

ON BREATHING

(Excerpts from talks by Charlotte Selver)

We have been seeing some photographs. Among them was one of grasses growing beside water. There was such appeal in the strength and vivacity of the grass, and such wonderful fusion of water, stone, earth, sunlight and shade with the plants, that I thought there could not be anything better to make us conscious - from the beginning - that nothing in nature is isolated, that we also, by nature, are not isolated from the world around us, and that the process of breathing is connected with everything which happens in us and around us, just as the plants are connected to everything around them.

Actually, every event, every presence - even our *sitting here*, our all *being together* - already has, in the moment it occurs, an influence on us: on our breathing, our blood circulation, our stomach activities, the functioning of our glands, and so on. In other words, all the mysterious interwovenness which is happening in the living organism is coming to expression in every moment in which we are living in our environment.

We are usually not enough awake for it, but sometimes you may have noticed that when something or somebody really interests you, you are speeded up, even when you were tired a moment ago. Your breathing changes; your vitality changes; you are functioning quite differently than before. And you may wonder, how is this possible?

Nowhere in the organism is there any limit to *being there* for any occasion; everything in us can be constantly responding to anything

with which we happen to be in connection - if we allow it. We are constantly in connection with something, and therefore are never alone, never isolated. The whole day is full of invitations, but only we ourselves can realize if and when we respond to them. That is the question: do we respond to these everlasting invitations which can keep us young, movable, and reactive - never repeating, always new, because each invitation is new? Imagine what a change such responsiveness would bring in our lives! Who would like it? Who is against it?

The distinction between spontaneous and habitual behavior is one of the main topics of our work in general. How a person lives - is he habitual, or is he reactive in everyday living? - is the great question upon which our work turns. Many people do not make a distinction between spontaneous and habitual breathing. They have the notion that when they are just as they always are, this is being spontaneous, just as people who are very pushy, or very lazy, say, "This is my nature; it's the way I am," while it is only a habit - a deviation from their true nature.

Breathing is always as the person is. It is the clearest index of what is happening in the person - unless it is made up. Many people think they should breathe "properly." Forget it! It is no use, because there is no "proper" breathing. Your breathing indicates very clearly what state you are in. When you are more reactive, your breathing is more reactive; when you are more habitual, your breathing is more habitual; if you are pushy, your breathing gets pushy, too, or stops. You can depend on it - as your breathing is, so you are. I should say, at any given moment my breathing is me, it is always me.

Now, as we go more directly into the study of breathing, please do not close yourself to other sensations. Everything which happens in us is very precious. When you care only for breathing, you are impoverishing yourself. It is much better when you have first the experience of the great variety of processes and sen-

sations which is you. Remember the grasses in the photograph; we are not working on something isolated.

When all goes well, our breathing is an automatic energy supply. It supplies the amount of energy needed at the moment for whatever we happen to do, in exactly the way the dynamic requests of living require - *if we allow it*. It is tremendously sensitive. Every little bit more of a demand or every little bit less of a demand - when we are innerly awake - will be reacted to in our breathing without our doing anything to it. It is about the same thing, for instance, as when an artist plays a Brahms concerto. There are passages which need a gréat delicacy and quiet, and there are passages which are very emotional and powerful. And the one who plays has to be able to give all of that, otherwise he just doesn't play well.

Every person who plays the piano can tell you that to play pianissimo needs the greatest presence, a kind of *being fully there* for this pianissimo, and for this only. In the next moment he must be there for a crescendo, and then for a greater crescendo, until the greatest power is developed.

And we have the same wonderful possibility in breathing. When we are lying on the floor, breathing will react to our lying there, and it will nourish us. But it is something else when we are playing the piano, or fighting, or when we are running or jumping, or whatever it is. The response in breathing, if we are not holding it back, or are not too disinterested or habitual inside so that it can't happen, will constantly allow the necessary supply of energy for what we are doing. We don't have to say, "Breathe!" For heaven's sake, forget that! it comes by itself, spontaneously - *if we allow it*. Therefore, it is the allowing - the possibility of becoming more permissive - that we want to explore.

