

Interview: **The Experience of Breath**

Juerg Roffler and Kai Ehrhardt

with Nancy Rosanoff
hostess of *The Listening Place* television program

June, 2002, New York, NY
a transcript of a video-taped interview

Nancy Rosanoff: Welcome to The Listening Place, where we listen to life from the inside out. I'm your host, Nancy Rosanoff, and today we're going to be talking about the simple, every day, every moment act of breathing, and how that can become an entrance way into a whole other experience of our Self.

My guests today are Juerg Roffler and Kai Ehrhardt. Thank you both for coming. Now you do this incredible work. Why don't you just tell us a little about the work itself and what its purpose is?

Juerg Roffler: The work is called The Experience of Breath, which has been developed by Ilse Middendorf of Berlin, Germany. She has developed this work from inside herself, in the 20's and 30's - at a time when people realized they had developed their minds very well over thousands of years, the psyche was established, and they realized the link of the body was missing. Ilse was very stimulated by this. So she found how important the breath was for her, and developed a work - a modality - that she eventually came to teach. She opened her institute in the late 50's and early 60's in Berlin, and trained practitioners.

Nancy: So how did you get to this? What's your story?

Juerg: Well, my story is when I was young and I grew up - in Switzerland - I was always *very* interested in the body. I knew there was something in the body and I didn't know what it was - that had a healing quality that would help me to overcome some of my conflicts. I found ways how to connect with the body that helped me to go through difficult times.

Nancy: You did this as a young person yourself?

Juerg: Yes, intuitively. Then I was searching. I was trying to find out what could I do, how could I find support from my body to develop that ability?

Nancy: You were a teenager or before your teen years?

Juerg: Eight, nine, ten, twelve years old, during that time. And then I found people who would tell me, "Well, do sports. That's where you could use your body and find out more," - which I did. I listened to them. But I couldn't find fulfillment there. So I did lots of sports, I was very athletic then - and later on, in the late 60's, early 70's - the time of that whole movement, when body work and somatic disciplines became very popular. So I went through all kinds of things that people did. I did a couple of trainings.

Nancy: Like Feldenkrais, Alexander. . . ?

Juerg: Yes, many trainings. I did about 10 or 12 trainings, and still was looking for something.

Nancy: So, you knew it wasn't quite it yet.

Juerg: No, I didn't have it. And then I met Ilse Middendorf in '77 and I took a workshop with her and I

knew I found it.

Nancy: Tell me how you knew that? What was that experience?

Juerg: It was touching. It went deep inside, and I knew; *it's the breath*. It was not her person - well, it was also her person, the way she introduced it. But I knew exactly it *is* the breath, and it's the breath in the particular way that she presented it. Most of the breathworks these days force or manipulate the breath-they tell you how to breathe.

Her work, *The Experience of Breath*, connects with the breath in a way that you learn to listen to the breath - how it comes and goes on its own, so you don't disturb its natural rhythm. In this way, you have access to a wisdom and a knowledge of breath which is much greater than what you can take with your mind. I like to call that somatic intelligence, which becomes available. So this is what touched me at that point. I realized, "Yes, this is exactly it - it's in my body, everything is there, it's available, and the breath makes it accessible."

Nancy: How wonderful! Now, so what happened to you? You had the experience of knowing this was the work you were here to do - this was going to complete all the sort of yearnings you had. So, how did that change you?

Juerg: Some of the most significant changes were in my early 20's and late 20's, when I actually was suffering from anxiety attacks, and I was really unstable - emotionally unstable - easily irritable. This was the first time I realized that I became centered, I became calm. I started to relate to myself, and realized, "I finally know who I am and I'm starting to live a life that feels like me, without planning it." It just happened to me - gradually. It was not like all the work and disciplines I had done before - like Bioenergetics, Gestalt therapy, Rebirthing. These works had a cathartic element in it - like something was happening, but left me, after a while, with my old conflict or old structure. And with this work, gradually it changed my old conflicts, and all of a sudden I realized, "I don't have anxiety any more."

Nancy: That's really something! Now I want to bring Kai into this. Tell us your story. How did you come to this?

Kai Ehrhardt: For the longest time I had been plagued by the question "What am I here for?"

Nancy: What is the purpose of your life?

