

The Freedom to Breathe:

Reenabling naturally healthy breathing through Subtle Body Balance by the Goethert Method

The ability to breathe freely, calmly, deeply – without having to think about it or to control our breath through exercises: that is a state of being that most of us have lost. It is possible to regain your space to breathe, or to help your patients breathe freely again – by becoming aware of the subtle body. With the help of Subtle Body Balance treatments and exercises, therapists can guide their patients back to naturally healthy breathing.

Breath is life. We can go for weeks without food and even a few days without water, but without letting air flow in and out, we have only a few minutes. Although breathing is so vital to our existence, we rarely pay attention to it. It is only when stress gets out of hand and we feel a constant tightness in our chest and shortness of breath, that we begin to focus on this most important of all vital functions.

“Take a deep breath!” is often said, for example in a moment of acute stress – good and proven advice, as deep and calm breathing can lower blood pressure, lift our mood, promote regeneration and even prolong life. However, according to a study by the University of Evansville, 60-80 percent of adults still breathe too shallowly, too frantically and too irregularly. This puts the body in a state of alarm and increases its stress responses, promoting inflammation and associated illnesses. The activity of the vagus nerve, which enables relaxation and self-healing in the body and is closely linked to breathing, is also inhibited by incorrect breathing habits.

The solution is often sought in targeted breathing exercises. These can indeed provide relief, but usually only for as long as we can concentrate on our breathing. After the exercise, when professional or family challenges arise, we return to our short-breathed status quo. Performing the exercises can also be difficult as many people find it difficult to breathe into their abdomen in a relaxed manner despite instructions – especially when an invisible pressure, which many people are familiar with as the basic state of their everyday life, continues to weigh on their chest and compress the respiratory system. They pull their shoulders up tensely while trying to take a deeper breath. All that tension and pressure hardly allows their bodies to relax and let the air flow in.

The goal: Breathe naturally like a child

Relearning healthy breathing habits therefore appears to be laborious, and the prospect of returning to a state where you can breathe freely and deeply on your own may sound almost utopian to many.

And yet, it is by no means the preserve of yogis, who have spent a lifetime studying breathing, to breathe in such a way that it engages and invigorates the entire body. Rather, healthy breathing is an innate ability that all human beings possess. Observing small children, you can see how effortlessly and relaxed their little tummies arch and sink and their breath flows naturally and easily. Freedom of breath, like the ability to feel joy from within, seems to be a natural basic state in which we are born, but which we lose as we grow up.

So how can we return to an inner sense of well-being and the intuitively good breathing that arises from this state? To make this possible, we need to consider a third variable that affects our breathing alongside our body and mind: that is our subtle body. It surrounds and penetrates the physical body at a distance of about six inches and can also be felt with the hand. You can think of it as an interface between the body

and the psyche, as this subtle body is closely connected to our well-being. Integrating the subtle body into breathing practice can therefore be the decisive step in enabling naturally healthy breathing.

The subtle body – our “breathing space”

However, most people lack awareness of their subtle body. Although they experience typical warning signals, they do not associate them with the subtle body. Here are a few examples: In a conversation, you suddenly “catch your breath”. Something “takes your breath away”. You feel something tightening up inside you. You could “jump out of your skin”. There is so much tension between people in a room that “you could cut the air with a knife”. Or a relationship leaves you “no space to breathe.” These sensations and perceptions, which have become part of everyday language, can only be properly explained in relation to the subtle body. They are subtle pain sensations that indicate that something is harming us – similar to a pain sensation in the body. The signal – in these examples a change in breathing capacity – can be a reaction to a person, a statement, a decision or also a harmful substance. The subtle body contracts in these moments and the pressure should tell us: “Stop! This is not good for you!” Unfortunately, people forget to follow these signals.

The connection between this finer layer that surrounds us and our breathing has been known for thousands of years. In yoga teachings, this “pranamaya kosha” or energy sheath is strengthened through breathing exercises, the “pranayama”. From my decades of research and experience treating this subtle body, I recommend looking at the situation in reverse: The subtle body directly influences how freely we are able to breathe.

