Body of Bliss, Body of Blessing:

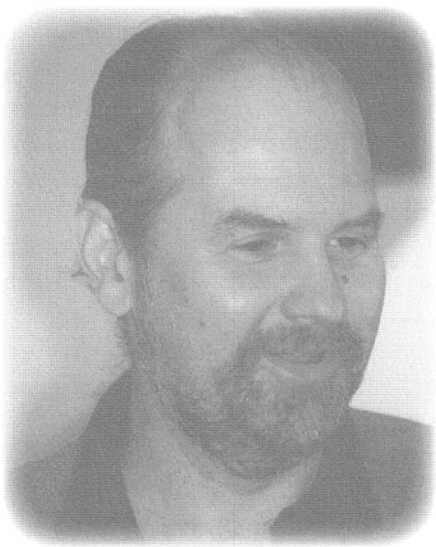
The Elemental Purification Breaths of Hazrat Inayat Khan and their Relation to the New Physiology

by Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz

"Consider the whole of Reality to be your own Body of Bliss." —Vijnana Bhairava Sutra (as rendered from Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

If we look at spiritual practice across various traditions and cultures, and from ancient to modern times, we can see that a few simple things unite them. Simply put, all spiritual practice seems to result from human beings seeking a greater connection to Ultimate Reality (however imagined), using the awareness of their breath in relation to nature and the "body."

I have put the word body in quotation marks above, because various cultures have different ideas about our enfleshed, material existence, some of which include a "body" (as separate from a "soul" or "spirit"), and some of which do not. For instance, the ancient Semitic languages (like Hebrew, Aramaic and classical Arabic) only have words for "flesh," a sacred, more material, living substance, and "breath," a sacred, less material, living substance. They do not conceive of a "body" as a separate form or entity. The idea of a separate body, mind, soul and spirit comes into our language and thinking through post-Platonic Greek philosophy, which influences our whole way of looking at the universe, mostly in an unconscious way. So please consider the use of the word body in what follows to be only shorthand for a very complex relationship we have to the universe, one that includes feelings, body awareness sensations and the apparently material substance we see when we look in the mirror.



Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz

Today, behind television news reports of new viruses, "magic bullet" pills and miracle diets, many scientists have begun to make large adjustments in the way they think about the body. Most of their research has not filtered out to the rest of society, but the implications of it can be as shocking or stupefying as those that accompanied the discoveries of quantum physics. This "new physiology" may open more questions than it answers, but it also presents us, for perhaps the first time in "post-Enlightenment" Western civilization, with the basis for a living cosmology of the body. Many researchers now use the term somatic to describe the intertwined nexus of body-mind-emotions, at which ordinary Platonic language falters.

I began my own study in this area while doing graduate work in the area of somatic ("body-oriented") psychology more than twenty years ago. At that time, the most significant references to a "new physiology" appeared in small scientific reports, journal articles and abstracts. In the intervening years, more of this new research has been collected in books and some was communicated in a popular American

film from 2005 entitled "What the Bleep Do We Know?" Yet we still see no general attempt to incorporate this research into the education of family physicians, surgeons or hospital staff, much less primary or secondary students.

When I began my own research into the area in 1983, I had already been a Sufi mureed for six years and had been doing the elemental purification breaths of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan regularly. I wondered how these breathing practices related to the way that other spiritual traditions considered nature, the elements and the breath. I also wondered whether the actual breaths correlated with any of the new research about the body. I found significant support for the effect of the purification breaths, and their attunement to the various elements, in both areas. Much of the information below was first published in my master's (1985) and subsequent doctoral (1995) dissertations.

The Sufism that Hazrat Inayat Khan learned and transmitted seems to be influenced by Platonic philosophy, which separates body, soul, spirit, heart and mind, as well as by more traditional Islamic cosmology, which proposes the ultimate unity (tawhid) of all dimensions of existence. At one point, it seems that Pir-o-Murshid treats the body as an object filled by spirit, which we are meant to dominate in the service of spirit. At another point, he communicates that the body or flesh itself is part of the divine, and has its own sacred purpose to fulfill. Perhaps these are not contradictions, but simply a paradox depending upon whether one is viewing life from the standpoint of God or of the limited human self.

