How Does Physical Therapy Meet Breathwork and Spiritual/Emotional Healing? Cole Thorton from Atman PT Transcript

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Introduction to Mind-Body Philosophy

This is where I think this topic gets so interesting because it moves beyond the realm of science and medicine and it moved into metaphysics and philosophy.

And you can use these techniques without buying into this. I tell people in my studio all the time like, I might get a little weird when I'm talking about this, if you think it's too weird I am just joking.

If you like it, I'm not joking at all. I am completely serious about what I will say. You have to get into the realm of metaphysics when you get to that mind-body problem.

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It's story, art, and connection. Today we have a special guest. His name is Cole Thornton. He's a physical therapist and owner of Atman Healing and Wellness here in Sacramento, right down the street from Chum Mines.

And he practices health and wellness physical therapy and teaches as well group classes in functional movement, breath work, and meditation. He also is going to be doing some breathwork classes here at Shaw Minds and really enjoyed that community connection that we have in Shaw minds.

I've always imagined Shaw mind to a collective, so people bringing in their specialty, their interest to really support wellness and healing. he firmly believes that physical and psychological health are beautifully linked and that breath work and meditation and physical habits that align with our deeper human nature are keys to unlocking true wellness.

So welcome Cole, thank you for being here today. Thank you. For having me. What exactly is functional or what you call natural human movement and why is it important?

So natural movement is all of those physical practices that we as human beings are really designed for. And most of those practices aren't things that were doing in our modern life.

So humans are movement generalists and my training as a doctor of physical therapy informs a lot of this practice, but we're movement, generalist. We move in a variety of different ways in the natural world.

and in artificial modern world, we don't move those ways. so natural human movement.

Podcast Welcome and Guest Introduction

is just all the ways that if you were a primitive human, you would be needing to move to survive. And honestly, it's a lot of ways, that kids naturally move.

If you just leave them to do physical play without intervening, its crawling, jumping, lifting things, throwing things climbing on things. So it is a much broader view of functional movement than what most people probably have.

And why is it important to know this and teach us more about how functional movement changes or evolves with human conditions and deconditioning? So I really don't think that human movement has had adequate time to evolve to modern demands.

We still live in caveman bodies. Um, we still have the same brains and minds as cavemen. Modern humans have been around for a really long time and modern life has only been the way we live it maybe 150 years at most.

So it's important because these are the movements and practices that, um, we were really designed for, either by nature or by whatever your belief system is.

We were designed to do specific things just like any other animal. And what's interesting about it is a lot of the diseases of affluence or these lifestyle diseases that we as modern humans have, you'll see analogues to that in animals in the zoo.

So, if you deprive any other animal its natural environment and its ability to move and behave naturally, it will get sick, will be obese, get chronic pain, painful osteoarthritis, mood disorders, depression, anxiety.

They can't kill themselves, but I'm sure if they had the capability, you would see suicidality. But they don't reproduce in captivity very well. So in essence, because we don't engage with these movements and these habits, and it's far broader than movement, Because we do not engage in these natural human habits.

It's like we've put ourselves in a zoo. a human zoo and we're getting very sick and depressed and anxious because of it. So it's important because you reconnect with that primal drive within your biology to move in this way, to behave in certain ways, express certain energies that you have inborn within you.

And it leads to health and wellness, but I think more importantly, satisfaction and happiness as well. Yeah, I can think back to my childhood where, of course, there were no cell phones or TV even.

And we play all day long. I lived in Pakistan and we lived on a boarding school, the boys boarding schools. So my father was the house master and the whole school was our playground.

It was a military boarding School. military type things like the swings and the sand pits. For us, it was like a playground and all day long, I remember hanging upside down from the goal post and just hanging up upside-down.

It's amazing and it's actually really sad when you look at what we've done to children in particular because What you were doing and what children do is part of our neurobiology.

That physical play is so intrinsically rewarding to kids because that's how kids learn the movement skills that they need to survive, just like any other animal.

Just like if you look at kittens and they play fight and the stalk each other and pounce on each. They're learning physical movement, skills and behaviors that need survive as full grown cats.

And so kids naturally do this if given the opportunity, but because of the screens and the phones and all the extra technological stuff that we throw at our kids, we don't let them do.

Natural Human Movement and Childhood Play

And it worries me as a physical therapist, because up until this point with the people that I treat, I'm working with nervous systems that have that groundwork laid already because they had natural to a degree childhoods.

You and I and those older than us. They had childhoods like you're describing where you are physically playing and you socializing and face to face and your building those neural structures.

And I'm worried because kids these days aren't even building them. So I know how to bring those back online as a neurophysical therapist. I did a number of years in a neural rehab unit.

Im confident with that. Am curious when Gen Z and these younger kids, when they have issues, you dealing with Not even a tabula rasa, it's not even just a blank slate to build those structures, but aberrant structures that have formed because they were babies looking at screens and they didn't get their tummy time.

And they don't have free outdoor play and didn' have face to face socialization. So in essence, this is why the natural human movement is so important.

It's reclaiming all of these things that are so necessary. We think, oh, well, you don' need to crawl around on the ground and climb up trees to survive anymore.

But if that's what your biology demands that you do, you're going to be painful, and you are going be stiff, You're gonna be unhappy. You are gonna feel like this deep anxiety that comes from the fact that your an animal that doesn't have the animal skills to survive.