Kai: Yes. I've looked into many all sorts of different things, and maybe explored 20 different directions that had to do with creativity, mind and body work and so on. When I met Ilse Middendorf, during the actual workshop, I didn't really get what this was all about. I thought, "Nothing's really happening," because I was so used to the cathartic methods. Only when something really came out in a big way, emotionally or so - then that meant that something was really working. But suddenly, after those three days, I was back at home, and things were effortless - like I was working with a client, and things were effortless. I realized, "I'm not trying to produce anything, I'm not having to prove anything, I'm not performing." I could let myself be in the moment. That's when I realized, that something very powerful is in this work.

Nancy: So are you saying that by relaxing your breath, that it actually changed your whole kind of attitude towards life?

Kai: By consciously *receiving* the breath, in that moment - when I just let myself consciously *receive* my breath, so many things simply fall away. Sort of what Juerg said - suddenly the anxiety was gone. It's like a leaf falls off - suddenly it is ready to fall off - and that moment is when you realize that it (the leaf) was once there. So this work really was a homecoming for me. I understood more later, in the process itself, the power and depth of it. Before that, at the very beginning, it was the experience I just described, but there was also a lot still in the dark, and I only intuited that there was a lot for me to discover that I didn't understand yet - how there was/is still so much more to explore. In fact, what I love about the work with breath is that it is just so rich and so all encompassing.

Nancy: Well, can you help our audience to understand? Is there a way for you to talk about the relationship between breath and who we are, that helps us to understand how important this is?

Juerg: I wanted to add a little something about how we can connect with the breath: which is not just relaxing into it. It's a learning to listen to the breath - to the natural breath. We help people to connect with the breath in a way they can *be* with the breath as it comes and goes on its own without disturbing it. This is one of the most difficult steps - to move from a controlling attitude to an allowing - so to allow the processes that are happening within yourself.

Nancy: Well, that brings up such an interesting relationship then. So breath *is* us, but we don't control it. It's something that's kind of other than us? It flows through us?

Juerg: No it's not something other than us. The moment it moves us - breath creates a movement - as you receive your inhalation there's a breath movement happening. It grows wide, and then on exhalation it swings back, and then you have your pause. And at that moment, when you become aware of that movement, you realize this is the reality of your existence. You know that you *are*. And if you don't disturb the rhythm, the natural breath rhythm is an expression of individuality. *Your* breath rhythm is different from Kai's or mine.

Nancy: And that's appropriate. We don't want to all try to breathe the same way.

Juerg: No, no. You have your own (way of breathing). That's how your individuality manifests, and also you have your individual rhythm - it's different - and every breath cycle is different again - by allowing (it to happen). And if you learn to connect with your breath in that way, you can read how you are, and what is happening. And you can even realize the connection to the past and to the future. It has a perspective in it.

Nancy: Hmm.

Juerg: One of the keys is learning to connect with the breath and to stay with the breath cycle and with the rhythm of breath.

Nancy: Do you want to stay more with that?

Kai: Yes, about the movement itself, which some people may think that it only occurs in the chest.

Nancy: Yes, in the chest.

Kai: In the chest area, yes, but that's actually not all. It's something like a pressure wave - imagine you throw a stone into a pond - it creates ripples. And if you inhale, there are ripples - a pressure wave of breath movement that can go from head to toe, if you connect with that through sensation. So, through physical sensation you can actually experience yourself being moved by breath all over, enabling you to be in touch with your whole body all in the same moment, without linearly going from one place to another, without mentally projecting and abstracting, you can be in touch with everything, all at the same time, because you're connected to your breath.

Nancy: Well, it sounds like something we all have to experience.

Juerg: Right.

Nancy: And we need some guidance to do that... So, with what kind of things have people come to you? With what kind of issues, or what sufferings, or physical illnesses do people come to this work, and have you seen relief or some sort of new result?

Juerg: Yes, well, they are basically from all walks of life. People have difficulty breathing - they have asthma, emphysema, any kind of illness. They're stuck in their lives. A lot of people come because they're unhappy. They know something has to change, they don't know what it is. We have a lot of people from

that path. Name it. They come from all. . .

Nancy: Mmhmm. Mental illness?

Juerg: Yes, also there.

Nancy: Young, old, medium - all ages?

Juerg: Yes, all ages. We even have children at times, although the work with children is different, because we address the Self in the work. In connecting with the breath, we develop or help to connect the Self. And in adolescence, when someone is growing up, you should basically let them be, or let them develop that on their own, until they come and ask for it.

