

## Breathwork for deeper sleep

**Guest: Anthony Abbagnano**

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### **[00:00:10] Alex Howard**

Welcome, everyone, to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking to a good friend of mine, Anthony Abbagnano.

And this is going to be a little different to some of the sessions on the conference. It's going to be much more experiential. So there's going to be a guided breathwork practice and a guided meditation practice.

To say a few words about Anthony, Anthony is a visionary thought leader, breath expert, and founder of the internationally accredited breath work school Alchemy of Breath, which is a 100,000 person online community dedicated to evolving collective consciousness.

He currently lives in Italy, where he co founded Alchemy School of Healing Arts with his wife Amy, and ASHA supports breath work, holistic practices, sustainability, growing food, and building community. So Anthony, it's great to be back together again.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Thank you. Thank you, Alex. It's a pleasure to be with you.

### **Alex Howard**

I always enjoy our time together. One of the things that you put in the notes when we were prepping for the interview was thinking around the frame of sleep as an opportunity. Or indeed, when one is struggling with sleep, rather than seeing that as a problem to be fixed, seeing that as potentially an opportunity for exploration. I was curious to start there.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, it's a cheeky suggestion, but it works for me. And I've noticed that at the times that, in fact, last night we had difficulty sleeping because we're in Ibiza and we had mosquitoes and you get into that mosquito frame of mind like, there's got to be another one, I've got to get it.

I think it's a worthwhile question to ask because what if there's something that we're meant to know or meant to find out because we're not asleep? I know in some philosophies they say that 04:00 in the morning or 03:30 in the morning is what they call God's hour.

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And if you wake up at that time to surely pay attention, take a pencil and paper and start writing some notes and open up to what it is that might want to come through. So I think it's a worthwhile question to ask ourselves, maybe there's a reason beyond the obvious that I'm being asked to stay awake right now. And what might that be?

### **Alex Howard**

I just think that changing frame in of itself can be really powerful, because one of the things that often happens when we can't sleep is we become frustrated and we become irritable at the fact that we can't sleep, which then just causes more escalation in our nervous system. Whereas the frame that you're offering, a frame of curiosity, somehow allows that to de escalate.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, exactly. I think we're switching from self condemnation into curiosity, just like you say, and then it becomes a question of, well, what could I actually create? What is there that I might notice about this moment? So it can actually become a useful time. It could be a time that we get inspiration and gifts as to how to manage issues that might have been troubling us in the past.

But I do understand also and recognize, of course, that underlying all of this there's an anxiety. And so, of course, another fair question, I think, to ask is why aren't we sleeping? To really open up to an inquiry as to what the reasons are that are underneath.

And I think that's where the true solutions lie. And we know we've got lots of opportunities. We can look on YouTube and Google sleep and insomnia, and we can find all kinds of techniques which are fantastic management systems.

But I believe underneath that, there's a nervous system imbalance. And underneath that nervous system imbalance, there's a reason, there's some kind of an old trauma or a memory or something that perhaps hasn't been fully felt or processed that wants to be met so it can be put to rest.

And until it gets put to rest, then it won't let us rest. So whatever management or coping systems we might use, we still, underneath have an opportunity to maybe greet something that we need to pluck up the courage to greet.

### **Alex Howard**

As you're speaking, one of the things that comes to my mind is the deep wisdom and brilliance within our physical body and our emotional body, all those incredible systems and processes that are running all of the time, which even in computer science, we struggle to recreate many of the things that the human body can do. Recognizing that there is intelligence even when we think something's not working.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Isn't that the truth? Yeah. If we could flick a switch to turn that recognition on all the time, how much better off would we be? Yeah, absolutely.

**[00:05:21]**

So I think there are the obvious things to regulate ourselves with natural time and the things that we lost during the Industrial Revolution when we could switch on a light bulb and suddenly discover that night becomes day and we can make day last as long as we want and all of those things. So connecting with nature and honoring more of nature's rhythm is important.

And I think also on the more, let's say, management levels, rhythm itself is very important. We used to be rocked to sleep as children, as little babies. And so any repetitive motion that we can create lying in bed, hopefully without disturbing any partners we've got, is also a good way to lull ourselves into some kind of harmony with the natural rhythm of life, which then is a precursor for being able to loosen our body a little bit.

The two things I'd like to suggest today that are really practical and experiential rather than talk too much, one is the coherence breath, which was devised by the HeartMath Institute some 25 years ago. And it's a very simple breath. And I'm a master of breath, so that's how I relate the breath to any problem I greet in the day and would invite anybody to do the same thing.

Because the breath is really the only symptom that we can manipulate in order to affect the cause that created it. So what I mean when I say that is if we're panicking, we notice we've got a really short breath or no breath at all.

