

STYLE


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EXCLUSIVE

KEIRA ACTUALLY

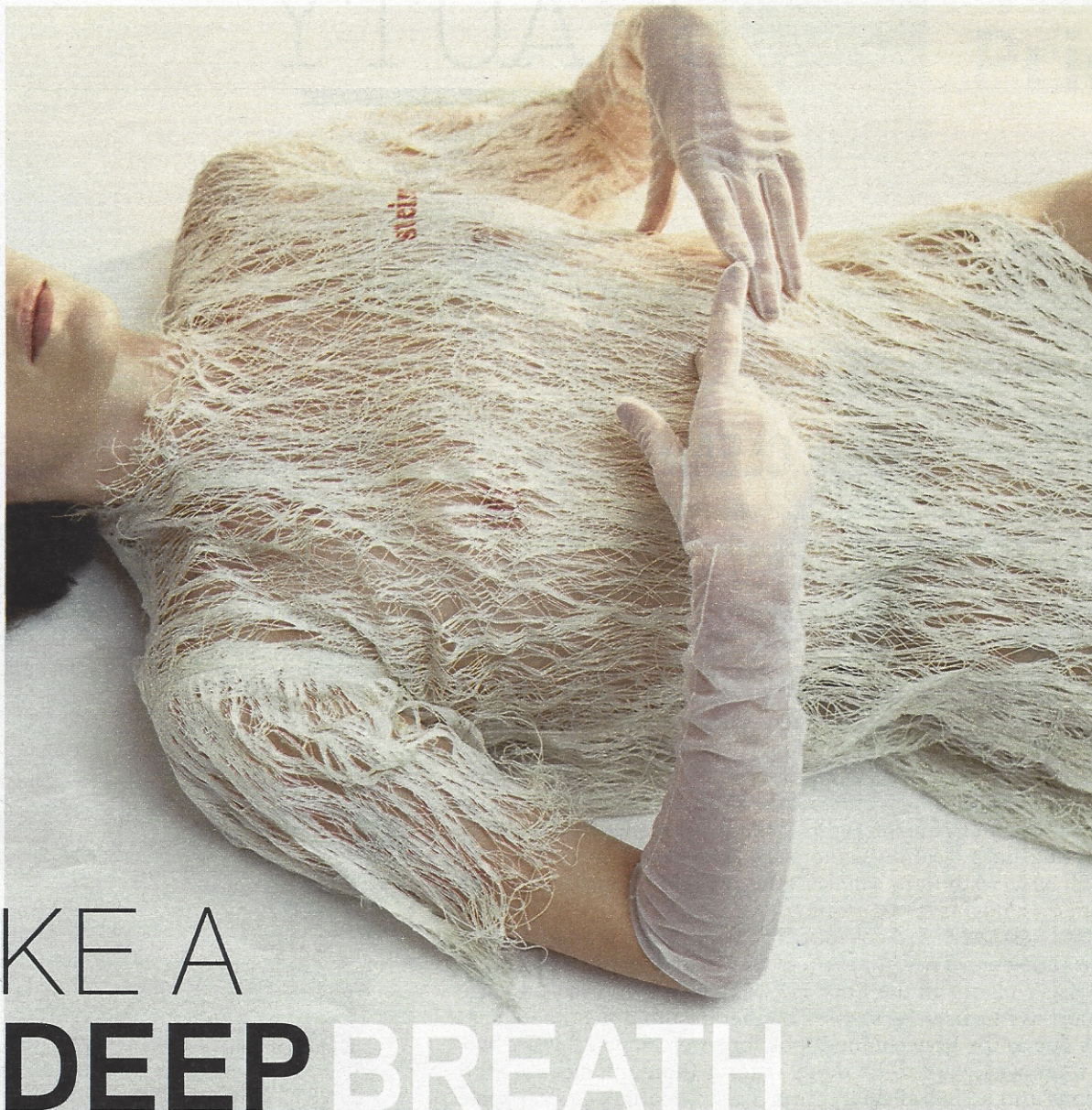
HER MOST HONEST
INTERVIEW YET
BY SCARLETT CURTIS

PHOTOGRAPH JACKIE NICKERSON
STYLING VERITY PARKER

WHAT TO WEAR FOR
NEW YEAR'S EVE

YOUR LAST-MINUTE
GIFT GUIDE





TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Is oxygen the new ayahuasca?

Kate Spicer reports on the
breathwork revolution being
used like psychedelic drugs

Photograph **Umit Savaci**

Rythmia is a medically licensed wellness resort in Costa Rica. It's described as a "life advancement centre", and a week here can run to five figures. Its co-founder Brandee Lynn says: "We access altered states of consciousness to heal body and spirit by opening up the mind."

At Rythmia, there are two different "keys" used to open the doors to our inner world". One is the plant medicine of the moment, ayahuasca — illegal almost everywhere outside South America and an extremely testing experience, according to those who have tried it. The other is breathwork — an umbrella term for conscious, controlled breathing via exercises. "Another wonderful opportunity for growth using a different type of medicine — oxygen!" says Lynn.