Nancy: Right. It's not something you want to push somebody to do. They've got to be self motivated.

Juerg: No, (not push). The work becomes different. We approach them differently.

Nancy: And so what's required? I mean, do people have to go to a year-long program, or a one day workshop, or do they work with a therapist once a week?

Juerg: Also, we have classes that we offer - evening classes, day classes that are an hour-and-a-half long, which they can visit on a regular or weekly basis. We offer weekend workshops. We have training programs that run over three years to become a practitioner. You can come and see us also individually. We call that breath dialogue. It's a hands-on work, where we work with people hands-on.

Nancy: Hands-on - so you mean it's a massage where you touch them where they're breathing and help them to feel that?

Juerg: It's not a massage. We are. . . I said it - it's a breath dialogue. We basically dialogue with the people over their breath. The breath is the mediator. I put my hands on the person and connect with the breath in this way, and listen to that person's breath, and support the breath in its natural development, according to responses I get from the breath. I have no plan in my head. So I pick up the plan of that person's breath and support it.

Nancy: That's great.

Kai: But the person being treated needs to be very present, as well, in this process. This is the key element - that the person is really there - so he/she can consciously participate when a door opens in the body, to let more breath movement happen, to allow for more breath awareness to enter. Then he or she knows consciously, "Oh, that just shifted." Because it just shifted, he or she now knows it wasn't available before - because often particular structures or patterns are unconscious - and only when something changes do we become aware that they existed. So the person's participation in the breath process is vital.

Nancy: OK, since I knew you were coming, I've been paying attention to my breath. So let's use me as a guinea pig so you can help explain this. I've been noticing over the last few days that my exhale feels so natural, but my inhale feels stressed. I feel I work at that a little more. It's a little harder to get the air coming in. So what would that mean? What does that say? What would be another step?

Juerg: My answer to that would be if you would come to see me I would work with space - breath space - with you, to help you experience that you can allow - receive the breath - and allow the breath to come in.

Nancy: Rather than experiencing sucking it in.

Juerg: You have to learn to receive the breath, to trust, to focus inside, and wait until breath comes on its own and fills you. At that moment it's a practice of surrendering to the breath, with your presence there - inhale, exhale, pause. It's a cycle. It repeats itself from the beginning to the end of life, all the time. Every

cycle actually holds - basically - your whole life in that one breath cycle. It starts with the spark at the beginning of inhalation. Inhalation grows wide, filling you. When the natural fulfillment happens, at the end of the inhale, you have a transformation happening. Your exhalation happens. You let your exhale go through. At the end of exhalation there is another transformation. You come into a space of not knowing at the end of exhalation - before the next inhalation, before the next spark comes back. Everything is in one cycle. So if you look at it from that perspective, inhalation is the receptive principle, the filling of the space, the feminine principle - the receiving - trusting that things can happen. Exhalation is more oriented toward expression. It is more active. It has direction. It's more the masculine principle. We're talking about principles here. So, (in your case) I would work more on trying to develop the receptive principle.

Nancy: Uh hum.

Juerg: We have ways we can do that! When you are born your breath is in balance. You have that breath always with you. During your life, influences from the outside and influences from the inside make you build resistant structures - structures that restrict your breathing. So, for some reason, something has restricted your inhalation. But we're going underneath to the true, authentic, natural breath, and trying to develop that. This breath always knows what you need in order to create balance and healing.

Nancy: It sounds like you're talking about that breath is deeply connected to our own inner knowing, our essence.

Juerg: Yes.

Nancy: It's kind of our connecting link between our conscious awareness and who we are on some deeper, more universal level. Would you say that's true?

Juerg: Yes, absolutely.

Nancy: Would you want to say one more thing?

Kai: I just want to say one thing in general, about how sensitive breath really is to any kind of influence: whether it's from the inside like an emotion, or from the outside like an interaction with a person, or even the weather. Everything that goes on in our lives, reflects in the response of the breath.

Nancy: Hmm.

Kai: When there are certain influences happening repeatedly over time, you will develop a certain breath pattern that reflects the response that it is associated with. And so, with that, you can see how everything links into it. You can try it out on your own. See what your breath is like when you're happy or when you're sad.

Nancy: Pay attention.

Kai: Yes. Pay attention to how that alters. The beauty about the breath that comes and goes on its own is that it always seeks to balance things out.

Nancy: Hmm. It's the healing principle then, part of the self-healing tool.

