

BY GRANIA LITWIN (*Times Colonist staff*)

Brian MacLean gives people breathing lessons.



Not because he thinks they need more oxygen or they need lung exercises, but because he believes breathing in a special way can make them more lovable--and loving.

The Victoria psychologist came up with the theory after working in biofeedback and brain wave therapy for 20 years. He recently had an article about it published in *Biofeedback Magazine*.

"The connection between the heart and love is not just metaphorical," stresses MacLean. There are actual heart rhythms that are more "love-conducive" than others, and cultivating them can help people who suffer panic attacks, anxiety and a plethora of other disorders.

The desired rhythms are synchronized by a specific kind of breath, says MacLean, who was a monastic Zen Buddhist monk for 10 years, studied martial arts, and holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Ottawa.

"It's not a particularly deep breath, but it's paced and relaxed."

Some people take as many as 24 to 30 breaths a minute, he says. "And it's disordered because they also may hold their breath sometimes. It's kind of like sleep apnea, only they are doing it through the day."

Everyone has an optimal frequency, but in general, breathing at about four to eight breaths per minute, and doing belly breathing rather than upper chest breathing, is best for moving into the love zone, says MacLean.

His concept is based on something called heart rate variability, which refers to the gap between beats. By breathing in a certain way, MacLean says people can increase that gap and move into a healthier physiological state. (See side-bar below.)

"We live in a time of high speed and high stress," says MacLean. "We are continually hyped up, cranked up, in fight-or-flight mode and when this happens sensitivity goes down. The possibility of sustaining subtle emotions like love, or of forming bonds, is reduced. It's like trying to hear a subtle melody in a noisy room."

Besides making people more loving and lovable, optimal frequency diaphragmatic breathing can help with everything from urinary incontinence to fibromyalgia, says MacLean, who recently cofounded--along with Dr. Peter Pomerville and Dr. Bryan Sweet--the new Vancouver Island Pelvic Health Clinic.

Proper breathing also has applications in anger management.

Andrew Masee, 28, went to see MacLean for anxiety and rage issues, as well as other conditions. "I was completely house-ridden for three years, unable to work, totally isolated," said Masee, who now lives in Nelson.

"Once I started the training, I noticed a change immediately. I used to get stuck in extreme anxiety, anger, frustration. It was like I was always in second, with no clutch. Breathing allows me to shift gears and move from one emotional state to another."

Since taking breathing lessons and brain wave therapy, he has started his own business, been happily married and moved to Nelson, where he plans to start a strings band. "But the biggest change is my new ability to access and express any emotion I want--especially love."

Reading poetry, meditating and rosary recitation can also slow respiration down to where "the cardiovascular system shows higher levels of flexibility," says MacLean, whose work bridges the gap between a number of ancient and modern world teachings, between mysticism and science.

"As HRV increases the brain enters a quiet attentive awareness, with synchronous alpha rhythms which are associated with a centered, attentive state of mind." Conversely, a person stuck in high stress has a physiology that can lead to cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, diabetes, abnormal tissue growth and depression.

"Cultivating an increased level of HRV will not ensure the experience of love any more than opening a window will ensure a breeze. However, without opening the window, there is little possibility."

UVic professor of cognitive neuroscience Dan Bub is not familiar with MacLean's research but says: "Certainly breathing can make you calmer, as a lot of recent experiments into meditation have shown. Whether it will do anything in terms of more positive relationships, I don't really know. Although I expect if you feel good about yourself, and relaxed, you might be more predisposed to seeing good in others."

## **A THEORY FOR HEALTHIER LIVING, IN A HEARTBEAT**

Victoria psychologist Brian MacLean bases his work on well-founded science relating to heart rate variability--the variation in gaps between heart beats.

"High HRV is associated with good health, younger biological age and adaptability of the cardiovascular system, while low variability has been linked to poor health, cancer mortality and most psychological disorders," he explains.

"Rhythmic, belly breathing, at the correct frequency for each person--determined through biofeedback--maximizes HRV," says MacLean, who did undergraduate work at the universities of Miami and Vienna. Positive emotions, such as appreciation and gratitude can also increase HRV.

*Grania Litwin*