

# Breathing the dance: an experience of Middendorf Breathwork

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*Sitting comfortably, place the palms of your hands somewhere around the middle of your torso. Bring your attention to the movements of your body with the breath as you let the breath come and go on its own. Let yourself participate in these movements, be present with them. What do you notice? Is it possible to be with your breath movements and allow your breath to come and go?*

*When you have had enough of this, let yourself stretch like a cat or dog does*

*when it wakes up. Extend your arms, your legs, in any way that you like that feels good to you. After some of this sort of stretching while sitting, stand and continue – stretch the sides of your torso, your back, your front. When you have had enough stretching, sit, close your eyes and ‘resonate’, that is, sense for a few breath cycles what this has done for you. What has changed? Where do you experience the movement of your body with the breath now? Do you feel more spacious? Is it easier to let your breath come and go on its own?*

This is how we began ‘Breathing the dance’. Try it for yourself. The important elements of Middendorf breathwork are already there: letting the breath come and go ‘on its own’, sensing bodily movements with the breath, being present. Breath, sensation, presence: these are the doorways through which we can enter this work.

Middendorf breathwork is a modality that fits well with dance therapy because of its emphasis on embodiment, on the kinaesthetic dimension of lived experience, and because of its orientation to wholeness. At the same time, this form of breathwork also has much to offer the field of dance therapy both in its way of working with clients and in terms of the therapist’s self care. Breath is a fundament of life. To be connected to breath is to be connected to one’s body in the present moment, in the now. It is a practice of mindfulness. My teacher, Ilse Middendorf, says, ‘Fear and anxiety come when there is separation of self from sensation of breath’.

## **Background**

Ilse Middendorf has developed her work, *Der Erfahrbare Atem*, known in English as the ‘Experience of Breath’, over a lifetime of working with breath. She is now 98 and still active in teaching. In Europe her work is recognised as a major practice in somatic breathwork. There are a number of Middendorf centres in Europe and one in Berkeley, California. Graduates use the work in many different areas of health, well-being, sports, creative, and spiritual practice.

Middendorf situates her work in the area of ‘body consciousness’ or somatics, which has its roots in

the middle to late 19th century with figures like Delsarte and Dalcroze. While her work has parallels with other somatic practices such as Alexander technique, Eutony, Feldenkrais, Body-Mind Centering, and Authentic Movement, it is a distinct body of work in its own right with its orientation to breath that is allowed to come and go.

Breath awareness is now gaining a place within the realms of critical social theory, as French feminist writer, Luce Irigaray, indicates:

*Breathing in a conscious and free manner is equivalent to taking charge of one's life, to accepting solitude through cutting the umbilical cord, to respecting and cultivating life, for oneself and for others ... As long as we do not breathe in an autonomous manner, not only do we live badly but we encroach upon others in order to live. We remain confused with others, forming a sort of mass, a sort of tribe, where each individual has not yet conquered his personal life but lives on a collective social and cultural respiration, on an unconscious breathing of the group, beginning with that of the family (2002, p's. 74-5).*

### **More experience**

Here is another somatic breath proposal from 'Breathing the dance' for you to try:

*For this you will have to take off your shoes. Socks or hose are fine. Sit with one foot crossed over the other leg in a way that is most comfortable for you to reach that foot. Tap the foot gently all over then close your eyes and explore your foot with both hands as if you were touching it for the first time, attending very closely to it. When you have had enough of this, place your foot gently back on the floor and resonate – sense the differences between your feet. At the same time sense any effect this has had for the whole of you. What is your experience? Is the foot you attended to warmer or cooler? Does it seem lower, wider, heavier, lighter? Has*

*there been any change in how you experience your breath in your body? Many different experiences are reported from doing this. There is no right or wrong. The way you attend to your body, how you are present as you offer some stimulation and sense the outcome can have an impact on your experience. When you are ready, repeat the procedure with the other foot. What is your experience now? What do you perceive? Has this had an effect on your mood?*

It is not at all unusual to feel lop-sided part way through this sequence, or at the end. The activity can provide a clear example of perception of sensation, which can be readily distinguished from thoughts, ideas, imaginings, even feelings arising from it. When you put your first foot down it can be obviously different from the other one in startling ways or hardly different at all.

The group work aspect to Middendorff breathwork usually begins with three-part sequences: a movement or action – this one of attending to the foot is just one of many possibilities – a time to sense what the effect of this movement is, how the body and breath has responded, then a rest. All three parts, the movement, the gathering of the experience, and the rest, are equally significant in the work. This practice, taken over many different sequences, allows us gradually to sense what our habitual patterns of bodily movement and holding are, and how these might allow for, or interfere with, breath movement. Change from within becomes a possibility.