On the other hand, if we slow that breath down, then that panic will descend, it will start to decrease after about a minute or so. We just have to remember to breathe, we have to make that choice to take a breath when we really don't feel to.

And likewise if we feel exhausted and tired, an energetic fast breath in through the nose and out through the mouth will revive us and give us more energy. So it's one of the only things that shows up as a symptom of any condition that we're living that we can actually manipulate. So I would recommend that as one practice and I'd love to do it with us just for three minutes or so. Would that be okay Alex?

### **Alex Howard**

I think that would be great. And also what comes to mind, Anthony, just to back up to something you said a moment ago around the importance of movement, of course it is our breath which is the constant of movement within our being.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, absolutely. And that's why when we measure our breath, we are actually creating that rhythm and so that's really the purpose of this particular exercise. And you can actually choose any breath you want, you can create your own breath pattern that works.

The importance is that it's repetitive and that repetition helps soothe the nervous system and bring it back into balance. And the fact that you're giving it your awareness does the same thing too. So the coherence breath is, I think, perhaps one of the most simple breath patterns that we use at Alchemy of Breath and it's one that we use to harmonize a group of people and also, as it suggests, create coherence with the heart itself.

**[00:08:50]**

And it also supports greater heart rate variability, which is the ability of the heart to vary according to any outside situation. So it would mean the ability of the heart to awaken and become more functional in providing blood supply, but it can also do the opposite thing which would be to help us calm down and become more coherent on a heart level.

And there's so much to discover about this. I really recommend that you check out the coherence breath with the HeartMath Institute. And it's so simple it's almost ridiculous. But the principle here is to put these practices into place when you don't need to sleep.

You're almost too late if you try to do things when you can't sleep because you're already in a mind state that's forbidding you from letting go of what you need to let go of in order to settle into a sleep state. So I really recommend practicing this first thing when you wake up, also at midday without a full tummy. Or in the evening when it's time to go to bed, you can do it too.

And after you've done it for a week or ten days you'll find that it becomes your go to breath. Actually it took me two days but I work with breath all the time and I found that if ever I felt any sense of stress or threat, I would just go to the coherence breath. And after about three or four minutes my whole nervous system would settle again.

So once you've practiced it for a while it'll become the way you greet the world and then you're creating the conditions you need when you go to bed to be more consciously relaxing and more consciously creating the space to let go of those obstacles that we carry with us.

So let's try that first now. I'm going to count with my fingers and with my voice and you're going to breathe. And we're going to breathe through the nose, and it's a count of five.

So I'm going to start the count by saying inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. And I'm going to do it that way because the word inhale or exhale takes 1 second, just so you know that I'm not missing a number by mistake.

Okay so let's take a nice inhale, a nice big inhale and an easy outbreath. And then we're going to inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Inhale 2, 3, 4, 5. Exhale, relax. Just take a moment now to notice anything that's different.

### **Alex Howard**

So what I notice is I just feel a lot more present. I'm rushing through my morning and sort of prepping my interviews and I just noticed that I feel more here.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, exactly. It's a wonderful gift, this breath alone and there are so many different ways that we can benefit from it so it's a pleasure to share that with you.

**[00:15:47]**

And I think there are two precursors here with the work that we do at Alchemy of Breath is that number one, we accept the opportunity to think differently and that means notice what's different, rather than focus on what's the same.

When we measure something, if we're going to make a piece of clothing or work with wood, we always measure what's there, what's actually there that we're going to use. We don't measure what we don't use or we don't measure what's left.

But in life we have this tendency to always measure what's left to do. And it's so overwhelming because it's an endless measurement, it's an infinite thing because there's always something to do. So when we measure our own progress, I think appropriate self acknowledgement is really important.

And that brings up the second thing that is the premise that we work with, is that we are willing to think differently. We are willing to have our thought patterns challenged in order to create change. And if we can make those two commitments to ourselves, then we can really notice in just two or three minutes, with a tiny little breath practice like this, that there's so much that can change instead of discarding it and stepping over it and focusing on what's to be done.

### **Alex Howard**

One of the things that also comes to my mind, Anthony, is that often when we can't sleep, or if we're in a state of anxiety or so on, we're in a certain groove of thinking and breathing and moving. And often those grooves are self generating.

So if we're in a mindset of anxiety, anxiety tends to breed more anxiety because the more we look for things, as what you get focused on, as you say, if we look for things to worry about, the more we find those. And I think often the tendency is that we try to think our way out of our minds.

It doesn't often work very well. And what strikes me just as doing that practice and speaking with you, is that actually we need to breathe or we need to move our way to a different state.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, exactly. I had a very bright student say to me one day that the definition of emotional leadership was the ability to take a breath when you don't want to. I find that such a beautiful learning, because if we take the time to make that breath, then that gives us all the time to consider things in a different way.

