

The Breath of Life: An Introduction to Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy

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People often ask me if I do energy work. This may seem like a simple question but, to me, the answer is complex and informative. First, I would say that all bodywork is energy work in that everything involves energy. We are made up of energy. Every tissue in our bodies emanates a bio-electric field. We respond to each other energetically, whether we are aware of it or not. I do not, however, consider Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy to be “energy work.” This beautiful bodywork involves attention to the physical body and is based on physical sensations, although it includes attention to the non-physical and energetic dimensions of our being.

We cannot practice Biodynamics without an awareness of anatomy and physiology, which guides our perception and enhances our ability to meet what our clients present. We also offer an informed appreciation for the subtle expressions of anatomy and physiology. When we slow ourselves down, as we do in this work, we begin to perceive more subtle layers of what we call physical reality. One of the things I love about Biodynamics is how it bridges what we perceive as physical and what we call energetic or even spiritual.

William Sutherland, the father of Cranial Osteopathy (also known as Osteopathy in the Cranial Field), perceived a process of transmutation, or stepping down, of what he termed The Breath of Life. He saw this Breath as a mysterious, larger source beyond the physical body. He sensed through his “thinking-feeling-seeing-knowing fingers”¹ the subtle rhythmical fluctuations of fluid within the body. He understood that the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) in the ventricles of the brain picked up the potency, or life energy, of the Breath of Life force that forms us. The CSF then carries this potency to every tissue, every cell in our bodies, bringing life and health.

A. T. Still, the father of Osteopathy, stated:

“A thought strikes him that the cerebro-spinal fluid is one of the highest known elements that are contained in the body, and unless the brain furnishes the fluid in abundance, a disabled condition of the body will remain. He who is able to reason will see that this great river of life must be tapped and the withering field irrigated at once, or the harvest of health be forever lost).”²

This is the work of Biodynamics, along with other cranial therapies. Biodynamics in particular has grown from the later work of William Sutherland. Towards the end of his 40 years of studying and facilitating the subtle movements of the bones, tissues, and fluids of the body, Sutherland moved to California. Living near the ocean, he was influenced by its tides to recognize their similarity to what he was palpating in the body. He began to speak of “the Tide.” He advised his students to “Rely upon the Tide.” He wrote:

“Visualize a potency, an intelligent potency, that is more intelligent than your own human mentality ... You will have observed its potency and also its Intelligence, spelled with a capital I. It is something you can depend upon to do the work for you. In other words, don’t try to drive the mechanism through any external force. Rely upon the Tide”³

The meaning of this advice has taken some time for cranial practitioners to integrate. As it is interpreted by some of us in the field of Biodynamics today, relying upon the Tide is a highly foreign approach for modern, western people. It involves a major paradigm shift.

Up until this point in his career, Sutherland had practiced various forms of subtle manipulation of the cranial bones, membranes, ligaments, and fluids. Most cranial practitioners today continue to practice such manipulations. We consider these practices to be “biomechanical.” They involve the common cultural perception of the body as a living machine. When something goes wrong with a machine, the mechanic evaluates what is wrong, which informs him as to how to fix it. If I break a bone, for example, it can be extremely helpful to have an X-ray taken so as to establish which bones are affected and if they are truly broken. Then a skilled practitioner can set the bone and immobilize it with a cast. This is a useful, biomechanical approach. It involves the external source, the X-ray technician, the doctor, etc., evaluating the situation and applying an external force, X-rays and a cast, to fix the problem.

Biodynamics is a different approach. It involves the appreciation and facilitation of internal forces. These resemble, and perhaps are, the embryological forces that form us in the womb. Biodynamics involves attention to the energetic and physical midlines of the body, which rhythmically re-enact the miraculous expression of the life force through embryological development.

The potency driving this expression is essential to health. We recognize that Potency is always present in the system, although it may be tied up in areas of holding or compression in the bodymind. These areas of holding are actually expressions of the ever-present Health. The system has done its best to manage unresolved traumatic forces by containing them in various patterns in the bodymind. Our job is to perceive and resonate with the Potency and Health in the client, which supports it in resolving the issue and expressing itself more fully. The client’s Intelligence knows what it needs to do. It has its own “Inherent Treatment Plan.” As Biodynamic practitioners, we have profound respect for this expression of Intelligence. We patiently wait for it to unfold, rather than imposing our own ideas of what should or shouldn’t happen or be treated next.