Yes, air is the new ayahuasca, or something like that. "Breathing is the buzz thing at the moment," says Sheena Mackichan, a London-based headhunter for

high-net-worth individuals and celebrities. "It sounds ridiculous, but I was curious. I first tried it with a small group of girlfriends. I'm really not an esoteric-therapy type of person. I'm aware of my image, but I was in another realm, it was an out-of-body experience."

Now, once a month, Mackichan likes to gather a few friends in a small London yoga studio for a couple of hours of breathwork with her teacher, Kim Kindersley. At one session, the make-up artist Sofia Schwarzkopf Tilbury opened her eyes and saw an angel standing over her, surrounded by a bright white light. Another breather was sobbing and crying out: "Make it stop, make it stop."

"It's a pretty visceral experience. You need to leave your embarrassment at the door," Mackichan says. "I'm never sure if everyone in the group is going to get it because it's so out there, but everyone always gets something out of it. There's something of the magic and euphoria of the rave about it. It's a trip, basically."

The connection between breath and altered states is nothing new: Tibetan monks can raise their body temperature using breath alone. Anthony Abbagnano is one of the world's highest-profile breathwork teachers; his method is called the Alchemy of Breath and is based in part on rebirthing. It's one of two influential methods developed in the 1960s and 1970s. The other significant method is Holotropic Breathwork, developed by the Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof as a successor to his LSD therapy after the drug was made illegal.

"I work with the Psychedelic Society in London, helping people integrate trips they might not have yet understood," Abbagnano says. "The breath state is similar to the psychedelic one, but unlike the psychedelic state we can continue it or end it as we wish."

Abbagnano writes books, does talks and appears at festivals such as Bali Spirit and Boomtown. Every Sunday he does two free breathing webinar sessions, which get hundreds of people breathing together. But he does not claim his technique is superior to the several dozen, perhaps hundreds, of different types of breathing patterns. "The fact is breathwork uses an extraordinary bodily function that you can manipulate to control your psychological state," he says. "When we experience intense trauma, our breath stops. In fact, the founder of gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls, said, 'Fear is excitement without the breath.'"

Fearne Cotton has used breathwork to manage anxiety, and describes it as "magic that can be created with breathing in a certain way". In her book *Calm*, she dedicates an entire chapter to her experience with the Transformational Breath teacher Rebecca Dennis.

Dennis is the author of *And Breathe*, a book about conscious breathing that charts some of the many breathing styles out there. Her three-hour workshops aim to get people breathing like a toddler, "opening up the respiratory tract". What inevitably follows is, she says, "digging in the subconscious, releasing suppressed feelings that are held onto in the body and the head. Grief, pain, trauma, loss, it helps release it."

I took a one-on-one class with her, and I didn't expect much as I lay on a thick mat on the floor. I was instructed to breathe in deeply and exhale fast, effortlessly. An hour passed very quickly, in a flash, and my mind emptied. Dennis moved around my body touching acupressure points and having me pull breath deeper and deeper into my torso until it felt like I was inflating down to my hip flexors. The breath was often noisy, and if I thought about it too hard, I felt pretty daft. The emptiness I felt at the end of my session is what I had

been aiming for with nearly six months of daily, pretty sketchy, meditation practice. I mentioned this to Dennis. "Yes, you can reach the meditative state of a Tibetan monk by using the breath," she said.

What characterises some of these breathwork patterns is simple hyperventilation. While giving another teacher a go, I got pins and needles in my arms and my fingers went involuntarily into crab claws — a carpopedal spasm. There are stories of breath-induced psychosis and heart attacks. Breathing, essential as it is for life, is not necessarily harmless and in the wrong hands things can go wrong. Despite air being a psychoactive substance when used in certain ways, the government has yet to find a way to

make it illegal. Breathwork may not be regulated, but it is recommended that people with epilepsy, heart conditions and some mental-health issues avoid it. Abbagnano is aware that there is more to know about the body's response to breath: "If air was patentable, perhaps someone would do some good research."

After I left Dennis I went straight back into rushing around to meetings, and I found myself getting quite agitated. Using my phone made me unusually anxious. When I got home that night I had trouble sleeping, and at 3am I woke up and sobbed for half an hour, which pissed my boyfriend off a bit.

I mention this to Mackichan when we speak. Do people cry in her Monday circles? "Yes, a lot. I started crying, not for me, but because of the damage we are doing to our planet. Anyone who knows me would be shocked to hear me talking like this. It has taken me by surprise. And I like it. It has the power to release something very deep and cosmic." ■

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**ONE BREATHER
SAW AN ANGEL
STANDING
OVER HER,
SURROUNDED
BY A BRIGHT
WHITE LIGHT;
ANOTHER WAS
SOBBING AND
CRYING OUT**