism and Ayurvedic philosophy, and both speakers radiated a caring compassionate warmth from their inner being. Joy formulated this explicitly in her talk, which emphasized that, just as the aim of Buddhism is the end of suffering, so its starting point is ethics. Her breathwork seemed based on a fundamental respect for the pupil/co-worker, emphasizing the need for firm grounding and balancing before venturing into the deeper realms of shamanic experience and progression through the stages of breathing leading ultimately to enlightenment, as described in the texts. In reflecting, for example, on early breathwork several years ago, she remarked that 'hyperventilation is a form of raping the unconscious'. While both these speakers emphasized that, in Joy's words, 'there is only one breath although it has infinite variety and power,' Peter Glover concentrated more on the differences between various manifestations of the cosmic breath (prana), leading to the Ayurvedic system of classification of the different faculties, organs and processes of the human being. I found this a tantalizing picture. On one hand, it had an impressive integrity and coherence; on the other hand, its very integrity made it difficult to dissect and compare with the Western approach. It would have been interesting to explore what, if any, were the Ayurvedic criteria for empirically correcting and evolving the system, as compared with such criteria in the West. Many other elements contributed to the conference's success: a beautiful flute recital by James Gregory, including instruments he had made himself, accompanied by James D'Angelo, showed breath in action and added the dimension of artistic appreciation to our participation; and several participants shared poetry or performed music that opened different facets of the breath. The conference organization steered us easily through the difficulties of accommodation in a rather widely scattered campus, and the programme allowed plenty of time for discussion and conversation. My thanks to all!