And so the childhood you describing is exactly what I want people to experience. When they come into Ottoman, they say that a lot. They say, oh, it feels like being a kid and I'm out on the playground doing this sort of stuff.

That's a huge compliment to me. I really love hearing that. Yeah, I can't agree with you more. I find that as a physician, you know, we aren't taught this in medical school and it's vital to, medicine, healing.

It surprises me that we haven't been taught and I had to really learn the science behind breathwork to believe it myself because I was like, how did I miss this?

How did we not really bring it to our attention? Is it Western medicine? is it the Eastern arts that's lost? I come from an Eastern art healing tradition.

I can remember, I mean, just meditatively practices that we do on a ritual basis was And there was a different way of living there. So access to me is, oh, yeah, I know that I have the history of that in my body, that experience.

But so many people here in Western medicine or in, my experience here, because I practice globally as well. And I came back to the United States after 10 years.

I could sense it right away in the hospital. What is going on? This is chaos. This medicine is chaotic. And it had an effect on me too. So what is missing?

I think about that a lot as well because it's troubling as someone who also comes from a Western, I mean, a clinical doctorate in physical therapy, they're not We go over breathing.

We're a softer art, physical therapy. we cannot escape that because it won't work. So we're much more in the biopsychosocial model of medicine than most physicians who are practicing in mechanistic model medicine.

And so we are a little better off in that regard. But even still, we don't talk about this stuff. I was taught breath work as a relaxation technique and as core stability training.

And I used it that way and I loved it. I didn't know that my love for it went as deep as it did until I able to break out of that Western medical model.

So I had a long tradition. in my life of engaging with Eastern practices. So I've been a lifelong martial artist and I had a lot of time in the more esoteric martial arts that the inner martial art, so Aikido and Tai Chi are the two inner ones, which they're notoriously impractical in them, the martial aspect, but something really drew me to them.

And I think it was the inter practice cultivating what they described as Chi or Ki in Japan. This idea of like, inner energy that you can direct and use to benefit yourself and others.

And so that's when I first started practicing meditation, but that stayed very bracketed in my life and I went, I was an EMT and worked on the ambulance service and.

Wanted to stay in healthcare. So I wasn't interested in exercise. I want physical therapy school. and all that sort of stuff. And then the COVID situation happened and I was so disillusioned in a lot of ways with how people were being treated.

I, was working in the hospital at the time and looking at people dying by themselves. in rooms with air scrubbers and the only people they saw were in hazmat suits.

And I saw old people come in, mildly symptomatic and they get thrown into these isolation rooms and develop dementia rapidly because they're removed from all normal social interactions.

People forget that our state of mind is a social thing. Like you need feedback from other sane people to know that your experience of reality is sane and so they would just deteriorate so fast.

And it was heartbreaking really. And I thought this is wrong. That's when I stopped practicing in the mainstream medical model. I became a cash pay physical therapist.

My wife and I become very interested in home birthing. So our middle and our youngest daughter were born at home and seeing this sort of things that happen to women and babies and birthing units in the hospital and the sort of, the way that that mechanistic model of medicine manifests during COVID with infectious disease, during childbirth, all the time.

And then so you go down these rabbit holes. So then it was a long process of being okay with the fact that I am going to be weird. Like there's going, my colleagues, nurses, they're going to think that I'm weird and they are going think this stuff doesn't work and that it's pseudoscience.

But then I went on a meditation retreat and I don't know if you're familiar with Joe Dispenza.

Western Medicine, COVID, and the Shift to Holistic Care

He teaches meditation techniques, a little bit of breath work. I was already more into the breathwork stuff. So it wasn't the breadth work specifically, but the meditations.

he teaches, I meeting people who were treating diseases that Western medicine says are incurable or untreatable. And I know that these people weren't like being paid.

by the people putting on this event. They were just random people at meet-up meals and one woman had a cancerous tumor and she went to one of these meditation retreats and they went in to remove it and it had encroached entirely with perfect margins.

And there's a man there who had Parkinson's, he was barely functioning with a walker and on levodopa and all the Parkinson meds. He was completely off all his medications, not using an assistive device, walking up and down stairs, He had a mild tremor in one hand.

And my professional eye, I know that guy was faking it, but he actually had Parkinsons. And so it's like that CMS, like all these diseases that Western medicine can't treat.

Now Western Medicine does a lot of things really, really well. And I give it credit for things that happen fast. Infections, car crash, you know? You were in a car crash and you need spine surgery to stabilize.

Cool. Like you guys are great at that, but you don't do a lot of things well when it happens slowly because those things that manifest slowly are so multifaceted, multifactorial and so linked to our mental state, our psychological and psychic health.

And when you do not address that or you only address it by giving mood stabilizing drugs. Then it's like, okay, well, I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised that all these lifestyle diseases continue to get worse.

And so that was my big transition. I was like, okay, I am going to still do the physical stuff because someone sprains his or her ankle and they come in to see me.

Like, cool, let's work on your ankle, and do some exercise. Now, if your sprained ankle still hurts two years from now, when all that tissue is well healed and remodeled, there's more going on there.