So just that one thing, and I think what you said is the perfect segue into what I would love to talk about next is the more underlying factors of losing sleep. And this is assuming it's not a physical condition, which it might be. I know that some things happen in our sleep that can wake us up that are actually nothing to do with our psychology.

It might be apnea or it might be through breathing through the mouth or any of those conditions. So those certainly need to be looked at and evaluated if one of those are contributing to a lack of sleep.

**[00:19:00]**

But if it's something to do with our tension level, our nervous system, our psychology, then what I would wish is that we develop the ability to trace it to source, and to find out why this began in the first place is a part of that.

But more importantly, to restore connection with that part of us that got stuck behind some incident or trauma or something that damaged us, that learnt to become hyper alert as a way of coping and probably lost our breath in that moment as well.

So I really believe that restoring our ability to, what I say is if you breathe and feel, then you can feel and heal. In other words, if we can bring our consciousness and our breath back to that time when we lost it, then there's some deep healing going on that's below the conscious mind. It's down in the subconscious.

And the breath is one of the best ways to wear down the walls of that old body archive that contains all our memories and all these things that we want to forget too.

So the way we do that, we have a meditation called alchemy meditation, and it's about felt sense, which some of you may be familiar with already, but we actually take it a stage further into what we call felt presence. And this is a practice that you can do very lightweight as you walk down the road with the keys in your pocket, your car keys in your pocket, you can feel them bouncing against your leg.

Or you might become conscious if you're sitting down, of the touch of your fabric against your skin. Or I'm noticing now, for example, how my fingers are interlaced as I'm sitting here talking to you. And these tiny little noticings can be used as a way to sharpen our quality of awareness and focus, and to understand that the body has so many of the solutions that we look for.

So when we trace back to source, something that we're trying to avoid feeling, the practice is to notice where that feeling would be in our physical body and then to rally the mind. That incredible competence of the mind. To actually use it to focus on that place in the body and to keep amplifying that focus.

Which is not an easy thing to do because you realize very quickly that if you don't amplify it, it's actually fading. It's a bit like if I asked you to open your eyes as wide as you can and then I tell you to open them wider. Now, wider, wider, wider. And you notice that every moment that you're not actually straining to open them wider, they're actually beginning to close again.

And that's a good analogy because this is what we're doing with our awareness, with this meditation. We're seeking to become more aware and more sensitive of what's happening in our body.

If we are willing to accept that every instant in our lives is in this body, this body archive and we know scientifically that 80% of the messages come from the body to the brain, not the other way around, why would we want to give the brain so much importance, give the mind so much importance as to what it's thinking when it's only one fifth of its potential?

There's a whole body brain here that's waiting to be included. So with this meditation, we look into the body, not with a purpose of resolution, but as a practice. We develop a practice of looking into the

body to greet whatever outside influence there might be, to understand where that's landing in my body.

**[00:23:16]**

And to apply it to this particular purpose of insomnia or sleep deficiency, we're simply going to ask a couple of questions. First one is, why am I not sleeping? What is it that's troubling me? And then, where does that come from? Where does that come from? Does that come from someplace in my past? Or is it something that's happened today?

And as we begin to inquire and kind of sniff at it a bit, then the question is, where does it exist in my body? Where does this concern, where does it manifest in my body? So let's take a couple of breaths and we'll do a little journey together. And you may want to close your eyes because then your insight can be stronger than your oversight.

And use these first couple of breaths, just an easy breath through the nose at any pace that you want, to settle. To settle into your chair or your mattress or whatever surface that you're on. And see if you can notice as you start to allow your awareness to consider the fear or the stress or the tension or the anxiety.

Notice where that might be in your body. It might be a fixed place or it might be moving. But see if you can use your will and that tremendous mind power you've got to locate where it is principally. Perhaps you can put your hand on that place just to acknowledge that all this time that your mind might have been worrying or telling you stories, that there's something else going on as well in your body.

And now see if you can use each cycle of breath, always being as conscious of your breath as you can. See if you can use each cycle of your breath to come a little closer to that place in your body, leaving the thought a little bit behind in favor of getting curious about this part of your body where that feeling or that thought has lived all this time.

And always breathing, breathing is so important. Bringing your breath to this awareness and holding in your awareness both your breath and this body sensation that you have. Just like that little experiment of opening your eyes wider and wider, see if you can use each breath to come a little closer to this physical sensation.

And notice your mind may wander. What's important is bringing it back. Each time you bring it back, you're developing strength. So even just a half a second, the focus counts. And each time you bring back your focus, see if you can enlarge it a little bit stronger, a bit closer.

So you're really working. It's not a lazy job. You're really almost straining to focus more. Notice anything there might be to notice, like a visual thing or a sensation or a vibration, a shape, a color, whatever it might be that has been sitting there wanting to be noticed.

