

The Path to Breathwork: Lisa McNett

Part II

Discovering Yoga

Meditation on the breath as well as breathwork practices were not new to me when I began Alchemy of Breath Training. My first exposure began when I discovered yoga, in the mid-1990s. My practice was sporadic until 2007 when I began a regular practice of pranayama and meditation.

I knew about different types of breathwork (rebirthing, dolphin breath, conscious connected, etc.) however, fear kept me from trying any of these practices. I imagined, based on things I heard, breathwork to be intense. Toward the end of 2017, my inner knowing shouted out that it was time. I was ready.

My first experience with a daily meditation practice began in India, in 2007.



I reached a breaking point: knowing I needed to let go of everything, immerse myself in a yogic lifestyle, and meditate in caves. Once I arrived, I started breathing for the first time. This is where my unwinding began.

From my first experiences in India, anytime I stray away from healing work (which always involves the breath), something deep within calls me back to this work of unwinding and helping others to unwind.

While in India, I experienced samadhi in a cave in Tiruvannamalai. I was in the Arunachala Hill, where Sri Ramana Maharshi lived and meditated for many years (and created an ashram). This may sound strange or untrue, but the vibration was high in this cave and the spirit of the Maharshi was there to guide me. The breath was my guide into meditation. After many hours, I returned to awareness of my body and found myself completely drenched with sweat, still sitting in perfect meditation position.

I experienced feelings of complete bliss and oneness with all things. The sun was baking the rocky hill, but I felt nothing on my bare feet as I began my journey down.

After this experience, there have been other occasions where the fringes of reality have shifted, or solid materials became transparent. I have felt this bliss since this time, as well. I am aware this is rare, that most people will not experience these things in their lifetime. I'm curious as to why... why is a story like this rare and unbelievable, even to myself? How could I not comprehend at that time the existence of God within myself?

I experienced the people of India in a similar way to the Jewish community of my youth, but on an even deeper level. So much faith and reverence. So much suffering all around, and yet faith. I spent much time in the temples in India. I felt at home in these temples. Accepted. This led to years of study and immersion in Indian culture and religion.

This brings me to the teachings of Lord Krishna. I spent several years among the Krishna community, and studied the Bhagavad-Gita. Krishna teaches to meditate on God, and that meditation on God will remove suffering, help us understand our true nature, and find self-realization. He questions why we fret over death, when we are not this body. He teaches that we are spirit, souls, and our bodies are an impermanent vehicle for the soul.

Many religious and spiritual teachers speak of suffering, worry, and anxiety; they offer meditation as a way to transcend this suffering. Gautama Buddha is one of these teachers.

I happened to get involved with Zen Buddhism through a friend, who introduced me to the Abbot of the Gateless Gate Zen Center, KC Walpole. I also (later on) participated in a weekend retreat led by Nuns from Plum Village, where I learned the deep relaxation meditation taught by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Through the practice of meditation, specifically through the practices of Zen Buddhism, meditation on the breath, and body scan meditations, I have healed many of my emotional wounds.