In some descriptions of the twenty purification breaths, Hazrat Inayat Khan omits relating them to the elements; however, the oldest rendition (as described by Pir Zia Inayat Khan in his recent doctoral dissertation) includes the elemental attunement, along with breathing in Ya Shaffee (Source of Healing) and out Ya Kafi (literally, the Most Necessary, i.e., the Remedy for the Moment).

In addition, in his book on "Metaphysics," included in The Sufi Message, volume 5, Hazrat Inayat Khan relates the elements to various parts of the body:

"Our physical body is constituted of the five chief elements, which compose even the whole universe.... They correspond in the following way: the bones with the earth element; the flesh with water; the blood with fire; the skin with air; the hair with ether.

"Bone is as void of sensation as the earth. The shrinking and swelling of the muscles, the festering of the flesh, and the effect of water on it both inwardly and outwardly, prove that the flesh corresponds to the water element. The circulation of the blood depends absolutely upon the degree of heat; it flows as the fire element makes it. The air influences the skin. In hot weather the skin becomes darker, and in cold fairer; in rough weather it becomes rough, and in fine weather smooth. All different shades of the skin are mainly due to the climactic conditions of our place of birth and dwelling. The hair corresponds with the ether and is the least sensitive. If the hair is cut or burned there is no sensation."[1]

Clearly, different mureeds attune best to the purification breaths in different ways: some through sound, some through color, some through visualization, some simply by focusing on the healing wazaif and ignoring the elemental attunement. Nevertheless, I have become convinced, after twenty years of experience with many groups of students, that the purification breaths do help discriminate exactly the body awarenesses that Hazrat Inayat Khan describes above. This can contribute to both the health of the physical body and its ultimate transformation in service to the fulfillment of our purpose in life.

Other spiritual traditions and somatic therapies, as well as new research on the body, support the same body awareness attunements in the similar ways. I have detailed these below.

Earth: Breathing in through the nose, out through the nose.

While many native traditions speak of feeling the earth under our feet, or the feet rooted in the earth, for most people this remains an imagination. While we think we are feeling our feet, we do not actually feel support all of the way from underneath us to the top of our heads from the earth. So thinking about our "feet" is not the same as the feeling of being grounded. Both Native American and African traditions emphasize a type of rhythmic walking that emphasizes feeling the solid bones of the heel, and the resonance of this all the way up through our skeletal system. Rhythmic drumming supports this inner resonance and creates a greater feeling of connection. Many Native American traditions in particular use four-count rhythm and breathing directed downwards, in and out through the nose.

On the somatic side: While bone may be void of sensation, as Hazrat Inayat Khan says, the cooperation of bone with ligament leads to our entire sense of embodied support. It was, for instance, discovered by the somatic researcher Gerda Alexander (founder of Eutony), that patients who had suffered severe spinal cord injuries, such that they had no way to control their leg muscles, could still learn to walk by activating the body awareness of their bone-ligament connection. This type of walking, which uses no muscle action, relied on the patients feeling deeply and specifically how they were supported by the earth underneath them, all the way up from the feet and legs, through the hips, spine, ribs, and shoulder girdle, to the neck and head. Their re-educated walking, which Alexander called "Vorlage" (German for "walking before"), involved the patient gently leaning forward and then allowing the ligament-bone support to catch them.[2]

One can experience this bone-ligament relationship most clearly just after stepping off a trampoline or rebounder, on which one has bounced for five minutes. The immediate feeling of weight and support one feels is nothing other than our actual relationship to gravity, the attraction of earth to earth.

The earth purification breath can increase this feeling if we simultaneously ask the question, "how do I feel myself supported from underneath?" Then as we begin to walk, we might notice: are we pressing ourselves down, attacking the earth, adding the weight of perceived responsibility (the "weight of the world") to our walk? Or are we holding ourselves away from the earth, because we either fear that it can't support us or we don't want to acknowledge that it is as living (and unpredictable). The latter "tip-toe" type of walking also has the negative effect of not stimulating the acupressure points on the bottoms of the feet, which usually negatively affects digestion first.

On a deeper level, the actual feeling of support and gravity, of living earth connected to living earth, is nothing other than another expression of ishk, the glue or passion that holds the particle nature of the universe together.