When we become more sensitive for what being permissive means, then the whole day is full of opportunities for exercising this possi-

bility of becoming more permissive - or, if I might say it differently, more loving in the way we contact whatever we contact. And the role which breathing plays in this is tremendous. As soon as we become more open for something we do, we find that the first thing in which we can recognize this increased openness is our breathing. In other words, when the heart is touched, when the inner is touched, when we really allow something to - as we say so nicely - *touch* us, then something in us opens, becomes awake and interested, and simply makes us breathe. We don't make ourselves do it. *It makes itself felt*.

Exploring breathing really needs to be a practice, but a practice which is absolutely new each time - not a repetition of old ways, but a finding out what is going on in the condition and activity in which you happen to be at a particular moment. No moment can be compared with another; in each there is something new to discover. There are people who have spent a lifetime practicing breathing in this way. It is one of the most wonderful, most gratifying practices in which you can engage, because as you are finding out about breathing through experiencing it, you will become quieter and quieter, freer and freer, healthier and healthier, and more and more alive. As long as you live, it never ends; so don't worry about how long it will take you!

It is very important that you set aside time for this exploration of your breathing, perhaps beginning with not breathing at all. Who has already noticed that we all stop our breathing a great deal? Perhaps we don't notice it, or only when someone asks about it. It is very important to notice. And once we do, the question of permissiveness comes up.

If you are dutiful, when you feel you stop breathing, then *you begin to breathe*. That means, you *do* something. That does not mean that *it* wants to breathe in you. Maybe it wants to continue to stop breathing. At one point, you will certainly feel that your breathing starts by itself; and that is a won-

derful discovery. Do not go about your daily life saying to yourself, "Breathe!" When you find yourself holding your breath, wait a little. Wait until your breathing begins to function again for whatever you happen to be doing. You will notice that when your breathing stops, something is not quite right in your relationship to what you are doing. Either you are too anxious, or too hesitant, or too shy, or resisting something, or holding back in some way. In other words, you are not fully *there* for what you happen to be doing at that moment; and it is very interesting psychologically to find out what makes you stop your breath at that particular moment.

It is possible that you put into everything, not only into what you are doing at that moment, too much pressure, too much urgency, too much watching or observing. In very many people, when they watch or observe - whomp! - breathing stops. When the head is too busy, breathing stops. There are thousands of reasons why breathing may stop. You may be awed; you may be shocked; you may be this or that; and it's no use being angry with yourself about it. Be grateful that you feel it, and don't push yourself toward changing. Then you will discover this marvelous fact, that breathing will start by itself again - when you are not hindering it.

The most important thing is that you learn to have patience and respect for what you find, and not get into regimenting yourself in terms of, "Breathe! Breathe! Breathe!" Is this clear? Be very careful about this. It can destroy the discovery of spontaneous breathing entirely - if you try to force your breathing along as soon as you find you are not breathing.

When you feel your breathing is too shallow, which usually means that you are not participating enough in what the occasion demands you may become a little more ready for what you are doing right then. And you will find that this change has an effect on your breathing. And when your breathing changes - be-

comes faster or slower, or you have to sigh, or anything - permit it happily. This is one way to learn what permissiveness is.

We will have to give a little time to the question of exhalation. I wonder which of you, without being invited to it until now, has found that there is much exhalation going on? For instance, in some of our experiments, you may have needed to allow considerable exhalation to go through the head. Being as busy as we are, with one activity heaped on top of another, our heads have lost their elasticity and freedom. Often this lack of freedom is created through the holding of too much inhalation inside of us, which doesn't permit the cleaning out, the sweeping out, the renewing that is needed. Only fully permitted exhalation can do this. It would be helpful to give yourself plenty of time to find out whether you allow exhaling as needed; that means whatever time exhaling wants to take when you do not *do* it, but *allow* it until you have, so to speak, a feeling of satisfaction, of completion.

It is also possible that, having permitted a satisfactory exhalation, nothing further seems to occur immediately in breathing. Don't be upset by this. At one point breathing will start again. There is no need to worry if the inhalation does not come immediately after the exhalation; and please listen to me as I say once more, if *it comes*, not if *you inhale*. Who can feel the difference? You know, some people *take* a breath. Wait until it comes by itself! And allow it to distribute in you as *it* wants to. In other words, be an open house for your breathing, and don't manipulate it.

All this is a question of sensitivity, and when you orient yourself, you become a fine discoverer. It is much better when you find out about things for yourself, when you trust your own sensations and learn from them and do not have to be told everything. That is truly "exploring." And you will be delighted at how clear a language the organism speaks.