Western medicine at that point would dismiss you. say that there's nothing they can do or say all we can, do is give you drugs or we, can try surgery or like all this others what they need is to tap into that other side of their being.

So that's kind of like this transformation from being a kid who was really engaged with these inner practices because I thought martial arts were really cool.

to being a therapist that was so disillusioned with how Western medicine is practiced because of that mechanical model and realizing, oh, wow, we're so much.

And then of course you have a psychedelic experience and you're like, well, this is not all there is. Like, you can't tell me after what I've seen, there's this isn't all, and so if, how can you ignore that?

Like if you are a clinician. And you know that people are more than just this. Like, how can you ignore that? So it was a tough transition because we are so ostracized as practitioners who want to engage at this level.

It's like you're a pseudoscientist. That stuff doesn't work. It's your quack, it's like, maybe, but. Yeah. Tell us more about breath work and how you utilize that in your practice.

And I'm sure it has a lot to do with mind, body and meditation as well. So mind-body connection, breathwork, functional movement, meditation. That's exactly.

Exactly right. So I think of breath work as really the connection between the physical and the psychic, psychological, spiritual words for the same thing.

The inner side of the practice and outer physical practice, and inner meditative practice are both of paramount importance. But how do you bridge those two?

Because we're spiritual beings living in a material manifest reality, and the breath work is really, in my practice and what I teach, it's the key to connecting those really effectively.

And it is non-denominational. Breath work as human heritage. Every single traditional society has some breath-work practice, some way to induce trance states or nonordinary states of consciousness, because that's so essential to us as humans.

For us, breathwork is a really good way of doing that. Now the cool thing about breath work is that it bridges those. So it is a spiritual practice, but it's physical.

Your diaphragm is core muscle. You do breathwork and you learn to use your diaphragms and suddenly your low back pain gets better. Not just because you're dealing with your anxiety, depression, psychological issues via the

inner work, But because your helping stabilize your core too.

These practices each engage. on, on all the different levels of your being, but breath work is the one that I think most readily crosses those boundaries.

And it's very physical, But it is very spiritual. You get deep into these trance states via breathwork. Um, and so people coming in for the first time who can't meditate themselves into a non-ordinary state of consciousness, I could probably get them breathing in such a way that they can experience those states and kind of peek through the keyhole and see what's possible.

Well, walk us through the, you know, the types of breath work, because I'm sure there is a variety that you actually provide and what would be recommended for what kind of necessary, I guess, connection or reconnection.

It's a little more about types or breathwork. So I teach a variety and breathwork techniques are tools. So it depends on what you want to achieve. Some of the techniques don't get as much time in Atman because their utility is limited for most people.

There's traditional pranayamas, the yoga breath work techniques. there's tradition pranyamas for cooling off your body and for like doing these other fun little things.

That's not as important to me. The big picture thing is those non-ordinary states of consciousness or engaging the parasympathetic nervous system, turning off that fight or flight response that so many of us live with day to day.

And so the main techniques that we teach fall into one of those two categories. Are these relaxation techniques? which are usually deep breathing, slow exhales, extended breath holds, typically after the exhale.

Those are kind of the characteristics that you see in parasympathetic nervous system engaging breath work. That would be, in the most basic sense, box breathing.

Counting four in, hold for four, four out, pull for for. You can extend those. exhales and external retention. So like four in, hold for four, eight out, pull for eight, 16 out hold, for 16. That would be a very basic way to do that.

But then you can start adding more bells and whistles to it. Humming techniques, that engages the parasympathetic nervous system, mostly through the vagus nerve.

If you hum and especially if you bring it down into the throat, the way a lot of traditional cultures like Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing, where they have the really deep resonant humming sounds, While the vagus nerve is stimulated by all that vibration and through your neck, so it has this pronounced relaxation effect.

So that's one category. The other category is the hyperventilation style breath work. And this was really pioneered in the West by Stanislav Grof, who was a psychiatrist who is utilizing psychedelics therapeutically to great success.

And why those medicines got put on the schedule, schedule one drugs is another conversation that will expose my predilection for conspiracy theories. But, but she was using LSD very effectively.

Suddenly it's illegal. Despite being so physically safe, it was made illegal and he had to develop a way to get those non-ordinary states of consciousness that were so therapeutic.

And so he developed polytropic breathing. From there, branches off into all various kind of trademark styles of hyperventilation, which I don't teach any specific one because when you boil it down, have some music playing, breathe deep, breath fast, put some breath holds in there.

take people too far too quickly and you're going to do pretty, pretty well with it. So for our hyperventilation style, we do multiple rounds of deep circular breathing, either nose or mouth.

And we alternate it with external breath hold, so blowing all the air out and folding, and we finish with an extended breath fold. And, we take that straight into a meditation because if you're going to do the work, you should take advantage of it.

The breath work again is that bridge. So, the hyperventilation style breath works really like a chair lift that takes you most of the way up a mountain and then you can meditate and get to the peak.

You can take what would take you five hours of meditating, you can do it in an hour and a half because of the breath work. So those are the two main ones, the parasympathetic engaging for relaxation.

It's much easier to introduce people to that or hyperventilation, which is an excitatory kind of flipping sympathetic parasympathetic nervous system on and off.

But in doing this and in changing your blood chemistry, your gas chemistry and the perfusion of your brain, another interesting topic, but lowering the profusion and it induces these more vivid internal states.