Kai: Right. That's what we want to connect to, the intelligence of the breath has the balance-no need to organize that from the head, but. . .

Nancy: But through the experience. So in a way what you're saying - and this may be confusion or paradox - you can explain. Breath is natural. There is no right or wrong way to breathe.

Juerg: Yes.

Nancy: It will constantly change in response to whatever our life is at that moment. Right?

Juerg: Correct.

Nancy: And at the same time we have these sorts of patterns, restricted patterns we've put on because of different ways we think about ourselves throughout our life.

Juerg: Yes.

Nancy: And that's what this kind of work helps us release.

Juerg: Exactly. Yes, the reference we use to connect with the breath is the body, of course. And that part is the missing link. We're not used to relating to our bodies any more.

Nancy: Yes.

Juerg: So if I am sensory aware and breath aware, I immediately realize when I hold my breath or when my breath is being put into a pattern.

Nancy: Mmm.

Juerg: Because if I'm not sensory aware and don't sense the movement of breath, these things can happen. So we teach people a lot how they can get back to sensing their body and learn to refer to the intelligence of the body that tells you instantly that something is wrong. And at that point I have a choice. I can then say, "O.K, well I realize I'm holding my breath," and I can make a choice. I can say, "No. I can let my breath come and go on it's own."

Nancy: Mmm.

Juerg: And then I'm on the right path. The breath tells me at that moment what to do. I give different answers (than I used to). I say, "Yes," when I mean yes. I say, "No," when I mean no. But I need to have a reference, and that's so important to come back into the body again. This is the house I'm living in. I have to claim it (the body) back so I can sense the breath. The breath is the way for me.

Nancy: So what have you learned? What have you come to - both of you - in terms of what is a healthy relationship between the body and the mind?

Juerg: A healthy relationship between the body and mind? I love life. I love living.

Nancy: OK, where is your mind in that? It's not controlling, right? It's not anticipating. It's not manipulating?

Juerg: No. The mind is participating, and it is a friend.

Nancy: OK. It handles the details of life.

Juerg: It starts when I need to cross the street, and I do it when the light is green.

Nancy: So it's safe.

Juerg: And I do not experience my mind any more as disturbing, or as controlling, or inhibiting what I feel what I should live. I love to live my life. My mind is not an enemy any more. It's part of myself and it has its right position that's in balance with the body.

Nancy: Kai do you want to say anything about that?

Kai: Just how deceptive it can be to live with this as concepts only and talk about mind, body, and soul while in actuality a true experience of wholeness is still far away. It is a very different step and a very important step to actually experience and realize what that means to *be* in the body.

Nancy: Mmm.

Kai: It has taken me a long time to come into what we call the lower space, to realize what that is. Of course I have legs! (Squeezing legs)

Nancy: (laughs)

Kai: I can feel my legs. But it is a completely different experience, transformation and access that becomes available when I connect to them from the inside through sensation.

Nancy: Un huh.

Kai: When my legs become connected to my mind and to my emotions, then the way I speak, or the way I walk, or the way I do anything becomes much more embodied. If you primarily relate to things mentally, you tend to zoom into a fragment, and another fragment, and another fragment, and eventually you lose touch with the greater whole and you end up sawing on the twig you sit on - so to speak.

Juerg: The body is the simplest reality that we have.

Nancy: That's right. It's always present.

Juerg: I have a plain orientation and if I stay with the sensation, I can be very clear. I have a very clear reference to orient to, and it's very easy. And at that moment I sense the breath and the breath takes me further. The breath encompasses everything. It has my emotional, my spiritual, and my physical state of being.

Nancy: Wow! On that note, which is so perfect for both of you, we are at the end of our time. I do want to say, Juerg, you come back and forth to the east coast, but your center is based in California and the website is on the screen for people: <http://www.breathexperience.com/>

And Kai, you're based here in the east coast, and conducting workshops regularly, so people can go to the website and get the information, and find out about upcoming workshops and ways to connect with this work. I think we've shown Ilse's book on the screen (Photo of the cover of *The Perceptible Breath*) and how to get that. (U.S. Middendorf Institute for Breathexperience, 830 Bancroft Way, Suite 104, Berkeley, CA 94710). So thank you both for being on this show.

Juerg: Thank you, Nancy.

Nancy: Thank you for listening. This is Nancy Rosanoff of the "Listening Place" saying bye for now.