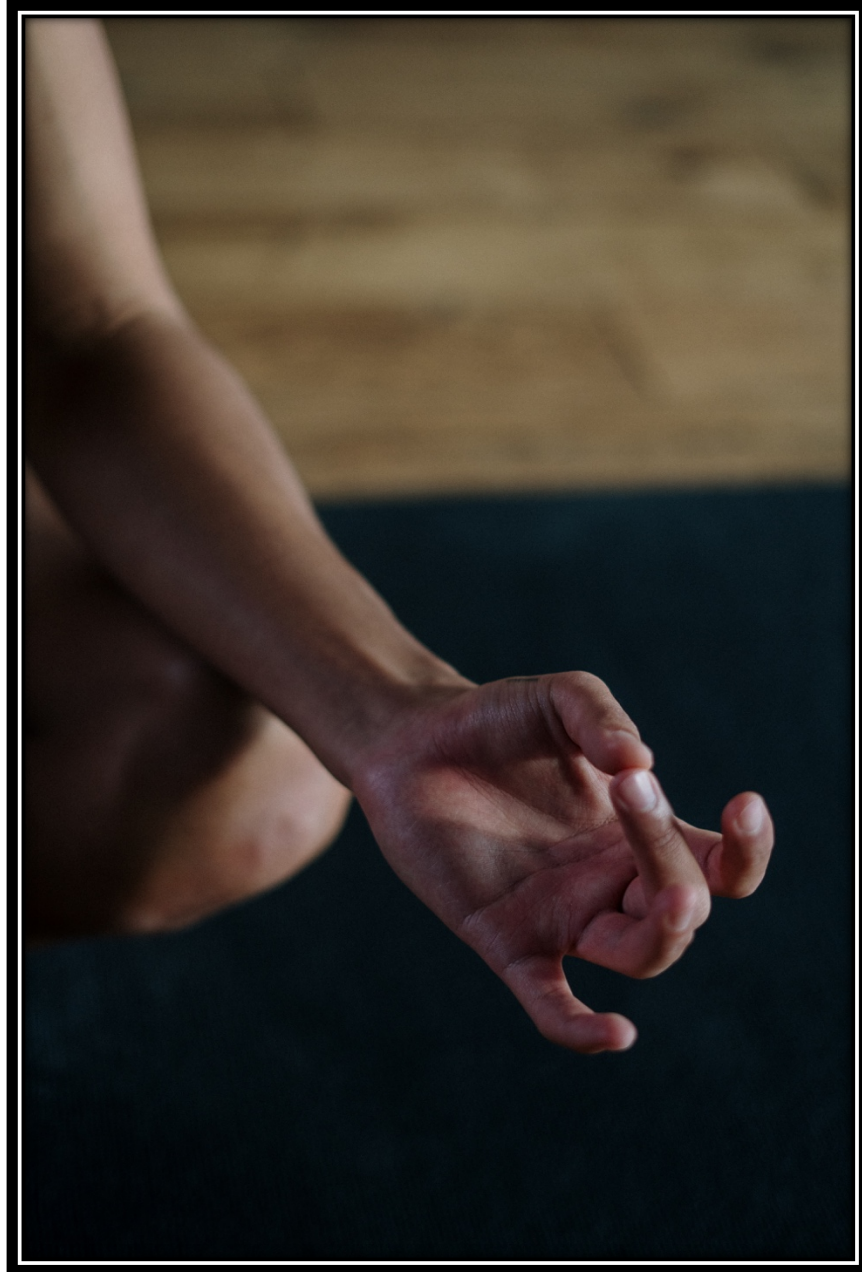
I experienced Zen meditation as painful. I found much within myself I did not wish to see or feel. Because of the depth and difficulty of my practice, I went easy on my students for a long time. I was unable to see, until recently, that I was doing a disservice to those I was allowing to check out instead of encouraging them to check in.

KC invited me to assist him with programs in a maximum-security women's prison. Aside from being Abbot of the Zen Center, KC trained with Jon Kabat-Zin in the early 1990's and assisted him with his prison programs and research in Massachusetts. When KC met Kabat-Zin, he had already been a long time Zen practitioner. Through his work with Kabat-Zin he found a lifelong passion for working with inmates.

I worked with KC for two years in the prison, going in once a week, until I found myself feeling troubled and unable to continue going in. Entering into this world enclosed within multiple high chain link fences with spikes, guards with guns, being patted down and going through multiple metal detectors was difficult. I imagine I questioned how God could exist in this place.

KC created a modified MBSR program with content that could be more easily understand by someone with perhaps no education or all the learning blocks that arise from trauma and substance abuse. We taught about trauma, stress, codependency, and even "The Hero's Journey." I mention the Hero's Journey here, because this connection is one that attracted me to Alchemy of Breath.