Water: Breathing in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Chinese folk exercises as well as a number of Chi Gung breathing practices emphasize the same breath when the emphasis is on releasing, rather than containing energy. The flowing movements that accompany this type of practice also emulate the water and have the effect of loosening and creating more space in the fluids, connective tissue, muscle and tendons, so that chi-energy can be absorbed there. Somatic research seems to support this.

Corresponding to the model of quantum mechanics in subatomic physics, some new models of the body see it as both particle and wave. The "field" for all movements in the body is its water element, the connective tissue. Connective tissue ranges, like fluid crystal, along a continuum from very flowing "ground substance" to more gel-like fascia to muscle, tendon, ligament, cartilage and bone. Connective tissue is the ocean within us and, in fact, contains the same basic proportions of elements, salts and carbon compounds found in seawater.[3]

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However, this "water" seems to have special properties. For one thing, the more we move it, the more fluid it becomes (a quality scientists have named "thixotropic"). Conversely, the less we move and more sedentary we are, the more "dried out" our connective tissue and muscle becomes. As we move to contact nature and other beings outside us, we literally moisten ourselves and make more variations of movement and action possible. We also create more possibilities for the flow of neurotransmitter hormones within us. Healthy connective tissue also plays an essential role in shaping the circulatory system as well as in containing disease where it occurs.

The water within us even seems to have a sort of mind, according to one researcher. Previously, cell fluid was seen as a vacuum, contributing nothing (similar to the way Western culture has regarded the air around us.) New somatic models now see the body's fluids themselves shaping us. That is, we do not contain this water like a bottle; it holds itself together like "standing waves" and shapes our more solid structures around it.[4]

Blessing and thanking the water within and around us may have untold effects in the world.

All of this was known more than ten years ago, even before the research of Masaru Emoto and others demonstrated the way that water outside of us responds to, holds and transmits information given to it, including negative and positive emotion.[5] It then makes perfect sense that muscle and connective tissue can hold the emotional memory of past trauma, an observation common to body-workers in all fields.

The water purification breath can support this process of releasing, healing, and re-educating the water within us, if we thank it for its flexibility, feel its connection with the water element around us, and ask: "how could I allow more flowingness, less holding on, in my life?" I explored these issues while leading a therapy group for recovering alcoholics as part of my master's research. They found that the water purification breath helped them "let go" in the same way they had been looking for in abusing alcohol, and without the negative effects. Blessing and thanking the water within and around us may have untold effects in the world.

Fire: Breathing in through the mouth, out through the nose.

Many sacred movement traditions connect fire with blood and heart. These include yoga and Chinese movement, as well as some native American traditions.

We also find the same breath—in through the mouth, out the nose, feeling solar plexus first and then heart—used in various therapies that derive from the Austrian psychotherapist Wilhelm Reich (a rebellious student of Freud). This breath increases the feeling of one's inner pulse of energy (called "orgone" by Reich), so that one can then notice where this energy is blocked. Not surprisingly, Reich found that energy is usually blocked in particular areas ("armour rings") that correspond almost exactly to the chakras. This was the result of holding the breath in various ways, which Reich felt had everything to do with the way we are able to love, work and know ourselves:

There is not a single neurotic person who is capable of breathing out deeply and evenly in one breath....

We see a single thread stretching from the childhood practice of holding the breath in order not to have to masturbate, to the muscular block of our patients, to the stiff posturing of militarists, and to the destructive artificial techniques of self-control of entire cultural circles.[6]

In simple terms, Reich discovered that our habitual holding of breath and tightening (or deadening) our muscles, prevent our heart-pulse from being felt freely throughout the body. When

we feel that our environment and those around us do not and cannot receive our "pulse"—which corresponds to our creativity, sexuality, potentiality, voice and true feeling—we tend to collapse within ourselves. This collapse, said Reich, was the functional, and very embodied, definition of anxiety.

When we feel that our heart-pulse can radiate in all directions, we then can unleash the potential of what Hazrat Inayat Khan calls our "purpose in life." In "Metaphysics," he says:

The heart, being the center of the body, partakes of the effect of the feeling from within—which is the real heart, not the piece of flesh—and it feels suffocated and oppressed. Depression is felt as a heavy load upon the breast. And when the heavy vibrations are cleared, then especially a person has a feeling of joy and his heart is lighter than usual.