Yeah, I was fascinated by the book Breathe because he really goes through kind of all the different types and physiologically what's changing. You know, you talked about the polyvagal effect in both the parasympathetic and sympathetic system.

I call the vagus nerve the connector nerve, you know, the nerve that just connects everything to every organ in the body. I can remember as a medical student dissecting cadavers and the vegas nerve was almost everywhere.

And so it was always on exams. Well, if you don't know the answer, just guess the branch of a vagous nerve. It has to be the branches.

Breathwork as the Bridge Between Body and Mind

Our anatomist was so mean. If you dissected, If he severed a nerve he would pin it to the wrong place. Yeah. On the exam. So you have to be real careful with your dissection.

But yeah, the vagus nerve is just, it's ubiquitous throughout. And it is. It's really how you can control so much with breath work is via those systems, which aren't automatic.

People get this wrong. They can run automatically. But ancient yogis demonstrated this and there's modern breathwork practitioners who have demonstrated these things, blood pressure, heart rate, sweating, temperature of your skin, circulation that we take for granted as automatic can be controlled.

And that's really important because disease state can't be control as well via the same mechanism. So, but yeah, they deserve. Yeah, the vagus nerve. And so I can see how the systems kind of all come together.

The mind, body, spiritual connection, both breath and then the physiological connection just with the muscle, right? Movement, kind the rhythm. Breath is almost, we don't even think about breathing, and yet we breathe every single day of our life.

every second of our lives. But when we bring focus to breath, what changes? And there is something that changes when you actually bring focused towards our breath whether it be to align with that relaxation or to get to a non-ordinary state.

So I'm very curious about both ends of that. I'd like to ask you some questions about holotropic breath work because that's fascinating. What actually would you say is physiologically restorative about that and how does that actually happen?

I don't think it's really well understood, honestly, which makes it exciting. I am willing to give fair dues to science, but… I always keep in mind that science is an investigative tool that is trying to make sense of phenomenon via

correlation.

It's not explaining the reality of these things in a deeper sense. And so I don't think science has caught up to exactly why things like breath work can induce these states, there's theories, and also why these States are so restorative.

Now, one theory that I've really I've heard and it really drives with what I understand about non-ordinary states of consciousness is that reduction in perfusion of the brain.

And what. I find interesting about that theory is, that it relies on an understanding of mind brain that is different. from what most people assume. So most assume, because of our Western, dualist view of reality, that the brain produces the mind via electrical stimuli.

And it's somehow, we can't explain how in this theory, but it somehow makes this mind as an epiphenomenon of the Brain, as opposed to the view that's more aligned with traditional teaching, which is that, the Mind precedes the body, and the Body and Brain manifest from the mind, so the brain really functions as a survival valve for us, for the minds.

So it takes reality and it whittles it down into chunks that we can understand so that can survive. It's the ego, essentially, the survival part of the Divert energy away from that limiting valve of the brain, you get more reality.

You don't get less. And this really aligns with recent research in things like psilocybin, where they find that despite small spikes in brain activity, global brain activities drops drastically with psillocybine.

Despite the fact that your inner experience on psilocybin is way more deep and profound and vivid than your everyday waking experiences, near death experience, sometimes no discernible brain activity and people are having the most vivid experiences of their lives.

So I think breath work is functioning in a similar way that when you hyperventilate, you decrease the perfusion of your brain, that limiting valve is turned down a little bit.

You turn it down and you just get this more intense, vivid inner experience. And I think via that, you get a more, intense connection with who you truly are as an entity or a being.

Now, the cool thing about breathwork is you can stop hyperventilating. You can just go back to your normal breathing and if it gets too intense, unlike psilocybin, where you're there for the whole ride, whether you want it to be or not, you are at eight hours of whatever it wants to show you.

That's my theory about how it is physically inducing these states. So as a physician and just thinking about the acid-base balance, the homeostasis that the brain, body works at, right?

When you actually breathe, you're actually blowing off CO2. You actually go into kind of an acidotic state, almost a near-death state because it can drop really, really fast.

And that disconnection that you're describing, the dissociation from what people describe that default mode operating system, that awake state, say, or that sense of self-state, whatever you want to call that, default-mode, operating-system that we normally are existing in.

And we can talk about that in waveform. We can say well that's the alpha state. That's your alpha frequency operating. Just for a brief, through-breath release, right, the system slows down, something changes.

Whether it's the, we get more theta waves, you know, that distractible meditative in the brain. whether that changes the chemistry of the rain, whether we're having less, blowing off CO2, because we are exhaling more than we were inhaling.

So there's a chemical change, and then comes that spiritual connection, disconnection, like what is the mind-body connection? What is that sense of self?

what changes in that state that allows for, again, something else to show up, some other type of perception, call it. And this is where I think. This gets so interesting.

This is where I think this topic gets interesting because it moves beyond the realm of science and medicine, and it move into metaphysics and philosophy.

And you can use these techniques without buying into this.

Types of Breathwork and Nervous System Effects

I tell people in my studio all the time, like, I might get a little weird when I'm talking about this, if you think it's too weird, just joking. If you like it, not joking at all.

Completely serious about what I am going to say. Like I believe it wholeheartedly, that's why I teach it this way. But you have to get into the room of metaphysics when you get into that mind-body problem.