*Enliven your hands with a short massage, squeezing, stroking, shaking or tapping in any way that feels good to you. Sit resting your hands palms up on your thighs then move one arm out in front of you while you stretch your hand from the centre of the palm right out to the fingertips without strain. Do you sense the inhalation developing out of the stretching? You release the stretch and bring your arm back to your thigh. Does your exhalation follow? You go on this way, stretching and opening, releasing and coming back in, with one arm, then the*

*other, and later both together. Your arms can move wherever you like. Sense how your whole body is involved in this. It is important that you allow the breath to come and go on its own, not sucking it in or pushing it out. When you have had enough sit with your eyes closed for a few breath cycles and resonate – sense what this work has done for you.*

This work with hands can be a bridge into another aspect of Middendorf breathwork. When breath awareness is sufficiently developed we can find that movement arises from breath – the dance of breath. Middendorf writes, ‘Dance is moved expression out of the human wholeness’ (1990, p.120). She draws attention to how both breath and dance are elemental, being rooted in rhythm and movement.

Many dancers have discovered this connection with breath themselves. For example, Mary Wigman opens *The language of dance* with a section ‘The secret of the dance’, which concludes: ‘It’s secret? That lies hidden in the living breath which is the secret of life’ (1974, p. 9).

### **Pressure points**

*Sit quietly and connect with your breath, perceiving how it moves your body. Press the fingerpads of your middle fingers together, not so hard as to make your fingers pulsate and not too gentle. Sense if there is any response in your breath. After four or five breath cycles move to two other fingers. Continue through all pairs of fingers, sensing what happens with your breath perception in your body. If you want to repeat you may find two or three breath cycles sufficient. Finish with all fingers pressed together at once.*

Some people in the workshop found clear responses in particular parts of their body – upper, middle, lower for example, in response to pressure on particular fingers. This sequence, or parts of it, can be done anywhere, any time, and can be calming and anxiety-reducing. A variation is to press the fingerpads (not the thumb) of each hand

against the heel of the palm of that hand, and sense what the response in the breath is. This can be a useful exercise for people with asthma.

This aspect of the breathwork seems to have connections with acupuncture and acupressure, with the meridians of traditional Chinese medicine, and with the hand gestures used in Hindu religious ceremonies and Indian dance, which are called mudras (from the Sanskrit *mudrā* seal, sign, token).

### **Vowel space work**

*Sit comfortably and connect with your breath. In silence, contemplate a vowel sound, say O, on your inhalation, exhalation, and through your pause if you have one, for five or six breath cycles. Then allow sound with the exhalation while continuing to contemplate the vowel through the rest of your breath cycle. Sense if there is some particular response in your breath. When you have had enough, rest.*

All the vowels can be explored in this way, and you may find responses in different parts of your body with each different vowel. Like the pressure point work, this aspect of Middendorf breathwork involves bodily connections that are not known in the wider culture. But whereas the pressure point work has parallels in acupressure and mudras, vowel space work has no parallels that I am aware of except, perhaps, in a broad sense with ‘healing sound’ traditions such as chakra chanting. Nonetheless vowel space work can be an enjoyable way to explore breath and body, especially with other people where the group sound itself can be a pleasure.

### **Individual sessions**

In addition to group work such as that offered in the workshop, Middendorf breathwork includes a one-on-one ‘hands-on’ form. Individual sessions usually include this hands-on work where the client lies on the breath table (similar to a Feldenkrais table), sensing the movement of breath in their body. The practitioner is guided by his/her perception of the direction, rhythm, dimensionality, of the client’s breath movement to make proposals to the client’s breath – through presence, touch, stretches, compressions – intended to enhance their experience of breath. This process is known as ‘breath dialogue’. It is a

dialogue conducted not in words but rather through sensing the movement of breath.

Both the individual and the group sessions work in the same direction – towards a greater awareness of breath and body, towards ease and lightness, and towards an increased sense of wholeness. By focusing on the perceptible breath, each breath cycle becomes a finely nuanced experience of bodily sensation and presence. The idea of breathing with the whole body becomes a tangible encounter. The work can be invigorating and fun as well as subtly complex, profound and life-changing.

Over time the practice of the experience of breath permeates the everyday detail of life. People develop their own conscious breath practice out of the group and individual work.

### References

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**Middendorff, I. (1990).** *The perceptible breath: a breathing science*. Paderborn, Junfermann-Verlag.

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### Ed. Notes

The breath is the essential basis of all movement, in fact the first movement of a new born baby and very first stage of development. In LMA and Bartenieff Analysis, the breath is a focus as the first stage in developmental patterning and continued focus in all movement as “Movement rides on the flow of breath” (Bartenieff, 1980), and if the breath is not supporting the movement effectively then there are likely to be issues with movement integration and body connectivity.

The Middendorff approach to breathwork could greatly enhance the work of the dmt working towards these and other goals.

**"Breathing Embodiment: a study of Middendorff breathwork"** by Dr John Howard was published in 2009 by VDM, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2009. They can be contacted by going to [info@vdm-publishing.com](mailto:info@vdm-publishing.com)

**Information about Middendorff breathwork workshops are published regularly through the DTAA's Current Moves and in the What's On section of this Journal. Information can be found by going to [www.bodyvox.com.au](http://www.bodyvox.com.au) or John can be contacted on: [breath@alphalink.com.au](mailto:breath@alphalink.com.au)**