We conducted our research over two years. The prison saw an 80% reduction in disciplinary reports for the inmates who completed our course two times. Meaning these women had greatly reduced or stopped acting out and being disruptive. I could see visible change in the women with a regular meditation practice. They had more inner peace.



Each class I taught the women yoga, and either KC or I led the MBSR body scan meditation. This body scan meditation is led by the breath. We begin and end with focus on the breath, and as we breath we move attention through the body, focusing on specific areas and muscles (starting at the left big toe).

Once the women completed our 8-week course, they were invited to a week-long meditation retreat in the prison. Any inmate who had ever completed our course was allowed to attend our retreats (pending permission from prison staff). We would arrive each morning at 8 AM and have the inmates until 5 PM. KC was vigilant that they remain awake and alert, and in meditation. So that they may do the work.

The other volunteers and I were to watch and wake up the women when needed. In our class, in the retreat, I let them sleep. I couldn't imagine living in that environment, with all the chaos, noise and violence.

The daily count checks were demanding. Every two hours they are lined up and counted. They don't even get to sleep through the night. I figured they needed the rest, so I wanted to let them have it.

Jon Kabat-Zin was a student of Thich Nhat Hanh and Zen Master Seung Sahn, and a founding member of Cambridge Zen Center. Not surprisingly, the body scan he created for his Mindfulness-based stress reduction program shared similarities with the deep relaxation technique that I mentioned learning from the Nuns from Plum Village. A difference I experienced between the two meditations is, the deep relaxation technique offers an invitation to more deeply explore where tension may be hiding in and around the organs, and also invites one to express gratitude to organs (the heart for example) for performing their job and keeping you alive.

What I found to happen, personally and when working with others, is just by bringing our attention to an area of the body, to muscles specifically, those muscles tend to relax. However, this is not always the case. More so, it is not the intention behind these awareness-based body scans. I think I chose to forget this, and I decided a body scan was best used for relaxation, and that's how I began using them (for myself and with my students).

I decided the most important way I could help people was to offer them an opportunity to relax in this chaotic world.

Around the same time that I was doing this prison work, I learned a deep relaxation meditation from research doctors of S-VYASA University in India. They engage in and document research on healing and curing disease through yoga. The guided meditation I learned, this deep relaxation technique, begins from the top of the head and moves through the body to toes, bringing one's attention to specific body parts and muscle groups and "inviting" them to relax (once again using the breath as guide).

I rationalized that these Indian doctors were doing good work and had research substantiating the benefits of this deep relaxation technique, with the invitation to relax instead of remaining aware. I chose to forget this was one technique used in conjunction with other yogic practices.

There is a subtle difference between being aware of our internal landscape and *from that space* relaxation occurring, and learning tools, coping mechanisms for relaxation *while remaining unaware* of the underlying causes of tension, while remaining disconnected. I wanted others to feel free, to never experience deep pain and suffering. To just let go and breathe it out. I believe there is value in helping people relax.

What I've reconnected to and found a much deeper understanding of is that true relaxation and release occurs when we are no longer holding in our tissues and mind those things which cause tension, disease, physical, and emotional pain.

I believe that worries and anxieties are unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Also, that our breath is a tool of transformation, bringing our awareness to that which needs to be healed and revitalized. To reconnect us with spirit.

I've found that using the breath as a guide for exploring one's inner landscape with full awareness can be done in a powerful and also gentle way.

- How much and at what level do we need to practice breathwork to detach enough from our body to transcend the worry and anxieties we bring in and hold on to?
- How deeply into the pain must we travel before we transcend it?

It seems most of what we worry about has to do with our survival, with actual and perceived threats to our life and comfort. We've built a world full of bright, shiny lights deceiving and distracting us.

So many of us go around and around in circles, trying to find the correct way on their path, and dying from exhaustion before learning to LIVE.

Regardless of who or how conscious we are, it's nearly impossible to avoid being influenced and overstimulated by all the messages, sounds, lights, chemicals, and everything else we poison our environment with. And when we experience pain or discomfort, there are plenty of vices available to take one further outside of him or herself. We are disconnected from nature, from each other, and from ourselves; From our awareness of being spiritual beings, of knowing God.