Because modern science will never bridge that gap. You can never describe a way in which a physical brain, if you view of the brain as a physically separate thing, can manifest a subjective mind.

It just is impossible. And so my understanding of this comes from an ancient Hindu tradition called Kashmir Shaivism or non-dual Shaism, which is essentially just a type of philosophical idealism.

Which is a branch of philosophy saying, What we describe as material doesn't exist. Not in the way that people think it doesn' exist, it does'nt exist as matter, as something separate.

It's simply one manifestation of mental stuff. And if you view it in that way, everything you're describing with the acid-base balance and what's going on physically with your brain, well, that makes perfect sense because you are making a deeper spiritual change via the breath work, via moving energy with a breathwork.

It then manifests in an observable way physically. And it's like… A great way to think about it is that you can look at an MRI of someone's brain and you, as a trained physician, you could probably have a good sense of what that MRI is telling you.

But that correlates to an inner state that only the person living with that brain can experience. And so that divide is kind of the material divide. I look and I see something that is different from what it feels like to be you Just like you look at someone who's angry and their facial expression shows anger.

And it correlates to the feeling of anger, but the feelings of the anger precedes that. So it's this mental stuff is basement level. In philosophy, it would be the ontologically primitive stuff, is mental.

That is what everything is at the basic level, in a spiritual sense you can say whatever you think that is. God, the void, whatever. But that's basement-level stuff.

What is matter bubbles out of it. And we as individual entities are one little lump in that. that universal mind and we think we're separate because we can see other little lumps poking up.

And we are like, look at all those people. Look at that stuff that's separate from me. You do the breath work or you do good work with ketamine or psilocybin or LSD or have a near-death experience or meditate deep enough to reach these states.

And what you realize is that sense of self, small s self as a little lump in this universal mind is an illusion. You're a wave on the ocean and the oceans stills.

And then you realized, oh, I'm the Ocean and everyone else is the Oceans too. and we're all just one thing and that's a beautiful state to reach. I think that is why it's so restorative is because when you can tap into that, it is like, I don't know if you remember going away for college when you were young, but you go home and it's restorative.

We all have homesickness as… beings under the illusion that we're separate and when you connect back to that source of what we all are, it cures that homesickness for a time.

And so tapping into that regularly. You can go deeper into what you can do when your in that state and how that can help your physical health and mental health, and all that, but simply engaging with that cure your homes sickness as a universal being who thinks your separate.

I think breath work is the most accessible way for people to experience that. Yeah, I think you're beautifully describing kind of what we call in when we do treatments, of course, breath and again, bringing that focus to your body, bring in that, you know, disengaging from this place that tends to be the one place we always use, at least for me I can speak for that.

But bringing focus into our breath. You know, that awareness changes somehow something. As soon as you say that, it just kind of something releases as this, ah, you know.

Lifting and this kind. And then rhythmically, I've seen you in your class and I was in just listening to the breath, the rhythm of the breathe in the group and there was this in effect and like, there wasn't energetic.

There was. connection that everyone was having with that breath and the sounds and it was so beautiful to just quietly listen because it gave me a sense of peace and I could feel the energy that was in that space.

And then what you're also describing is what happens internally or externally is that connection to something bigger than ourselves, that mystical or external unity or internal unity and that disengagement from you know, the mind and the access, forgetting about time and space.

And people had many types of experiences in mystical levels, something you can't even describe. You know? And many aha moments have emerged from that.

I think most of what people experience can be adequately described. Which that in and of itself is an interesting topic as well, because things you're describing right now, this ego sense of self, default mode network, space, time, these are frameworks the ego mind has put on reality for us to survive.

Like time and space are really helpful. If you're an entity that's trying to perpetuate your own existence, but they're not fundamental to reality. Quantum physics is showing us this now, that space and time are not at all fundamental.

Ancient yogis and gurus understood that 10,000 years ago. So it's really interesting that topic of how do you describe these experiences? Anyone who's had a deep meditative or breath work or psychedelic experience, can't use words to describe it.

I think there's a good reason for that. That language is itself. Yeah, and language is a survival tool. Language is not universal. It's not all pervasive.

We have experiences as humans that precede language and that you cannot describe with language. In traditional esoteric teachings, those would be initiatory experiences.

And what that means is that, you can only know this by experiencing it. You can't be taught this because language cannot grasp what you're trying to experience.

And for a lot of modern people, that's frustrating because you do mushrooms and you're trying to describe it to your loved ones. And I just can't put into words, it was just, kind of like this, but it wasn't exactly like that, It was more than that.

Or a deep dive on ketamine, and it's more that what I can describe, or the breathwork. Yeah, I was like, kinda like but I cant use words. Those are initiatory experiences, you understand them on a level that is deeper.

What's cool, The more you engage with those practices, the more can separate the ego mind away from your broader self.

Holotropic Breathwork, Brain Chemistry, and Metaphysics

And the most you can engage those things that precede language like intuition, like the felt sense of your body, interoception. We teach people in Atman that one way meditation improves physical health is it improves interosception, you know what's happening in your Directly you don't have to like have a x-ray show you or an MRI machine show.