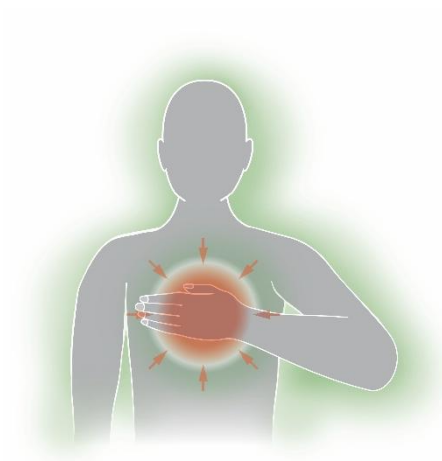
For example, I – or people I have trained – find that in about eight out of ten people whose subtle bodies are examined, this finer layer is compressed and condensed, exerting pressure on the respiratory system. This causes the person to have to breathe against a resistance, resulting in a shallow breathing pattern. They experience their compressed subtle body as tightness and constriction, although their body actually has enough space around it. The truth is that we have not learned to maintain our “inner space”.

However, this is exactly what we need in order to breathe naturally and well again, as we did back in childhood. This is possible when the subtle body relaxes and expands. Then the breathing space that we experience becomes larger. This not only facilitates the breathing exercises, but also measurably improves our unconscious breathing patterns.

The theory that a subtle body presses on our chest and diaphragm, making it difficult for us to breathe may sound abstract at first. An exercise can help you discover this connection.

Exercise: Compression of the subtle body

Position your hand, flat with closed fingers, in front of the center of your chest, about 6 inches away, and hold your hand there for a moment. At this distance, you can feel the outer boundary of the subtle body. It is often reported that this feels so as if the hand is resting on a balloon or a stream of warm air.



Now very slowly, as if in slow motion, bring your hand closer to your chest and observe your breathing and sensations. Does your breath continue to flow freely or is it threatening to stop? Is there a feeling of pressure on your chest even though you are not touching it? Do you notice a lump in your throat that wasn't there a moment ago?

People usually describe feeling pressure at a certain point, even though the physical body has not yet been touched, and that their breathing shallows. Now bring your hand back to the starting point and observe whether anything changes.

Fig. 1: Exercise: compression of the subtle body

Breathe more freely without pressure

For most people, this kind of pressure is a constant feeling because their subtle body is in a poor state. Like a muscle that has never been exercised, a neglected subtle body falls into an inactive state and loses its ability to function. Disease, surgery and harmful external influences can also have a detrimental effect. But also if we do not pay attention to our inner self and ignore subtle pain sensations such as pressure and shortness of breath, this can damage the subtle body in the long run.

When we learn to perceive and understand our own subtle body, it revives like a plant given water. In addition, when pay attention to our subtle body, we can better interpret its signals - such as sudden shallow breathing – and make changes to the situation before a physical stress reaction occurs. If, on the other hand, if our subtle body is in a poor state, external influences will come disproportionately close to us, throwing us and our breathing out of balance.

A therapy that focuses on this can bring about quick and effective changes. An improvement in the natural, unconscious breathing pattern occurs automatically as soon as a compressed subtle body relaxes and expands. Patients report that various breathing exercises and techniques then succeed with ease and become more enjoyable to perform, whether in yoga, meditation or singing.

The exercises have a more lasting effect and may even no longer be necessary for the correction of everyday breathing, as this happens more or less automatically. Muscular tension that stood in the way of abdominal breathing can be released more quickly and posture corrections succeed without reverting back. A general feeling of well-being sets in, which encourages relaxed and free breathing.

Treatment of the subtle body through Subtle Body Balance

Fortunately, it is relatively easy to bring the subtle body into such a relaxed and expanded state. It reacts quickly to signals that we can give ourselves by touching it with our hands while observing certain inner attitudes. For this purpose, I have developed the Subtle Body Balance (SBB) method. It consists of a treatment on the treatment table and exercises designed for self-application. A sequence of three sessions of 40 minutes each within 7 to 10 days is recommended, followed by a second sequence after approx. 2-3 weeks if necessary. Subtle Body Balance is taught by therapists from a wide range of disciplines and integrated into their therapy.

During the treatment, the therapist palpates the patient's subtle body with his or her hand. At the same time, the therapist's subtle body sends a signal to the patient's subtle body at a frequency that causes it to vibrate and become active, causing the collapsed structure to expand and move from its rigid, stagnant condition to a more supple and open state.