In order for the Inherent Treatment Plan to present, there is usually a need for the client’s system to slow down. Where there is trauma or holding in the system, there is the tendency to focus in on that issue. This limits access to the resources of the entire system. As practitioners, we settle ourselves so we can be present as a neutral mirror for the client’s system. Our intention is to reflect back to the client the whole, including the issues and the forces available to resolve them. We gently develop our relationship and physical contact with our clients, with an intention to enhance their sense of safety and trust. We support them in being present with their breath and bodily sensations, to balance the tendency to slip into old trauma-related patterns of dissociation or acceleration. We help them to orient to the resources available to them, such as things that are working well in their lives, people or pets they love, activities they enjoy, etc. We track as their nervous system settles and balances.

At some point, we experience a “Holistic Shift” or “Neutral” state⁴. The system has shifted from an accelerated, often chaotic state to a more settled coherence. This is much like how the water in a bottle settles after it has been shaken. Consider that our bodies are made up of about 70% fluid. At our rapid speed of modern, western life, these fluids can be in a state of perpetual shaking. Our nervous systems are constantly in fight-flight, which interferes with our innate ability to rest and rejuvenate. In Biodynamics, we wait for the system to settle before bringing attention to specific issues in the body. Once this settling has occurred, the Potency naturally begins to orient itself to where it is needed. The Inherent Treatment Plan can emerge when the system no longer needs to constantly respond to external input. As practitioners, we listen for what the client’s system chooses to express and follow its lead.

Listening in this way can be compared to going to the woods with the intention to observe the wild animals there. If we go thrashing through the forest, looking for a fox or deer, we are less likely to be rewarded than if we sit quietly and wait. When we are quiet, the animals feel safe to peek out and see who we are. If we continue to be quiet, they come right up to us and start sniffing. If we remain quiet and respectful of their presence, they may then go about their business and allow us to learn from them.

The fluids behave the same way. They show their true nature to us when we quietly witness. If we try to intervene, they react to our actions. Even such a subtle intervention as looking directly at an animal can alter its behavior. Cranial Osteopath James Jealous⁵ points out that our natural way of seeing is diffuse, rather than focused. In Biomechanical approaches, such focused viewing is helpful in making a diagnosis. In Biodynamics, we need to re-learn how to see in a more diffuse way, taking in the whole, rather than focusing intently on the issue. When we perceive the issue as part of, even floating in and supported by the whole, it can more easily access the resources available to it in the whole.

While the subtle manipulations of biomechanical work can produce immediate results, they are often followed by efforts of the client's system to integrate the changes that have been externally initiated. Allowing the changes to emerge from internally generated forces enables the whole system to shift as it needs to. The changes are integrated as they happen, when the system is ready for them.

In some ways, this approach is much easier on the practitioner. We don't need to strive, claim, or pretend to know what is needed. We also don't get to claim responsibility. The work is done by the Breath of Life as it operates through both client and practitioner. There is a resonance between us, which is a key to how Biodynamics works. As my system settles and becomes calmer, it reminds the client's system of what it is capable of. As the client's system settles and becomes more fluid, mine does, too. We say, "Give a session, receive a session." I have never had any inkling of feeling burned out doing this work. Even if I have been wearing myself out in my life, I always feel better after facilitating a Biodynamic session.

For our egos, this approach may be challenging. The little ego self wants to be in control, to be appreciated, to be important. Every time I facilitate a session, I sense my little ego self having to let go. I consider this work to be a form of spiritual practice. Biodynamic Craniosacral therapist and teacher, Anna Chitty, notes that we are meditating in relationship⁶. As we sit in the presence of another human being, we practice calming our minds and observing our breath and bodily sensations. Often, we enter into a profoundly peaceful state of presence, together with the person on the table. While the little ego self may struggle to be in charge, it also has the opportunity to rest and experience how it is held within the larger field from which we emerge. The mysterious source that forms us, the Breath of Life, rocks us gently in her cradle. As we sit with our clients, it becomes more and more difficult to deny the power and support of this Breath.

Over time, we settle more and more deeply into the rhythms of the Breath, slowing down until we know ourselves as something deeper, slower, smoother, softer, wider than our everyday personalities. We find ourselves becoming one with the Stillness that is us, that is beyond us. We sense ourselves returning, together with our client, to the beginning, prior to the hurts and traumas of our personal histories. Like the early embryo, we float within the full potential of what life has to offer. This is the heart of Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy.

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