You you feel it you know it You can't describe it necessarily And so there's all sorts of human experiences that precede language and so I always find it so fascinating when people have these experiences and I'll have people leave and they say I I don' know I can say, I just have think about that.

I need to decompress like I to think about that experience more. And that to me is a really good sign. It's like you hit the right spot, which is you left that ego mind that is consumed with language and explicit knowledge, and you went deeper than that.

That's what I really want people to do with breathwork, because I think that's when you get to that restorative level where you kind of go home, so to speak, Well, to think outside the box, and I think it's vitally important, I thing, for us to kind of change the narrative of what medicine is.

One is that medicine, is also spiritual healing. Medicine is, also emotional connections. Storytelling in the form of medicine. You know, sitting with somebody and not having to give any prescription, but just listening is medicine holding from this hand.

What always appealed to me about physical therapy even before I got on this path was as a therapist, you are the treatment. The moment you walk in that hospital room, your treating that patient whether you realize it or not.

When you put your hands on a person, whether your doing a joint mobilization or massage or simply putting your hand on them. That is treatment, Your energy.

as a human is affecting theirs and it can heal or it could hurt. Whether you know it or realize it, or not. And I worry because so many practitioners hurt with their energy.

They don't heal. But yeah, healing is, we are participating in an archetype that precedes both of our professions. Like, there have been healers for as long as there've been human beings.

And we used to call them shamans. That is the archetype we're participating in. Our professions behave as though we are scientists. There's science involved, but that's a tool that we use.

We're not scientists We're healers. Whatever your degree or your profession is, you're a healer. And we've lost those basic principles that healors for all the epochs before this really understood, which is that it's an energetic communication between the heal and the patient.

You need to engage on these deeper levels. You can't just treat them like a card that you're taking to the mechanic. They're not going to get better. And that's how most medicine is practiced these days.

Like, let's change your oil and rotate your tires and you'll be fine. It's like, that not how people work. Yeah. I think it's beautiful that we, you know, we're talking about being quacks, but really it is not quack.

To me, it really is the very art of healing. Going back to basics of that relationship, as you are describing. Yes. Well,

Aldous Huxley has a really good quote.

There's a good from Aldus Hugsley that he says, and I'll try and get this right, but it is no sign of health to be well adapted to a profoundly sick society.

So I'm proudly a quack if it means that I am not well adjusted to the culture of medicine that prevails in the West these days. I'm okay with that. Go ahead, call me whatever you want.

But if people get better because of my quackery and breathing and meditating and moving your body naturally, even though I don't have all the meta-analyses behind it to prove most of which are not reproducible and some of them are falsified, like the whole evidence-based thing is I can go off on that, but then yeah, I am happy for people who are doing the horrible things that I see happening in modern medicine.

People doing that, calling me a quack is kind of a badge of honor, so. warm. Because you're thinking broader, bigger. You're making integratively kind of connecting every part of that.

And really, again, there are things that we don't know. Almost everything. So back to kind your story about, you know, how came to be where you are today.

I find that this is the common thread that I often hear in patients' stories, too. Something brought you here today, I say this to patients, it's not the ketamine, its not medicine, something else brought you here to be better, to heal.

What was it that you feel like you were seeking or what was the question that was unfulfilled? What is that motivation or drive for you that brought to this place?

Seeing enough people that, well, let me backtrack a little bit. Pain science was really important. So treating people in chronic pain and seeing how bizarre pain is and how misunderstood pain, is not just by patients, but by practitioners and clinicians as well.

pain viewed mechanically makes no sense. You'll find that for all your assumptions about mechanical pain. Almost every experience people have with pain contradicts those assumptions in some way.

So trying to treat people with chronic pain and being unable to, in a mechanical way, kind of push me in this direction as well. You spend enough time with the nervous system and you realize this is magic.

Like, there's no other way to describe what's happening with people's nervous systems. So that helps push me in that direction. I think what you're describing for what gets people to that point that they're willing to take that leap or to have that journey.

That you don't understand where it comes from, but at some point in your life or in a life that you're going to manifest and you are called to walk this path.

I mentioned that a lot of this happened during the COVID lockdowns and, and working in healthcare at that time, I wouldn't change it as horrible as all that was.

because it really pushed me on this path. It made me comfortable with being a bit of an outcast. Personally, I had a dark night of the soul as well, and I was able to experience firsthand the healing effects of breath work and meditation, these practices I was familiar with, but utilizing them in that capacity.

Ketamine. My first experience with the therapeutic use of ketamine was so eye opening and world shaking that I had to investigate what's going on here.

And once you start wondering what is going, it's the next step for anyone in clinical work is, well, how do I use this? I can't give people ketamine on a physical therapist.

I could teach people how to breathe. We're like the best at that. That dark night of the soul was using psilocybin therapeutically. And that medicine is so profound and so deep and just has so much to offer that when you have that experience, there's really no turning back from that.

If you've had a one that you went into intentionally that, you actually tried to work with the medicine that brought something back, from the journey that weren't just there as a tourist having fun.

It's hard to come back. From that and not be changed by that Again, how do you use that in the current climate? How do use what you learn? Well, breath work and meditation, every psychedelic state and experience that people have had throughout history has been had by people who meditate or by who use breathwork or people in shamanic trances.

They've described all of it. There's nothing that anyone has experienced with EMT that hasn't happened during a shmanic journey. So it's like, That was the path forward for me was I'm going to investigate these practices more.