Before working on the treatment table, the therapist shows the patient the exercises with which he can touch and perceive this subtle layer with his own hands. This often elicits astonished reactions. When people feel their subtle body for the first time, they describe it as “rubbery, like a wet suit”, “a solid plate” or as “something that pushes the hand away”. Their breathing space is correspondingly small – they have to breathe against an invisible resistance. This resistance loosens like a corset as soon as the subtle layer expands and becomes more permeable. The breath can then flow more freely. This begins to happen during the exercises. When the patients feel their subtle body again after the treatment, they are often amazed to find that its boundary can be perceived much further away from the body and that it feels much softer and lighter. When a person's “breathing space” is expanded in this way, it is not surprising if their unconscious breathing pattern also adapts to this, resulting in healthier and more relaxed breathing, both awake and when in asleep. This effect has now been proven in a scientific study.

Study: The subtle body and the autonomic nervous system

The effect of Subtle Body Balance was recently investigated in an observational study using Heart Rate Variability (HRV) measurements, which was supervised by Dr. Alfred Lohninger, head of the Autonom Health Institute. HRV measurement is considered a reliable method to measure the effectiveness of a therapy. The test subjects underwent 24-hour measurements using an ECG chest strap over a period of approximately two months, during which they received three or six Subtle Body Balance treatments and performed the exercises at home.

The results indicate a strong connection between the autonomic nervous system and the subtle body. A clear influence on breathing, heart rate and especially the interaction between heartbeat and breathing was measured. As soon as the therapist's hand begins to palpate the surface of the subtle body, the patient's breathing automatically switches to deep, rhythmic abdominal breathing – similar to in healthy deep sleep. The heart rate drops below the average during sleep. The vagus nerve also responds with a higher level of activity than in deep sleep. While the subtle body is being treated, heart-breath coherence is established: heartbeat and breathing synchronize in a rhythm of 4 to 1, providing the basis for bringing the overall rhythms in the body into harmony and order.

Dr. Alfred Lohninger commented on the results: “When we received these measurements, I was quite astonished because there were patterns that we had never seen before. The striking thing about the Goethert method is that it induces a state similar to deep sleep in an extreme form, which leads to a re-synchronization of the body rhythms. This produces effects that I have otherwise only seen in measurements of monks in the Shaolin monastery, for example, where special skills are developed through decades of training.”

Long-term HRV measurement data also show that after three to six Subtle Body Balance treatments, a foundation is laid for sustainable healthier breathing, also thanks to the exercises that patients can do on their own. The healthier breathing can be seen in the higher average PNN50 value – which is a measure of vagus nerve activity. This value is associated with coherent breathing. The test subjects showed a tendency to double these values, both during the day and during sleep. The test subjects reported that a few minutes of attention to their subtle body sufficed to calm their breathing in stressful situations without any conscious effort on their part.

“The fact that the Subtle Body Balance exercises can apparently be learned quickly by almost anyone,” says Dr. Lohninger, “gives me a positive outlook as a physician, because self-efficacy is a topic that we will definitely need in lifestyle medicine in the future, because the whole story won't really end with reparative medicine.”

Conclusion:

The subtle body has a direct influence on our breathing. Whether we feel pressure and constriction or lightness and expansiveness around our body, whether we breathe hectically and shallowly or calmly and deeply, often depends on the state of our subtle body. Therefore, it should be integrated into every breathing practice.

In a healthy state, the subtle body forms a protective space in which you can breathe freely – regardless of what is happening around you. With an awareness of the subtle body, people become more attuned to their own needs again and learn to recognize signals such as when they “run out of breath” or are “gasping for air”. This allows you to consciously create more “space to breathe”.

Ronald Goethert

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Literature

Lohninger, Alfred: *Herzratenvariabilität: Das HRV Praxis-Lehrbuch. facultas, 2021*

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Ronald Goethert, author and developer of the Goethert Method, is a recognized expert in the field of subtle body health. His groundbreaking research, in-depth knowledge and 25 years of practical experience form the basis for seminars, subtle body therapies and the “Subtle Body Balance” training for therapists.