Through working with clients with breathwork, massage, yoga, and just observing, I've found that most people aren't breathing to their full capacity. This lack of breath creates the disconnection. As soon as we begin to breathe, we reconnect.



The Beach

One August, my husband and I vacationed at the beach. Spirit aligned me in this week and created an opportunity for me to realize the depth of our disconnection and the impact this has on all life.

The first morning, I was up at sunrise to run on the beach with my dog. As we strode down the beach, I saw a group of people near the dunes, and wondered why they were out so early, just standing around near the dune. On our way back, the people were near the water, and one of them called out for me to stop.

Baby turtles

An entire nest of baby Green sea turtles were making their way down to the ocean. It was a magical experience for me, watching these tiny babies make their way into the ocean.



I grew up in Florida, and yet never witnessed a turtle hatching before. I've spent countless hours on the beach, where you see the protected nests everywhere. But the chances of stumbling upon a hatching are small.

The following morning, crack of dawn, another hatching. This time Loggerhead turtles. There were only six, and only a few volunteers present as well. It was indeed magical!

It was also heartbreaking. They are tiny and vulnerable and their journey is a difficult one. The sand has mountains and crevices, there is seaweed they can become entangled in, and once they enter the ocean the waves slam them back onto the shore. These are all examples of natural difficulties along their path. They need to get into the ocean to survive, and many of them die on the journey.

I spent some time talking with a volunteer, who specifically moved to Cocoa Beach (from the Midwest) to volunteer with the Sea Turtle Preservation Society.

He reminded me that each turtle lays around 100 eggs, and 1 in 1,000 live to survive up to sexual maturity, which is why they are a protected species.

On my third morning at the beach:

As I'm heading to the beach, I see a woman with a dog in the dunes at the end of my path, directly where I am heading. As I approach, she looks up, and first we confirm both our dogs are friendly. She tells me she is looking for baby turtles. I am confused, I ask her why they would be in the dunes. She points to the sand, and I see baby turtle tracks going in every direction, including in circles.

The hatchlings find their way to the ocean by following the natural light of the sun as it rises over the ocean. Streetlights and lights from homes disrupt this. I have known about oceanfront businesses in Florida restricting the number of street lights and the hours lights are to be on. But seeing those hundreds of tracks in the sand gave this a very new meaning to me. This woman shared with me that she has found hatchlings entangled in the dunes, going the wrong direction in the sand, and many dead. They die from exhaustion after going around in circles, trying to find the water, deceived by the shiny, unnatural light.



She left me with these words: “Life is hard. It’s really difficult, for ALL beings.”

True. Life is difficult for all beings. But I feel we’ve made it even more difficult than it needs to be. Turtles can live more than 200 years. I remember learning from my yoga teacher, in India, that turtles have long life spans because they take four breaths per

minute. The yogis believe the length of one's life is connected to how many breaths they take per minute. There is scientific evidence backing this theory.

If a turtle can live more than 200 years, why are they nearly extinct?

By not breathing, ourselves, we've not only shorted our lives, but the lives of all beings. We've lost our connection to God, to spirit, to the awareness of how all things are connected.

Is it possible that emotional pain, worry, and stress, were not a part of the original plan? Maybe this is why we've had teachers here to guide us toward the truth, that these bodies and what happens to them - life and death - are not to fret over?

Perhaps the disconnect, the discomfort, the pain and worry came when we started holding our breath?

I'm grateful I answered the call, my Hero's Journey, to learn from and work with the breath. I have found myself lighter, freer, more connected and present as a result of this healing breathwork so far.

I experience myself as full of unlimited potential and possibility, which I believe brings me closer to the truth of WHO I AM.

I am here to hold the light and help others find the truth of themselves through the breath. We are spirit beings, connected to all things, breathed into life by God.



[Breathe with Lisa](#)

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