Yeah. I think you described that as initiatory practices that both breath work and meditations are initiator practices. And how does that initiatory practice change relationships with themselves?

It seemed to, I feel like that's kind of maybe what you're describing is this relationship change for that systems and also. It's an initiation into a reality that you were unaware of before.

That's why all the verbiage that we use for these things makes sense in this context. Awakening, enlightenment, it's like I'm not saying I am an enlightened being, but the process of awakening.

Well, yeah, when you've had these initiatory experiences, someone can't tell you to be awakened. You wake up, that's what happens. And we joke about, I have a group of friends that, we all go to the beach.

few times every year. It's all men. We have families at home, so we get our male bonding time. And we joke because one of the guys is a hard-nosed materialist.

Every time we're there, we talk to him about ghosts because we know he doesn't believe in ghosts. And so it's kind of an ongoing joke now that we make fun of Nick for not believing in ghosts.

Initiatory Experiences, Healing, and Narrative Medicine

But it is actually a great example of this that I don't care how much you tell me ghosts aren't real. I've had an experience with an entity. It's like you can't convince me that's fake.

Just like I can convince you it real because if your eyes are closed, I cant convince to open them. It's like a blind man saying vision doesn't exist.

It is like, sorry, I've opened my eyes. I know it exists. That's the initiatory experience. Can't describe what the color orange looks like. You have to experience the colour orange to know what it looks.

And breathwork, psychedelics, meditation are the same thing. But, and once you're, you've gone down that path, You can't go back. Like you have that experience, like you can undo that.

And no person, no scientist coming to me and saying, oh, well, what you experienced was simply an epiphenomenon of your brain going haywire when you took mushrooms.

It's like, yeah, you can say that, but I was on the inside and I know what actually happened. And you cant convince me otherwise. So it's interesting too, cause these initiatory experiences escape science.

They're subjective. Science only works by correlating objective phenomenon or in looking at the objective traces of subjective phenomenon and then correlating those, but even then it starts to go off the rails a little bit.

And I'm sure you know this as a psychiatrist, it's like, you can't get the inside picture. looking at a brain scan, you can correlate it to a degree, but you'll never know what someone's grief feels like, or what their love feels, like or their inner experience of joy feels.

It's impossible. Those are initiatory experiences. They escape science, they're inherently subjective. And so it's one reason that I'm more skeptical of a lot of science is that when you start going down this path, Okay, well, more of what we attribute to the outside world as objective is truly subjective phenomenon within our own consciousness.

And so then it opens you up a little bit to saying that these are useful practices, even though you can't get good data on them and study them in the way you could study some pharmaceutical that you're giving people.

Yeah, which is what brought me to a narrative medicine and narrative, medicine, meaning you will use creativity arts to really try to, I can say to patients, they can only try understand what it feels like for you.

And to be able to try, to do that so that we can, you know, support that healing process in the best way possible. Well, that's the distinction is you're supporting their healing, right?

And that the, distinction that modern medicine doesn't have is. Modern medicine says we're healing you. We're curing you, we are fixing you." I think your approach, the traditional approach the shamanic approach is, We are guides, were guiding you towards your own healing.

You're doing the work. I've always loved that about therapy. If you do the working and you get better, I just tell you what to do, which means if you succeed, you'll get the credit.

But if I fail, then I don't get to blame. And it's the same thing. And interestingly enough, also, I don't know if you're aware, Stanislav Grof, part of his process was to draw mandalas after the experience.

He would have his patients draw a mandala to try and integrate the subjective experience they had during the breath work or during LSD when he was able to work with that medicine.

But it's so personal. Health and healing are so personally and medicine has lost that because we try to treat it like bill your balls on a table or like baking a cake that you put this amount of baking soda in and it will make the cake rise.

It's like, it's not how we function as organisms. And they say it's spontaneous remission when they can't explain it. Or they says the placebo effect.

It's all these little tricks of language to say, we actually don't know why you get better. Yeah. I mean, there's so many books and articles now. Now I do have to once you start really looking into this work, There is science.

There are is more and more that we are learning that were allowing to kind of open our minds to, you know, I think we can take this narrowed vision anymore.

So I think culturally things are changing right now and it's really, really good. It's, I, think it a really change that's happening. There are more people who are open to this sort of thing.

They're still the old guard that is going to say that, no, everything you experience is just because your brain's flickering on and off in this little pattern.

And that all you are and you're nothing else. they still are around, but I. Hopefully. In the next few generations of clinicians and practitioners, we're going to have more people who are open and not in the condescending way.

You encounter some of those people that are like, oh yeah, the breathing that works for you. That's great. Just keep doing it if that work. Also, here's a whole bunch of drugs with all these side effects that we are going give you, because I actually don't think that what you're doing is going work, so.

There's that side of it, but I do think we have kind of like a shift in how we view health and wellness and a return to some of these practices that we've forgotten about in the West that they've remembered in a lot of Eastern traditions that used to be part of our heritage too.

Like ancient Greek physicians taught people how to exercise and eat right and sleep and meditate and do all these things and breathe and all this stuff that that were teaching and talking about now.

Big Pharma gets involved. They fund medical schools, they fund journals. Suddenly, the only way to practice medicine is to say that we need to give you pills and surgery and this, that, and the other.