The fire purification breath can support this process if we can, for some moments, feel the pulsation of our heart and blood, bringing what needs to be released to the heart and carrying new life to all parts of the body. We might also consider our own sense of purpose: "Towards what am I pulsing? What gets my blood moving?" We can honor the fire within and around us, by using it properly—to clarify our passion, not destroy.

Air: Breathing in through the mouth, out through the mouth.

While I did not find any specific correlations to this breath in other sacred movement traditions, we do find mouth-mouth breathing (including blowing the breath) used in many world healing traditions. This breath cools and refreshes the pores of the skin. It can easily be felt as what attracts human beings to "air-bathe" or "sun-bathe" by the ocean, exposing as much skin as possible (or culturally permitted).

On the side of the New Physiology, researchers have discovered that skin is much more than simply an organ of "elimination," as most of us learned in school. They have discovered that the skin and the brain develop from the same tissue layer in the fetus—the primary ectoderm. The skin then becomes, as one researcher put it, "the surface of our brain." As it unfolds and allows us to contact the universe outside us, it holds the key to the entire organization of our nervous system. Many scientists now see this nervous organization taking place beginning at the periphery rather than centrally controlled and planned from an all-wise brain. That is, the organization of our neural pathways seems to proceed from outside in rather than inside out.[7] Our touching, feeling, sensing, and making sound as infants is, in large part, an attempt to organize our nervous systems through a contact with "out-thereness." This model also accounts for the common, but previously unexplained, phenomenon of infants "wasting away" due to touch starvation.[8] "Sensory malnutrition" prevents the nervous system from properly organizing itself by pre-empting contact with what is outside us. Further, some scientists now believe that the sensory activity of the skin affects our entire disposition to emotional feeling; that is, how we "feel" influences to a large degree our "feelings."

The implications of this for our treatment of the environment are horrifying. If we continue to lay waste to the planet, we are not only destroying our home but also the means by which our children's nervous systems and emotional lives can organize themselves. Especially in inner cities, the absence of either nature, useful employment, or stimulating education lends itself to abuse patterns of touch, which literally teach the nervous systems of fetuses and infants "this world doesn't make sense."

The air purification breath can support healing in this dimension. We might feel air passing over and through the pores of our skin to open, feel our bodies simply as an envelope of skin with breath inside and outside. We might also consider: "How could I feel more lightness in my being? How could I feel more ability and freedom to change and move in any direction?" We could thank the air element in and around

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us, as we move spontaneously, like we did as children, to allow a sacred universe to teach us how to be ourselves.

Ether: Breathing a refined, yet deep, breath in and out through the nose.

We can experience ether as either the harmonious combination of all of the elements, or as their absence. The breath of ether can then be felt, symbolically, as either a rainbow of colors, or as the clear light into which the rainbow disappears. As a "rainbow," an ether breath is our own natural breath in its best possible relationship with sacred nature within and around us, expressing the source of creation, the eternal beginning. This "natural breath" can be experienced in the atmosphere of a person, as Hazrat Inayat Khan describes in "Metaphysics":

As the brain is the instrument of the mind, which is invisible, and the heart of flesh is the vehicle of the heart within, which is above substance, so it is the illumination of the soul, our invisible being, whose light is reflected within this physical body. When active it beams through the eyes, through the radiance of the countenance, charging the whole environment with a magnetic atmosphere. This light being originated from sound, both light and sound echo in the dome of the temple of this physical body, though neither in reality belongs to it. To the Sufi, the seeker of the self within, they are vouchsafed when he has control over the gateways of this holy temple, the physical body. Then, instead of reflecting outward through the expression, the light and sound both manifest within.

As the mystic turns within, in order to experience the silent life behind all sense impressions, s/he experiences the second, empty phase of ether. Practices like Shagal or certain forms of Vipassana Buddhist meditation, encourage the illumination of the senses by redirecting them inward to find the source of all sensing. We could call this source the "Sacred Sense" within, as was done in ancient Semitic storytelling.[9]

While allopathic medicine attributes the ability to sense to our nervous system and brain, recent research shows that the way this works is much more mysterious, and susceptible to the influence of human intention and concentration, than previously believed.