See if you can give it your full attention, not needing anything to change, just giving it your attention. Because in the middle of this place there's a part of you that hasn't yet been felt. It needs your support. It might be you as a much younger being or it may be something more recent, a loss or a grief or a fear.

**[00:29:10]**

Now, opening your attention, opening your awareness, allows it to be noticed a little bit more. Always breathing. Deepening and widening your attention. And bringing your breath unconditionally here, just keep delivering your breath to this moment.

There are things that can't happen until they're noticed. And even if you don't notice anything, you can know that the act of bringing your breath here consciously is providing connection and ease. Keep coming back, knowing that each time you come back, you can give stronger focus, more awareness and more presence.

And as you listen to your body, to give your body the attention it wants, what message might there be waiting for you? You may even notice a younger version of yourself. Because there is one there, a part of you that's been wounded or hurt. A part of you that might blame or seek help from the outside world.

But now, as you've made the choice to come here to this moment, what would you want that part of you to know as you inspect it, open to it? Are you willing to be the solution? Always breathing and always coming back just that little bit stronger.

What support can you provide to this part of you? Say it out loud and speak it, knowing that each breath you take is a breath of restoration and reunion. Now see if you can use these next few breaths to gather this part back into your wholeness, back into your current awareness, into your heart.

If it seems reluctant, then imagine it. Create the possibility with your power of imagination. In just a few minutes, you can come to this place of stillness and awareness anytime you need to.

So as we begin our journey back, coming aware again of that physical sensation and whatever may have changed. Before we leave, perhaps take a big bow to your own body.

As we come back through the doorway of that physical sensation and begin to bring your attention back to the sounds around you in the room, to the light beyond your closed eyelids. We'll just take two or three breaths to gently open your eyes and come back to the room.

### **Alex Howard**

Thank you, Anthony. That was beautiful. I'm deliberately not going to ask intellectual questions at this point because I am mindful we're out of time and I want people to be able to stay where they are.

I guess really my question is, because really, for me, at the heart of this beautiful exercise is this changing in relationship with one's subconscious, with one's body wisdom, and allowing that to have a greater voice and to work collaboratively.

What can support people of bringing, obviously beyond reusing this guided practice, to bring more of that into their daily life?

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah. Thank you. Well, I actually started off with a couple of hints there. Just to hone your awareness, you can become aware of the breeze against your skin, the fabric against your skin, the weight of your



keys in your pocket, the texture between your eyelid and your eyeball. You can really just begin to include these noticings.

**[00:40:04]**

Another thing that you can do is when something happens in your outer world, especially in conversation, to take that one breath and to articulate what's happening in your body first.

So if you said something to me, Alex, like, gosh, you've got a mark on your nose or whatever, something that would be a surprise, that I would go, oh, thank you. Gosh. That gives me kind of an uncomfortable feeling in my chest that I didn't wipe my nose before I came on screen.

So in other words, you begin to learn to articulate, including your body sensation in the process. And then I would love to, I'm very moved by the opportunity to be with you. I'm going to, after our session today, do a recording, and I'd love to share that with you, where we'll go significantly deeper.

And this meditation actually is the beginning of a process that we put all of our facilitators through so that when we're running a breath session, that we can be in that quality of presence with someone's process. Because sometimes people have to go through some really difficult things during a breath therapy session.

And I really want to make sure that our facilitators are capable of even being at someone's final moments of life and to be totally there with them. And this meditation, as we develop it, gives us the ability to actually speak from that place, from that internal place. That we learn to formulate words.

And it's kind of like a new language. It's the language that the body wants to speak. It's not the mind filtering it. Sometimes in a breath work, I say things, even now, I don't know what I said, because I'm speaking so deeply from that place that it's not really a mind thing. It's a whole mind body thing that's happening.

So that's really where this goes as a result, is that ability to deeply receive and reclaim our ability to respond to life instead of reacting unconsciously, investing in the reenactment of what's wrong, that we can actually create change that way.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. Anthony, I'm mindful we're out of time, so I want to ask you how people can find that meditation. And also how they can find out more about your work and some of what they can find.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Thank you. You can join us at [alchemyofbreath.com](https://alchemyofbreath.com) and you'll find we have breath works we do every week on Sundays. We have lots of other events that you can join. We have recordings. And I'm going to want to give you a link directly to this recording. Then you can navigate the site as you want so that link will be forthcoming underneath.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, we'll put that with your bio on this page. Anthony, thank you so much. I really appreciate you bringing some experiential practice to my morning, but also sharing this with our audience. So thank you.

**[00:43:19] Anthony Abbagnano**

Thank you so much, Alex. And many blessings to all of you. Good luck with your process and may our dreams be sweet.