Breathing's free. Yeah, it is free, and I will say this, so it does increase brain derived neurotropic factor, which is a medicine in the brain that you all get to have when we are in a good, healthy state of mind, when you are eating healthy and sleeping well and connecting with each other.

Our brains are great pharmacies that they make everything we need for us. You just got to put the order in and it'll do it. Yeah. DMT, your pineal gland makes DM.

All there, all the medicine is in your body. So tell us, we close usually with this and you know, what is a question or cause this is two Curious 70s and we have to have questions.

We love questions, We Love pushing the envelope, testing things out, theories, which is what your journey sounds like. you just didn't accept the status quo.

you are seeking or you have for us or for our audience or the work that you're doing. My big question with all of this is how far can it go? Like I've seen some remarkable things in other people, I have experienced remarkable states of mind.

I'm only scratching the surface and I know that's the case. And even still I am overwhelmed. So my big question and what I think this practice is going to be for the rest of my life is how deep does this tunnel go?

How far can this go clinically? I've met people who have cured cancer this way. I met, people have cure neurodegenerative disease this, way like I have heard stories of people, who've regrown thyroids and done wild stuff via meditation.

And it's like, it sounds insane. How far can this really go? And I'm really excited that there are doctors like you who are pursuing that and trying to heal people and help them heal themselves in this way.

I am going to keep doing it. It's catch breath works really popular now, which is great. Happy there's so many people doing that. micro laboratories all over the world now of people breathing and meditating and utilizing medicine that connects them deeper to their mind.

Future of Breathwork and Rapid-Fire Reflections

How far can we push this to the point that does this really create a renaissance in medicine? to where we get to the point that you can, some of these diseases and things that we thought are impossible to treat or cure, can we address them?

Like is it not fantasy? Is it science fiction? is this really possible? And are we just at the beginning of that process of rediscovering these things?

So that's my big question. How deep does this rabbit hole go? Does it ever stop? It might not. Great question. That's a great question, so some rapid fire now.

We're going to do just a few questions. Nose or mouth? Well, it depends on what you want to, but in general, no. Inhale you love or exhale you Love? Exhale.

Box breathing or Wim Hof? Again, depends upon what your into, oh, that's hard. They're tools, different tools. Right now, box breathing. Today, right now this instant, if I turned it off, Box Breathing.

Hmm. Most overrated breathing trend right now. They're all useful, even when they're being used for silly purposes. I would say putting too much on specific ratios.

If your exhale is longer than your inhale, then you're going to relax. It's like your mind doesn't really know. that you're counting one extra time or two or three.

It's like, so people get hung up in the weeds on the numbers or 7-8, 4-4-5, or 4488. Like that's a little overrated. it's missing the principle beneath it.

And what's most underrated? Most under rated breathing technique? The inner focus, breath watching, the simplest. Pay attention to your breath. I don't care how you're breathing, pay attention.

That is breath work in a nutshell. So breath watching is the most underrated because it is least sexy, it's the least fireworks magnificent, but it can do the best for you.

Coffee or coal plant for energy? I love cold plunges, but I also really like resistance training and cold plunge has in general an anti-hypertrophic effect on, on muscle tissue.

So as much as I enjoy cold Plunge, I really love coffee. Okay. And one breath cue you wish everyone knew. Slow down, slow down and just, just breathe.

That's it. Like I was saying about breath watching, paying attention to your breath, slow down and breathe. Cause that applies no matter what. No matter.

It's good advice. Slow down. Well, Cole's great to have you today. I just really enjoyed our conversation. There's so much more I'd love to talk to you about for our audience.

Cole does offer breath work as before his physical therapy sessions. That's just amazing. What intrigued me about you is that you brought meditation and breathwork before and after training, which I know definitely improves training.

Yeah, that's a whole topic I would love get into next time too. But yeah, breath work classes, functional movement classes one-on-one training and physical therapy, cash pay physical therapist.

I still have a PT license despite all the breathwork and meditation work I do. And I love treating people as a physical therapists as well and integrating all of this into plans of care.

Yeah and you really connect with people's story and who they are and I think that really matters. I have my own personal story with a physical therapist that I actually had a surgery and they ligated one of my nerves in my hip and i couldn't walk.

And I could feel the ligation actually, I was coming out of anesthesia and was like pain, pain leg, leg. It was so painful I can't even I was anesthetized completely and I could feel the pain.

Closing Thoughts and Physical Therapy Story

So they had to go back in and undo that ligation. They had tied the nerve and 90% of my nerve was injured or damaged. And so I had learn to walk and it was a physical therapist who worked with me, who believed in me who gave me that connection of support and that healed me.

Six months later, I hiking up. to every space camp. That therapist is a testament to our profession. Those are the therapy stories that do make me really proud to be a physical therapist.

Despite all my complaints about this profession, the vast majority of people who get into it really want to help people. And even in the limited toolbox that they're given by modern medicine, we still can really, really help.

I really do love the profession of physical therapy. Thank you. Thanks for joining us on the Two Curious MD podcast. We hope today's episode inspired you to ask new questions and explore fresh perspectives.

Post a comment with a question or curious inquiry that you have and seek to explore or learn with us. Stay curious and we'll see you next time.