The brain itself turns out to be more like a "gland" than a hard-wired mechanism. Information is not communicated across wires in any linear sense, and the proximity of neurons to each other seems to have little to do with the way we keep our inner communications straight. That is, information does not simply leap the "gap" (or synapse) from one neuron to the next in a rigid hierarchal system. Instead, it seems that our cells secrete substances called neuropeptides or neurotransmitters, which float around until they find appropriate receptors for their message. Neuropeptides also carry "messages" of emotional feelings. It seems that the number of these receptors can increase or decrease—consequently, we can become more or less sensitive to grief, pain or pleasure.

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Imagining an action that has emotional content seems to activate the same pathways in the brain as actually performing that action. If we constantly "rehearse" the impression of a past failure in a relationship, for instance, we can literally decrease the receptors for neurotransmitters that communicate the opposite impressions of joy, love or hope. We can then see meditation, breath and sound practice as a way of reprogramming our ability to sense in a way that frees what Hazrat Inayat Khan calls the "illumination of the soul."

Finally, researchers have found that glands like the pancreas also produce neuropeptides, and the brain itself secretes hormones like insulin. In fact, what we formerly thought of as separate nervous, hormonal and immune systems are more like one system interconnected through peptide communicators.[10] Finally, it seems that this whole system, communicating everything from sexual desire to sugar balance, is basically the same in us as in the simplest one-cell protozoa. If humans are "intelligent," so is the rest of nature. Native peoples have, of course, always said this. Westernized culture shows its decreasing ability to communicate—both internally and externally—by its failure to recognize this intelligence. In this sense, our immune failures are one more example of not having ears (receptors) to hear the voice of nature with compassion.

When we experience the ether purification breath, we might imagine that not only are we bathing in the silent, all-pervading life that began the cosmos, but we are also allowing nature to become more and more conscious of itself through us. Before the colors disappear into clear light, and the sense of self disappears, we might send a harmonious breath of all the elements as a blessing to all of our human brothers and sisters, reminding us all of our right relationship to nature.

By refreshing our senses daily, through the five simple breaths given by Hazrat Inayat Khan, we help fulfill the purpose of mureedship, as Murshid Samuel Lewis puts it:

The initiate is called upon to send baraka [blessing-magnetism] in all directions to humanity for every holy purpose. Healing itself is a specialized art in this line, and in the greater sense, holding thoughts of praise for God and blessing for humanity enables the devotee to increase the baraka in the world, and thereby to overcome the confusion of Nufsaniat (Samsara).[11]

Endnotes

[1] Khan, Hazrat Inayat. (1962). *Metaphysics: The Physical Constitution.* In The Sufi Message: Volume 5. London: Barrie & Jenkins. All quotes from "Metaphysics" are from the electronic edition of the manuscript.

[2] Alexander, Gerda. (1985). *Eutony: The Holistic Discovery of the Total Person.* New York: Felix Morrow.

[3] Juhan, Deane. (1987). *Job's Body.* New York: Station Hill Press. p. 60

[4] Watterson, John. (1988). *In Molecular and Cellular Biology* 79:101-105.

[5] For instance, see Emoto, Masaru. (2005). *The Hidden Messages in Water.* However, Emoto was not the first to discover that water can hold "information." The Austrian researcher Viktor Schauberger began work in this area in the 1930's. See, for instance, *Living Water*: Viktor Schauberger and *The Secrets of Natural Energy* by Olof Alexandersson (2002).

[6] Reich, Wilhelm. (1948). *The Function of the Orgasm.* New York: Simon & Schuster, p.333, 360.

[7] Juhan. (1987). p. 35.

[8] Montagu, Ashley. (1971). *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin.* New York: Harper & Row. p. 317.

[9] Douglas-Klotz, Neil. (2003). *The Genesis Meditations.* Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.

[10] Pert, Candace. (1988). "The Material Basis of Emotions." Whole Earth Review: Summer 1988 and subsequent books like *Molecules Of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. Pert's work is also prominently featured in the 1995 film, "What the Bleep Do We Know?"

[11] Lewis, Samuel L. (1937). *The Bestowal of Blessing.* Eugene, OR: Sufi Ruhaniat International. Electronic edition, p. 54. ⊙